

The Language of Hatred

Judith Harris (February 03, 2009)



An Indian immigrant sleeping at the train station in Nettuno, Rome. A group of Italian youngsters who have been drinking too much. They set him on fire, just for fun, "to see how long it would take for him to burn."

ROME - It was almost dawn last Sunday when the three youths saw the dark-skinned homeless man sleeping on a bench by the train station at Nettuno, seaside resort town in an area south of Rome noted for decades for its Fascist gangs. The man, whose name is Navtej Singh Sidu, 35, is a Sikh from India who had been in Italy for five years. Until that weekend he had done odd jobs on and off, but then he was fired. For a time he received hospitality in a shelter, but when he lost his bed there for reasons to be ascertained, he hopped a train from the Termini Station in Rome to Nettuno to sleep rough.

The two men in their twenties (one married and a father) plus a hanger-on of sixteen had been drinking and reportedly have admitted also taking drugs. The presence of the clochard on the bench

was irritating, and they were bored. They started insulting him; he answered back. They warned him that things would not end with just words. Off they went, returning with a bottle of gasoline, which they poured on the rags covering his legs and ankles. Then they set fire to him and watched the flames. It was something to do when the pubs and discos were shut down.

Boasting, one sent an SMS from his cell phone: "Gli amo fatto la festa." We've given him a lesson. The flames were noticed, and Singh was rushed to the intensive care unit at Sant'Eugenio hospital in Rome, where, with 40% of his body covered with burns, he has a 40% chance to survive. But he is alive, and when Carabinieri paramilitary police arrived with photos of suspects, he remembered the three from the dispute before they turned him into a human torch. The older two, ages 24 and 29, are in prison awaiting trial; the 16-year-old tough, whose name is Samuel, is in the Italian equivalent of a borstal because he is under-age.

What further distressed most people, including an outraged Rome Mayor Gianni Alemanno, was that the three gave as alibis that they had meant to put out the flames before the man was so badly hurt, and anyway they were drunk and had been using drugs—just a frat-boy sort of prank gone wrong, in short, and hence an accident more or less, "to see how long it would take for him to burn," to quote a sub-head in *La Repubblica* Tuesday.

This is the second recent instance of a gang setting fire to a homeless person, and TV commentators and men and women on the street, in the cafes and in my gym are soul-seeking explanations. Some are blaming Italian society: they attribute this latest instance to the sort of violence which the single individuals would shun, but which becomes acceptable to a group, to a lack of job prospects; a decline in the authority of the Italian family, school, and church; and a rise in hard drinking among Italian youngsters combined with low-priced drugs. Many speak of "la cultura dello sballo," a term explained to me in succinct English by the men reading the newspapers at Ermete's coffee bar in my piazza: "Stoned: sex, drugs and rock and roll."

A home-spun explanation was offered by the mother of the 16-year-old, Samuel. Interviewed by RAI TV Channel 2, she admitted that he was born when she was only seventeen, that he is always rebellious, and that to try to keep him in check his Tunisian stepfather beats him regularly. To what extent is this incident a sign of worsening times? The newly released annual report of the prestigious social research institute Eurispes shows that the number of homicides in Italy actually continues to decline, with Italy ranking below Turkey, France, Great Britain and Germany. After a high of 1,901 murders in 1991, last year Italy marked "an historical low" of just 512, again according to Eurispes.

For juvenile offenses, the record shows 39,000 in 2006 (the most recent figures available), well below the 46,000 in 1996. And although anti-immigrant feeling is high, about 71% of the juvenile offenses were committed by Italians, not foreigners. More occurred in the North, 44%, than in the Center, 18%; the South, 23%, or the Islands, 15%.

If, despite incidents like Sunday's, Italy is not necessarily an increasingly violent nation, a nasty undercurrent of racism and intolerance exists nevertheless. It shows in the torching of Roma camps, in a Milan shopkeeper's allegedly mortal bludgeoning of a Burkina Faso immigrant, in a teenage gang's beating of a Chinese immigrant w

ho was waiting for a bus in Rome, and other plainly racial incidents. The Council of Europe's human rights commissioner Thomas Hammarberg has warned Italy of the risk of fueling xenophobia and racism in the country.

To quote ANSA agency, "The government has rebutted such criticism and said in January that it would formally complain about Hammarberg's comments, which 'gravely offended the feelings of Italians' and 'took an unacceptable tone against a European country whose history and traditions of democracy, tolerance and respect for human rights cannot be called into question.'"

However, for Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, the underlying cause of Sunday morning's crime is racism. Calling for teachers and others in authority to combat racism, he said, "We are facing horrifying episodes that at this point must not be considered isolated incidents but alarming symptoms of a spreading trend."



Echoing Napolitano's words, Chamber of Deputies President Gianfranco Fini issued a statement pointing out the contributions to the economy made by immigrants, and, "We cannot permit in any way tolerance of even veiled forms of discrimination."

And yet the harsh new tone persists, even in the language, as when a Roman matron insisted to me that rapists should be publicly "lynched" rather than protected from an angry mob by the police. In politics "bonism" (do-good or bleeding-heart), as in an excess of tolerance, has become a dirty word. When a Radical party MP visited the prison Monday after reports came that the older two had been beaten up, she was attacked for her alleged excess of "bonism." She had to defend herself by explaining that, however horrendous the crimes of the two men, the law is to be respected, including inside prisons.

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