

Mediterranea conversations in Palermo

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In 2017, I spent two months working at Porco Rosso, a community center in Palermo, founded by Gambian and Palermitan activists to support newly arrived migrants. On Wednesdays, Porco Rosso has a *sportello*, an open desk, where migrants can seek counsel on an array of social, economic, and legal issues.

I returned to Palermo in July 2019 and attended an event designed to tell Mediterranea's story through the personal testimonies of three participants: Erasmo Palazzotto, Member of Parliament of the Italian Left Party and "chief of mission" of the Alex, Pietro Bartolo, a doctor from Lampedusa and newly elected Member of European Parliament, and Alessandra Sciarba, who was aboard one of the Alex's recent missions and who serves as the official spokesperson of Mediterranea.

Mediterranea monitors and denounces human rights violations occurring in the Mediterranean Sea, as well as provides direct aid to individuals in distress at sea. The Mare Jonio, Mediterranea's primary boat that performed search and rescue operations, was impounded by the Italian government in March 2019. Multiple members of the crew as well as the captain have been put under formal investigation for aiding "illegal migration". In the beginning of July, with Mare Jonio still impounded, Mediterranea sent out what was previously its support boat, the Alex, to sea.

Alessandra began the event by recounting her time aboard the Alex, which rescued 59 migrants including pregnant women and unaccompanied minors. Stranded at sea, the migrants were ignored until Mediterranea

intervened and brought them to the port of Lampedusa. Like the Mare Jonio, the Alex was impounded by the government and six crew members are currently under investigation and facing fines. Alessandra told how she promised those aboard that there are other Italians who are like the crew, who recognize their struggles to arrive in Europe by boat. *Mediterranea*, she said, is not just a symbol or an instrument of political resistance; it is an occasion to continue the fight to protect human life.

Erasmus followed with his own impressions as “chief of mission” of the Alex. The crew and the 59 migrants spent 50 hours aboard the Alex while the Italian government refused to comply with international maritime law. Miles from the shore of Lampedusa, they were using up their reserve oil and food. Only once the mission had ended did they realize the absurdity of their situation. Erasmus is proud that *Mediterranea* has saved 130 lives on its various missions. Even though this number may seem small, it is enormous.

The third and last speaker was Pietro who reflected on his relationship to the Mediterranean Sea and the humanitarian crisis Italy has created. For generations his family lived as fishermen, owing the sea their lives. The ocean was everything for them. Now, their beautiful sea off the coast of Lampedusa has turned into a cemetery. Pietro wants the ocean to return to the life sustaining ocean it was once was and still could be.

Pietro has been going around Italy for four years sharing what he has witnessed to counter the government’s distorted perspective on the situation. Italy has portrayed these people as stealing our jobs, as prostitutes, and worse. He has been looking for ways to change the narrative. Pietro collaborated with Gianfranco Rosi, to make the film *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea), that eventually made it to the Oscars, but the situation in the Mediterranean has only gotten worse.

In traveling around Italy to tell these stories, Pietro has entered into politics. He admits it has been strange being a doctor in the world of politics, but he has made the decision to dedicate himself to immigration. “We have lost our way”, he says, “lost the sense of our values and things need to change.” He believes the audience listening to him already shares these forgotten values: humanity, fraternity, and *accoglienza*, the untranslatable Italian word that signifies a sincere attempt at hospitality through the act of welcoming. “Thousands of people have died in the Mediterranean¹ – more than a war. We need to find a way for this to end, to stop their suffering, but also to stop our own.”



Teatro Garibaldi in Palermo, during the event held on July 26, 2019 (Photo by Fausto Melluso)

¹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>