



ONLY THE LUCKY ONES MAKE IT

Running The Mediterranean Gauntlet To Escape To Europe

Hilary Clarke

Dr Mario Re thought his long experience as head of the emergency unit at Palermo's crumbling Civic Hospital had equipped him for any professional challenge that might come through his door on a trolley. The rotund Sicilian, with long curly grey hair and steel spectacles, takes the care of gun crime victims, drug overdose cases, even the odd mafia don with a heart attack in his daily stride.

But even Doctor Re admits he was dumbfounded when seven severely undernourished and dehydrated Somali teenagers, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, were rushed into the paint-cracked walls of his emergency ward in October 2003.

'We knew you had to give only a small drop of food at a time because the stomach had contracted. But we had no idea that just one tiny drop would cause the patient such agony', said Dr Re. 'I had to look in military medical handbooks from World War II. It was as if they had just come out of Auschwitz.'

The concentration camp for these teenagers was a clapped out fishing boat that they had taken from Libya on the last leg of a long trek from Somalia to Europe. The vessel floated for 16 hot days under the burning sun and 16 cold nights on the Mediterranean between the Italian island of Lampedusa and the coast of North Africa. Of an estimated 100 people who set out from Libya, only 15 made it alive to Italy, the last hours of their journey spent sheltering under the dead bodies of other passengers.

Sicily, with its arid coastline, pale yellow sands, prickly pears and shoddy white concrete towns, looks almost identical off the coast to the North African port of departure 150 kilometres across the sea. One of the poorest areas in Europe, it has its fair share of problems; but hunger of African proportions was not usually one of them. Over the past few years, however, the island has become the landing point in Europe for thousands upon thousands of people fleeing war and hunger in Asia and Africa. Whilst the Italian authorities pick up some of them, many thousands, no one knows how many, die in the stretch of sea where Europeans have traded with Africans for thousands of years.

Walter Veltroni, the mayor of Rome, held a special ceremony for the 15 bodies recovered from the Somali wreck on the steps of the Campidoglio, the smell of death from their coffins mixing with the tourists and Michelangelo statues. It was a touching gesture. Sicilians however, especially on the southern most island of Lampedusa, are having to deal with a fully fledged humanitarian crisis.

Captain Corrado Scala's voice still trembles with emotion as he recalls 'that dog night' on 18 August 2002. The fishing captain and his four-man crew were returning in his boat, the Chico, from three days at sea catching swordfish when, around 5 pm, they spotted a boat drifting aimlessly on the horizon. As they approached, they saw it was crammed with people, its motor burnt out. It was dangerously close to sinking. The human cargo, 151 asylum seekers – Liberians, Tunisians, Iraqis and Kurds – were on the verge of collapse from dehydration after a full week at sea. 'Their only chance of survival was to meet a boat like ours', said Scala.

It was a full 12 hours before anyone arrived to help Scala and his crew, even though they were only 85 kilometres from the shore. All night his SOS was tossed between the local coast guard, the police and the central coastguard in Rome, no one wanting to take responsibility. As darkness fell, the only instruction he had received from Rome was: 'Don't leave them to drown, otherwise there will be trouble.' Another member of the crew, Scala's younger brother, Massimo, managed with a few words of English to negotiate with some of the Iraqi Kurds to bring the women and children on to their boat.

'We made jokes with the men about Saddam Hussein. They answered like this', he said, drawing his finger across his throat. Expensive fishing equipment was thrown overboard to make room for the desperate passengers. The Rome coastguard instructed Scala to tow the refugee boat to the island of Malta. 'That's when all hell broke loose. Some of the women grabbed our legs and threatened to throw themselves overboard, screaming, "No Malta! No Malta! Italia, Italia!"'

When he relayed the situation to Rome, Scala was told to hang on and say they were going to Italy after all, and that someone was coming to help. But instead of the coastguard, it was a boat from the Italian Guardia di Finanza, a branch of the police that showed up five long hours later. The policemen took the refugees aboard and instructed Scala to follow them to Pozzallo, a Sicilian port roughly 30 kilometres from his own village, to make a statement. That, says Scala, is when his 'personal holocaust' began. Exhausted after 60 hours without sleep, the fishermen were detained in a guarded room for 12 more hours until a magistrate arrived and told them to get a lawyer. It was only then that Scala was told he had been arrested for aiding and abetting illegal immigrants. In the days that followed, Scala's boat was seized, his home searched for incriminating evidence.

During the past, immigrants trying to reach Italy came via its eastern shores, mainly from Eastern Europe; but now they come from as far away as Central Africa and Asia.

