

No Laughing Matter

Judith Harris (February 16, 2010)



SNAP/SHOTS ITALY. A leaked wiretap from investigations into suspected irregularities in the post-quake reconstruction in Abruzzo, shows a cynical dialogue among two eminent builders anxious for juicy contracts.

Reading the print-outs of phone taps is one of the most vilifying pastimes, but necessary in a country where justice moves, if at all, at snail's pace. The leaking of phone taps is a way of flinging damning information, which might otherwise disappear into the meanders of power, into the public arena so that at least the ordinary citizen can pronounce judgment. Having read whole volumes of Mafia wire taps, I'd thought I'd become hardened. But I was wrong. Worse still than the accounts of the Mafia cemetery in a bay off Palermo (I am putting this politely) was a conversation, published as a leaked wiretap by Florence magistrates during Carnival week.



The Abruzzi quake took place at 3:32 am on April 6, 2009. A few hours later two eminent builders anxious for juicy contracts were chatting about the news on a phone that happened to be tapped on orders of Florentine magistrate Rosario Lupo, in charge of investigations into suspected crony contracts funneled through the Civil Protection Agency so as to avoid the otherwise necessary oversight and competitive bidding. Here's how the conversation went:

"You better pay attention to this quake stuff because we've got to get rolling right away. We don't get a quake every day."

"Yeah I know" (laughter).

"Naturally, the poor things."

"Well okay."

"This morning at three-thirty I was in bed laughing."

"Me too. Well, ciao."

In this tragedy 150 died, 1,500 were injured and 70,000 were left homeless, and so, not surprisingly, the Abruzzesi reading the wire tap chat were not amused. The day after it was published a group wearing T-shirts and carrying signs reading WE WERE NOT LAUGHING broke through a police barricade to demonstrate in the off-limits, unrestored historic center of the Abruzzo capital, L'Aquila.

Among the towns near L'Aquila where there was the least to laugh about was little Onna, a medieval town whose name comes from the Latin unda (onda in Italian), wave. During World War II Nazis shot and killed seventeen of its citizens in June 1944.

The quake flattened seventy percent of the town, and of its 350 citizens, forty were killed. From a news report of 4:30 pm on the day of the quake: "Onna, tiny suburb of L'Aquila, is no more. It was razed to the ground. No more houses, only rubble and in a field a long line of coffins. Tears, silence and in the air dust and so much pain, as if after a bombing. This town is the very symbol of the tragedy that has struck the Abruzzo."

This week, for the daily *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, journalist Sandra Amurri interviewed Onna citizen Giustino Parisse, who lost two children, Maria Paola, 18, and Domenico, 16, as well as his 75-year-old father and his home, flattened along with the others at Onna on that laughable April morning at 3:32 am. Giustino Parisse and others among the Onna survivors are currently collecting funds to help the victims of the Haiti quake, and Parisse has already made contact with an official adoption agency there in hopes of adopting two Haitian orphans.

It makes you want to weep with joy that people like the citizens of Onna exist, despite it all.



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