

Bright Moments of a Difficult Year

Judith Harris (December 15, 2008)



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Some of us think this is a year best forgotten. But let us consider the bright moments. In Viterbo one evening, as we were headed to a concert, we saw a group of well-dressed young people seated at a table. They were collecting fingerprints because Roma (Gypsy) children were being fingerprinted by order of the Italian state. As we pressed our fingers onto the pages, and signed our names and addressed and gave our ID card numbers, we took great pride in the young people, who took their time and intelligence and energy to react in a peaceful, serious way.

Another bright light was the show of courage of the Prefect of Rome Carlo Mosca, who refused to fingerprint Roma children, but instead sent Red Cross teams into the Roma “camps” to see which



ones were inoculated against smallpox and mumps and polio (half were not). Oh, yes—I forgot to say that for his pains he has been removed from his post. Insubordination does not pay.

Last month Isabella Clough Marinara, Ph.D., addressed a conference on racism, in which she described the situation of the Roma today in Rome. From her paper:

“Under the last centre-left government and now under the right, the drive to shut down unauthorized camps and deport undocumented foreign Roma has resulted in large numbers now keeping constantly on the move in the hope of evading the police.

“For many, deportation would mean the return to countries, such as Romania and Slovakia, where anti-Roma discrimination and violence are common. Thousands of other foreign Roma have been in Italy for decades or were born here but have suffered systematic obstacles to obtaining Italian citizenship. Most of those who escaped ethnic cleansing during the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo crisis have not been recognized as refugees.

“They confirm that Hannah Arendt’s analysis remains true today: those who lose citizenship rights very quickly lose their supposedly inalienable human rights. Foreign Roma in Italy have again taken on the role they had in the Renaissance, exiles who are de facto unprotected by the authorities of any state. However, the Roma question cannot be reduced only to one of citizenship status, as many politicians claim. There is certainly a racializing element in the special policies which target them. In fact, Italian Roma and Sinti are also subject to fingerprinting and police controls which are not applied to other Italians. This amounts to ethnic profiling.”

And so, lest we forget the significance of the season, let me introduce the Christmas beggar child Mary. A cocky six year old, tricked out in a cheap Santa suit, Maria (her real name) is a Roma from Romania. She told me that she has no plans to attend school. Still, all alone, playing skillfully to the shoppers in the bustling outdoor market at the Campo de’ Fiori, she collected coins and then came into the Magnolia Café and clambered up onto a stool to give herself a treat with a bit of her earnings. She has no home, she is being exploited, but she has a bright smile and eyes like the stars of Bethlehem.

Merry Christmas to the editors and readers of i-italy, and a very happy new year.

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