

Working to 'Save' Italy's Roma

Life for Italy's Roma community remains dire. Makeshift camps, most located in the north, are populated with despairing residents. But some organizations are making an effort to improve conditions and turn the tide. by Marina Gersony

Based on the 2011 census, the Italian statistical bureau ISTAT suggests that the Italian immigration flow has nearly tripled over the last decade. More compelling, given the relentlessness of the ongoing economic crisis, is the growth of a new foreign "bourgeoisie," second-generation small entrepreneurs that have gradually become a staple of every day Italian life.

It's an unusual detail in a country like Italy, which since its mid-19th century unification has resisted multi-

culturalism and unapologetically indulged both resistance and resentment. But what the new data suggests is that Italy is a society in transition. Many Italians are beginning to recognize that foreigners are a fundamental national resource that can also provide the country with a needed economic spark.

But one ethnicity has been left out of the growing open-mindedness, the Roma. Still regarded with deep distrust, the Italian Roma still face endemic racism and discrimination.

Media reports suggest confrontation between Italians and Roma arrivals are as frequent and vicious as ever. Most are based on more than six centuries of cumulative

phobias, accentuated by a change in the social landscape. In economic terms, nomadic life in post-industrial societies has undergone a shift. More and more Roma have chosen to move closer to cities. This has provoked a new version of old resistance, in which city-dwellers seek to protect their territory and workplace.

The growing tension adds urgency to the need for policies focused on finding ways to socially integrate a minority that has long been on society's outskirts.

Emblematic of the tension is a murky incident that occurred last December in the gypsy camp near Continassa in Turin. A 16-year-old Italian girl told police that two Roma men had raped her, only to recant under pressure from her family, apparently ashamed that she'd lost her virginity. In the meantime, locals organized a candlelight vigil on her behalf that escalated into an attack on a Roma camp, which was set on fire. As flames swept the encampment, the arsonists allegedly shouted, "Let them burn."

Regrettably, such stories are legion.

Although a number of groups have repeatedly underscored the sanitation and health shortcomings of Roma camps, nothing really seems to change. Living in tin sheds, amid garbage, rats and disease, remains the norm, with cases of tuberculosis also reported.

Such camps litter the suburbs of any number of major Italian cities. Some are illegal, makeshift encampments that grow spontaneously. Turin has at least three such camps, on Lungo Stura Lazio, Germagnano, and on Corso Tazzoli.

Rights and aid associations often find themselves on their own to deal with the thorny emergency. Five million euros in aid promised by Interior Minister Roberto Maroni three years ago to help alleviate the conditions never materialized.

Making an effort to establish socially inclusive Roma policies and working to combat discrimination has long been a European priority, with different levels of success. Italy seems an exception to this ongoing effort.

"In the period between May 21, 2008 and April 3, 2012 at least 1,500 Roma families were evicted from their homes in major Italian cities," asserts the Rom Nation blog. "They were given no alternative living arrangements. Violations of European Directives are a daily occurrence." The blog published a litany of allegations intended to expose what it called "Italian government lies



Roma kids on the Rome outskirts.

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on the Roma emergency, including collusion between local governments and the Camorra.” (<http://nazionerom.blogspot.it/2012/04/le-bugie-del-governo-italiano.html>).

Most recent (and draconian) proposals, including a Roma census, fingerprinting, and the forced emptying of the camps, suggest a complete absence of sensitive and rational proposals. The lack of farsighted policies in turn risks inviting further degeneration.

“Italy has a number of groups that are more or less qualified to deal with the Roma and Sinti [Germanic Roma],” says Constance Frari, a social worker for the social rights group Associazione Culturale TerradelFuoco. She frequently visits the unauthorized camps on the fringes of Turin that house mostly Roma from Romania. “The problem is that everyone’s pretty much on their own,” she says. “There’s no unity of focus. There are no common strategies. We, as an organization, have some important projects going, including a welcome wagon and a take responsibility effort, which are part of the Settimo Torinese project.”

Turin-based Tierra del Fuego has long worked closely with the Roma in an effort to get Roma into the work force

as well as assisting with more general social inclusion, particularly among children in matters of health and education. The Settimo Torinese project is an integration and adjustment plan to ease the Roma community into Italian urban and regional life.

Adds Frari: “In specific terms, the plan has helped six families to leave the camps based on a commitment to accept a specific set of rules, including kids attending school regularly, adults getting training so they can work, internship programs, and scholarships for adults. They’re intended above all to stabilize the financial situation that in turn leads to finding permanent home. Since 2009, in addition to working with Roma families with also had political refugees and youth from the Horn of Africa.”

The organization believes in this social mix as means for different people to coexist and begin to work toward constructive change.

There are positive examples. Milan’s Casa della Carità (House of Charity) has years of experience with Roma communities. It recently joined the European project “EU Inclusive,” which numbers the Soros Foundation Roma-

Italian anti-Roma sentiment persists.

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Roma children are often confined to camps, this one in Rome.



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nia, Bulgaria’s Open Society Institute, and the Fundación Secretariado Gitano from Spain in a two-year project (September 2010-September 2012) intended to work toward improved social integration.

Funded by the European Social Fund known as “Investing in People,” the plan is an effort to make good integration practices more systematic and information sharing between the Roma population of Romania, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain. The plan has any number of offshoots, including funding for a Roma beekeeping cooperative in Bulgaria and medical school scholarships for eligible Roma in all countries.

The underlying goals remain the same: to get Roma employment in large private sector companies, get young people the medical training they need, and teach civics so that the Roma community is in a stronger position to seek self-sufficiency wherever it resides. The preliminary results of the effort will be announced at a EU Inclusive conference set for Milan in June.

Roma and Sinti populations have a long history of labor over the century. This longstanding relationship between the Roma and work is often misunderstood, if not ignored or trivialized.

Roma were skilled artisans, shrewd traders and seasonal workers, providing key economic contributions to lo-

cal society. They filled complementary niches that interacted with the economy of host societies.

Such “middle ground” jobs and the skills they provided began drying up in the 1970s as the modern market economy swept away smaller economic spaces, considering them archaic.

The extinction of crafts created a vacuum that was often filled by individual cunning and trickery. Hucksters prevailed. Their presence, and that of cheating, cast a pall over all Roma communities by strengthening and nurturing precooked bias.

But there has been a recent revival in social awareness, and with it Roma pride. Books, conferences, university seminars, TV documentaries and craft exhibitions once generated by non-Roma as form of recognition, and in some cases pity, are increasingly in the hands of Roma who are determined to express their point of view directly, with the web serving as an ideal vehicle.

Roma sites include U Velto, the portal of Italy’s Sinata Cultural Institute, which records daily life of Sinti and Roma throughout the country. U Velto also has a radio network, a Facebook page, and a Twitter feed. There’s also the exhaustive Federazione Romani (<http://federazioneromani.wordpress.com/>), which brings together Roma and Sinti throughout Italy.