

L'Aquila. A Witness of No Rebuilding Efforts

by Anna Di Lellio (March 14, 2010)



"I am in L'Aquila from New York to visit my parents, who now live 6 miles from the historic center, where they used to own a beautiful old apartment. The apartment is still there, with just a couple of lesions in the living room, but is condemned like the rest of the town. There is no rebuilding effort in place (...) The hundreds of people gathered to remove the debris from the middle of the square in L'Aquila are no strangers to politics. There is a form of protest against the decision to turn the town into a large landfill after the earthquake of last April 6."

L'Aquila, March 14, 2010. As I look at the crowd that is slowly filling Piazza Palazzo early this Sunday morning, I think about what the left-center candidate to Governor of the Puglia region Nichi Vendola said yesterday in Rome, during a large protest demonstration: "we have people without politics and politics without people." The hundreds of people gathered to remove the debris from the middle of the square in L'Aquila are no strangers to politics. There is a form of protest against the decision to turn the town into a large landfill after the earthquake of last April 6. In one year, 4 million tons of dirt, bricks and the remains of many lives have accumulated, but nobody has bothered to remove



them until last month, when people started to roll up their sleeves to do what the Italian government did not. Yet, it is almost impossible to find a connection between this crowd and any opposition leader. I guess that this is the meaning of Vendola's comment.

I am in L'Aquila from New York to visit my parents, who now live 6 miles from the historic center, where they used to own a beautiful old apartment. The apartment is still there, with just a couple of lesions in the living room, but is condemned like the rest of the town. There is no rebuilding effort in place. There is not even a plan. I drive to town to be part of the cleaning effort, because although I have not lived in L'Aquila since the 1970s, when I left for college, I also feel a bit like an earthquake's survivor. And I strongly resent two things: that the government is not thinking about reconstruction, and that the opposition is going along with the plan to abandon a historic town in the center of Italy.

I have not seen Toto' for many years, but I immediately recognize him as I walk in the Piazza Duomo, which the civic groups intent in reopening L'Aquila for its citizens have made their headquarters. When I was a freshman at the University of Perugia and he a sophomore, we used to drive back home every Friday in my small FIAT 500. It took us almost 4 hours to make the 100 miles separating Perugia and L'Aquila. There was no highway then, and the two-lane road was narrow and winding. With Rita, his wife, I share an even older past. We were both avid rollerskaters in middle school, except she was better than I ever was, and scared the hell out of me when she launched down skating the very steep "discesa delle Aquile," on our way to the rink. It is a bittersweet pleasure to see old friends in such circumstances. I am told that their son Andrea, whom I remember as a toddler, is in Paris to accompany the Italian national rugby team, where he played for years.

L'Aquila is a town where, uncharacteristically for Italy, rugby is very popular. Even a protest must make way to this sport. This Sunday the crowd gathered to shovel debris out of the square goes suddenly home in the early afternoon, just in time to watch the game Italy-France on TV. But the whole morning is a feast of hard work and happy reunions with friends and acquaintances. For me it's a wonderful homecoming, but it is understandable, I live in New York. The fact is, everyone is busy greeting someone else as if arriving back home from a long trip. It used to be possible to meet the whole town along the "corso," the main street where people like to stroll daily before lunch or dinner. Even those who had moved to the suburbs would pop in from time to time and casually meet friends. This favorite pastime of people from L'Aquila has not been possible since last year. The earthquake has taken it away.

Toto' had to drive one hour to get to L'Aquila. He now lives on the Adriatic coast, because his house is not habitable any longer. Will it ever be again? Like him, there are many who were forced to leave L'Aquila and move to the coast, or to a smaller town in the surrounding area. Amidst the hundreds who are armed with shovels, wheel barrels and buckets, there are those who walk around looking for known faces. They greet friends and neighbors, some not seen since the night of the earthquake. I meet my friend Doriana's father, who does not dare advance more than a few yards into the town. "If I see more of it, I will start crying," he tells me. He is turning 82, but this year for the first time he will not celebrate his birthday at home.

L'Aquila feels like a ghost town even on this sunny Sunday, with so many people crowding the main square. The army and the police have surrounded it since last April, and they allow access only to a small portion of main street. Barricades impede entrance into the narrow alleys and the squares of the medieval center. Externally, the buildings often show only few cracks. Some are devastated inside, others aren't. Impossible to tell from the street, and at any rate they are all covered with scaffolds, even those that did not need the extra protection. The Civil Protection has made sure that private businesses that are in friendly terms with its top officers took a large share of public funds destined to reconstruction, through non bidding contracts. Never mind that not all the scaffolding was necessary.

For one year, the government got busy trying to place 70 ,000 homeless people under a roof. The



results were mixed, but even worse, the new houses built in the wrong places and at prohibitive costs (2800 Euro per square meter) have exhausted all the funds allotted for the emergency. They were supposed to cover all displaced people, but someone made the wrong count and thousands still live in hotels at the expense of the taxpayers. Furthermore, these new houses are not the accommodation that people needed or wanted. Scattered in peripheral areas, they lack infrastructures and even the most basic services. That's why old neighbors come to the town center on Sundays. They want to experience the old communal spirit as they shovel a mountain of debris, hoping to draw the attention to a place that the entire country has forgotten, but that none of us can ever abandon.

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