

Rome Welcomes First Flow of Syrian Migrants

Mila Tenaglia (March 01, 2016)



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ROME -- For the twenty-four Syrian families -- 52 adults, 41 children -- who flew into Rome from a Lebanese refugee camp on Feb. 29, kindly authorities at the Leonardo da Vinci airport had improvised a playroom for the youngsters. The families were from the cities of Homs, Idlib and Hama, all hard hit by bombing since 2011, and for this reason on humanitarian grounds had been



granted visas by the Italian Embassy in Lebanon. Because some of the youngest had never, ever been outside the Beirut concentration camp in which they were born, one five-year-old asked his father if they should fold up their tent to take it with them to Italy. Besides the play room, airport officials also offered each family a food basket, while volunteers carried signs saying in Arabic and Italian, Welcome to Italy. By way of response a little girl arrival held up her hand painted with a bright red heart. A few of the children had already been taught some words in Italian. (For a ghastly drone video of wartorn Homs, see: <https://www.inverse.com/article/11025-haunting-drone-video-shows-bombed-out-homs-syria>).

Their arrival was part of a pilot project involving the Italian government together with the Roman Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio and the Italian Federation of Evangelical churches with the Waldensian (Valdese) Protestant church, whose headquarters are in Piedmont. For almost a year, in response to Pope Francis's appeal for acts of mercy, Italian Protestants and Catholics have worked together on behalf of migrants, and this ecumenical approach to an open door policy, under the current dramatic circumstances, amounts to a pilot project on migration. The first such experiment in Europe, it is under study by some other European Union countries. "We hope it will open the way for more," said Marco Impagliazzo, president of Sant'Egidio. Already, over the next two years plans are for another 1,000 to arrive under the same program: 600 from Lebanon, 150 from Morocco and 250 from Ethiopia.

Speaking at a meeting of Catholics and Protestants held in Turin last year, the Waldensian moderator Eugenio Bernardini said, "We simply cannot ignore the drama underway in the Mediterranean." The joint project drawing together the Italian Protestants and the Sant'Egidio community, headquartered in Rome's Trastevere quarter, is called "Mediterranean Hope." The Catholic magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* calls it a "concrete proof of ecumenism", all the more necessary because of the epocal influx from the war zones.

From the airport buses took a group of 30 to Trento, where they will be guests of the local Catholic diocese; two groups to Reggio Emilia, also guests of the dioceses. Two groups went to Florence and to Aprilia, near Rome, where they are guests of the Federation of Evangelical churches. Finally, a group remains in Rome under the auspices of the Sant'Egidio Community. The reason for their being scattered throughout Italy is in hopes that they will more readily be assimilated into Italian life, language and, for the children, schools. Alitalia handled, gratis, the flight from Lebanon.

Once here, then what? Integration has become perhaps surprisingly effective for two reasons: the low birth rate of the Italians and changes in the pattern of work in Italy. Studies here show that the foreign migrants are now doing the jobs Italians used to do -- not only the tough jobs of digging ditches and trimming trees, but especially jobs for skilled workers, the old-fashioned ones called here "mestieri antichi": bakers, shoemakers, carpenters, plumbers, caregivers, gardeners.

"These are jobs that risked disappearing," according to economics reporter Salvatore Giuffrida. Their work force is essential so as to ensure a generational change in the crafts sector, says Giuffrida: "Italy relaunched itself after the war with exactly these jobs, but they were at risk of disappearing until now, when they are being carried forward by the foreigners." What foreigners?

Well over half a million live in Rome alone, a figure predicted to rise to 1.6 million in 2050, for about one-fifth of the population. According to a study by the UIL union together with Eures on new immigrants, in 2009 there were only 210,000 in Lazio whereas, today the triple, 636,000. Half are 40 or younger, and only 3% are over 65, by comparison with the 21% of over-65 Italians in Lazio (ISTAT statistics). Foreign workers also generate welcome income for the Lazio region, estimated to amount to 1 billion euros, plus tax money as well



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