

The Storm, 2012

Anthony Dion Mitzel (February 06, 2012)



All in all, it's always a good thing to see people out there helping each other. Perhaps we will see a stronger Italy emerge from this storm, a more cohesive unit rather than the fractured (read factioned) one which has become de rigour in the last couple of years.



Cesena (FC) - In scenes reminiscent of the Valykin Estate in David Lean's "Dr. Zhivago," the cold Siberian air has mixed with a North Atlantic anticyclone descending upon Italy in a perfect storm scenario bringing with it freezing temperatures and snow: lots of snow. For a film reference a bit closer to home, one you hear while you're having a "grappino al bar," it all comes back to Fellini's memory inspired tale "Amarcord" (Romagnolo dialect for "mi ricordo" or "I remember").

Set in the fictional town of Borgo, a major part of the film takes place during and after a severe snow storm (most likely the blizzard of '27) which turns the city into a fantasy land for the towns' kids. What we are experiencing here in the heart of the Romagna could be considered similar. But for the thousands of people without electricity and the elderly who can't leave their homes, I think the fantasy ended about 24 hours into the blizzard when the snow got knee high and trains started getting stuck. The fluffy white stuff is not unheard of here, especially in the higher altitudes, but the sheer quantity, duration and constant accumulation is. Ironically, a couple weeks ago "The Day After Tomorrow" was on the tube. Who knew the day after tomorrow would be today and it would last a week.

On a train to nowhere, literally

I knew things were getting serious when the train my wife was on got stuck midway between Forlì and Cesena in the middle of the Pianura Padana hinterland where the snow was already waist high. She and more than 600 other "pendolari" were there on the tracks for more than 7 hours without heating and intermittent light. A locomotive was sent from Fellini's hometown of Rimini to tow them on, but the rescue train ended up breaking down too. A third locomotive from Bologna was finally able to tow them back up to Forlì. My "wifesical" got home at 11pm. Currently she's nursing a bad cold. Time to go a normal 10-14 minute route: 9 hours. This story was not unique. There have been reports of trains getting stranded all over the country. One in particular from Rome to Pescara was stuck for 24 hours at a small station in the Province of L'Aquila. Toscana, being our western border, has also been hit hard with trains also being delayed and cancelled. The province of Forlì-Cesena is one of many that have opened a formal inquest into the mismanagement of the emergency situation and the functionality of the trains themselves. Many are left to wonder why places such as Switzerland and other much colder, poorer nations such as Moldova do not experience malfunctions like those of Trenitalia during severe meteorological events.

University of Bologna system cancels opening week of semester

Even the schools have been left in limbo. The University of Bologna system has cancelled the first week of the new semester in response the critical situation concerns road was and commuter transit. Last week Thursday and Friday classes were cancelled at the Forlì campus when it became apparent the weather wasn't about to let up. Still no clear date as to when classes will begin.

Send in the troops: Italian military mobilized to help dig out cities of the Romagna

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Due to the large masses of snow and the difficulty the communes are having with its removal, the Italian military has also been mobilized to aid many provinces. They arrived on the outskirts of Cesena a little before noon Saturday. Two days after the sky fell. Since most of Italy is either mountains or hills the logistical challenges posed to local rescue services and ambulances due to the ice and incline of the Preapennine terrain is taking its toll. Dr. Alessandro Berti of the 118 emergency medical service has stated that it is almost impossible to reach many people who live in the hills due to the narrow roads and 2 meters of accumulated snow in some places. Waiting times have tripled. In the city nine minutes has become 30 and outside the city twenty has become at least an hour if not more. As for fatalities around the most affected zones, no real numbers are out yet but there have already been 16. Some of which are due to shovelling snow while others due to hypothermia,



which is becoming an increasing worry due to temperatures dropping more this week. Human haven't been the only fatalities. In Rimini, the roof of a poultry nursery collapsed killing 50 thousand chicks.

Thousands without, food stocks running low

With the peak of the storm predicted for Tuesday, the focus may have to shift from snow removal to combating low temperatures. This week it can be expected for temperatures to hover in the low 20s to the high teens, which will almost end any hope of a thaw, thus leaving the huge snow piles, invisible sidewalks and roads that look like skating rinks. As if things still couldn't get worse there are still an estimated 85 thousand in North Central Italy without power, many of whom in smaller communities of less than 200 people. In the cities, and many other hard hit areas, however the emerging problem is the inability of supermarkets to restock foodstuffs due to the impassability of the roads. Coupled with the high fuel costs of heavy transport, you can count on more turmoil in the form of protests when the snow thaws. Both supermarkets close to my house were bare after the snow began and you could sense a palpable tension in the small, crammed markets as people bought all they could. Many people I spoke to kept using the war-time analogy to describe the situation.

Even though there is general disorder, there has been no criminal activity, which gives hope that people can come together in moments of difficulty. Everywhere you go you see people helping each other. The city put out an appeal for anyone with a shovel to come out and help remove snow, but that's not going to stop the criticism that has been levelled all over the country about the handling of the event, which I won't get into. One owner of a local kiosk that sells piadina, a flat bread specialty of this area, offered to make food available to the emergency workers and anyone who needed something to eat. A small piece of daily bread can make a huge difference. Out on my evening walk, which by the way is now a journey, everything is covered in frozen white. Ice is starting to form. The forecast for the next couple of weeks is cold and colder which means the snow is not going anywhere. Still, it's fascinating to see the old structures buried putting everything and everyone in place. Reminding us that there are things we cannot change but can only deal with. "Pazienza, pazienza...".

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