Many others, no one knows how many, make it through to the country's northern industrial cities or elsewhere in the European Union. Many stay in Sicily, as their presence in cities such as Palermo bears witness. Compared to other migrant communities in Italy, they are relatively well integrated. Others work picking tomatoes on the south of the island, sleeping at night on their fruit boxes. Their working conditions are pitiful; but they are also lucky that they are not among the hundreds, perhaps thousands, who join the growing pile of skeletons that fishermen's nets retrieve from the bottom of the Mediterranean sea.

With the sky spitting out hailstones the size of golf balls, it was already shaping up to be a memorable night for the people eating at La Playa beach restaurant near Agrigento, a month after Scala's arrest. It quickly turned into one that will forever haunt them in their sleep. It was the piano player, who was facing the sea, who first spotted two black teenagers, one male and one female, staggering across the stretch of beach alongside the restaurant. Traumatized, the two Africans managed to raise the alarm via the English speaking pianist: people were drowning after their boat had capsized. Some of the diners, without waiting for the emergency services, ran down to the beach to help. 'Some of us ran for boats while others grabbed pedal-boats, but the waves pushed them back', recalls Calogero Capizzi, co-owner of La Playa. 'Dozens of people were clinging to a large rock a couple of hundred metres from the beach.' Another eye witness added: 'I can still hear the cries in the dark.' He pulled four people out of the sea. A total of 47 bodies have since been recovered; 92 people were rescued. All were Liberians escaping a smoldering civil war. The Italian government granted the Liberians temporary asylum on compassionate grounds and the Archbishop of Syracuse, Monsignor Giuseppe Costanzo, offered them temporary housing. A special mass was held for the dead. 'They are taking care of me here in Italy', said one of the survivors of the Liberian shipwreck, 28-year-old Prince John Bull. 'I believe God wanted me to come to Italy.'

The arrival of the refugees and illegal immigrants has posed a moral dilemma for Sicily's fishermen. Although international maritime law requires seamen to aid anyone in distress, even if their own lives are endangered, the arrest of Scala sent out a confusing message. Three days after the Chico was seized, another group of Sicilian fisherman was arrested by a different magistrate for failing to come to the rescue of stranded asylum seekers.

There have been some much-publicized arrests of people-traffickers, but it seems impossible to stop the tide. The Italians have elevated the crime of people smuggling to the same level as associating with the Mafia; the Italian government has promised to step up the hunt for the so-called 'slave traders' who organize the perilous passage, usually from Africa. So far, there has been no evidence of the Sicilian Mafia being involved in the traffic of the clandestine immigrants; but no one is ruling it out either.

Sicilians have no time for racism, having long been victims of it themselves. Michele Niosi is the port commander of Lampedusa, a tiny island south of mainland Sicily, and where the vast majority of asylum seekers to Sicily arrive. Niosi's team intercepted 900 asylum seekers in August 2003 alone. 'Before, it was mainly North Africans coming here. Now they come from all over the world escaping war and hunger', he says. 'Where it used to be mainly young men, now we get families, pregnant women and children, too.' His empathy for the refugees is plain.

Indeed, he is quick to lecture on the 'deeply multicultural' nature of Sicily, where everything, from food to architecture to the variety of racial types, bears witness to centuries of invasion and immigration. Niosi agrees with Salvatore Cuffaro, the regional president of Sicily, who thinks the short-term solution is tighter political accords with the North African countries from where the boats come, so that enforcement can be increased along their coastlines. Cuffaro's chief of staff explains: 'The Sicilian people, who have themselves immigrated to the north of Italy, to other parts of Europe and in the last century to America and Australia, will always be there to help those people washed up on our shores.'

There are, of course, xenophobes in Sicily too; but there is less tolerance of racism and more understanding of the desperation that drives people to leave their country than in other, wealthier parts of Italy.

Sicilians have lived with Africa for centuries. Much of the Sicilian dialect can be traced back to Arabic. In Trapani, in western Sicily, they eat couscous. Even the famous Sicilian cassata dessert is Arabic in origin, all legacies of the centuries when North Africans lived on the island. African faces can be found even amongst the wooden carved Madonnas brought out every year for local festivals. Steeped in a deeply religious, as well as humane sentiment, most people in Sicily want to help the new immigrants.

Even Captain Scala says he would do the same thing again if he had to. 'When you are there, and it happens to you, even if you were a magistrate, you would do the same thing I did. You can't turn your back on 151 people and leave them to drown.'

Hilary Clarke is a writer for the New Statesman. based in Italy, she also works for the Times of London, the Independent on Sunday, and the Sunday Times.

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