

Visits to Comiso
by
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On March 8, 1983, International Women's Day, I marched in a peaceful procession of several thousand women through the winding streets of Comiso, past the shuttered doors and windows of this little town in Sicily. With me to oppose the planned deployment here of 112 Cruise missiles are Franciscan nun Rosemary Lynch and Elizabeth Scott of the National Council of Churches of Christ.

There is no sense among us of being intruders on Italian soil or interlopers in Italian policy. For us national boundaries on this issue are dissolved.

On March 9, 1983 at midmorning we three arrive at the entrance of the proposed Cruise missile base at the old Magliocco airport, just outside Comiso. At the gate, their arms locked together, sit fifteen women from the nearby Peace Camp.

A line of soldiers stands behind them, engaging in banter, and a few Carabinieri (elite state police) patrol the area. One of the women asks that I report to their embassies should they be arrested, and a piece of paper is found to start gathering names.

Suddenly several squad cars filled with additional Carabinieri and plainclothes police arrive. Without warning, the Carabinieri charge.

Rosemary's camera is jerked from her neck as she attempts to photograph the violent encounter. The police assault a journalist, ripping out and exposing his film. His head is smashed into the street.

I watch in consternation as the Carabinieri lunge for the demonstrators. Grabbing whatever they can - arms, legs, clothes - they drag the women 25 feet down the road.

I turn toward an officer twisting a woman's arm and admonish him. To no avail. The arm is broken.

The incident has been brief and violent on the part of the police. The women, disheveled and bruised, regroup in a circle to plan their next move. I learn that twice they have called the television station in Palermo. No one had appeared. We assure the women that we will do whatever we can to convey information of their experience when we return to Rome and the United States.

Upon our return to Rome, we write the U.S. Ambassador protesting the treatment. No response. We hold a press conference and meet with Italian reporters and senators. There is minimal news coverage, and two days later the women from the Peace Camp are arrested and deported.

My first visit to Comiso had been three months earlier in November, at the invitation of Giacomo Cagnes, former mayor of the city for 26 years. I had come to observe and be briefed by CUDIP (United Citizens for Disarmament and Peace), the local organization he heads in opposition to the proposed missile base.

When I arrived that November the scene had^{been} much different. I was met at the airport in Catania by an Italian protestant minister and his wife who were to spend the day with me and a young English woman. As we drove into Comiso we were given a brief history of the area and a description of the town.

I noted with interest the relative prosperity of this fertile region and was told that until the site was selected for the missile deployment, Comiso had been free of Mafia influence.

As we drive along a country road, I saw the olive groves, vineyards and numerous greenhouses where tomatoes and strawberries are grown for export all over Europe. My guides explained that the half-built houses we saw signify the local tradition of building as a family is able to afford it, part by part.

As we approached the old Magliocco airport, the narrow lane suddenly widened into a paved road. Looking over the wall of the old airport, we saw a few workmen moving around in a desulatory way. Someone was hammering in the distance.

As the sun was setting I stood on the road looking at the beautiful tended vineyards on my left and the base on my right, and thought, "There's life on one side and death on the other."

Yet very little work had been done. Morale at CUDIP was high. The feeling was that there was still time to stop the deployment.

March 1983. In a few short months, this serene community has undergone a fundamental transformation. Cranes, condominiums, high rises and swimming pools have radically altered the landscape. Tall, hastily erected buildings now overshadow the vineyards and traditional half-built houses.

Rumor abounds about a billion dollar expenditure for the base and a 3500 bed military hospital. This city of 28,000 is presently served by a hospital of 120 beds.

The citizens of Comiso have been told that the new base will bring a boom to their economy and an end to unemployment. But after eight months of work, only 60 workers of the 5000 without jobs have been employed at the base. None of the contracts recently awarded have been to local or Sicilian firms, as promised. One firm receiving a 5 million dollar contract is connected politically with the present mayor of Comiso who strongly supports the base.

After initially opposing the base, the mayor was brought to Rome for consultation with his political party. He then reversed his opposition. Soon after, he was feted in the United States by the Reagan administration.

First there were whispers. Now it is openly discussed and mentioned in print that the Mafia has become a strong presence in Comiso. It is not the populace, but organized crime that stands to profit from lucrative construction contracts obtained through ghost companies and kickbacks and from the drugs and prostitutes it is ready to supply.

The Mafia intimidates those who would speak out, and increasingly harasses those who do. Two Americans attending mass in Comiso in May were approached by a woman they had never seen before. "You have no idea what kind of pressure we're under not to oppose the base," she whispered to them, and left the church.

A family actively and legally resisting deployment has received menacing telephone calls. The Mafia has also attempted to quell resistance with their assassination of Pio la Torre, a dedicated opponent of organized crime and the missile base, and more recently with the threatening of Palermo Cardinal Salvatore

Pappalardo. Pressure for his removal has been blocked only by the intervention of the Pope.

While the Mafia's response to protest has been harassment, the government's has been official silence. 30,000 people demonstrated against deployment in October, 1981 and 100,000 as preparations to clear the base began in April, 1982. In June, 1982 one million Sicilians, including 80% of Comiso's voters, signed a petition of protest sent to the Italian capital.

This petition has been doomed to gather dust in a basement in Rome. And the construction of the base accelerates.

Comiso is not a household word, and yet our government's policy has had a profound effect on the life of that community. It might be interesting to know how many of our elected federal officials are even aware of it. But then it has hardly been a feature of our national security mentality to concern itself with people - either in the present or the future.

Circumstances made it possible for me to see the disruption that our official policy brings to a modest Sicilian community. Whereas the people of Nevada and Utah had the resources to stop the deployment of the MX in their backyard, the people of Comiso are simply pawns of higher authorities.

Time and time again democracy has been overridden in this struggle. The local representatives of the people have never been consulted about the proposed base. Activists from across Europe have been unconstitutionally expelled from Comiso. And the installation of the missiles is an unquestionable violation of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 which explicitly forbids the use of Sicily for military ends.

Whatever the official verbage about deterrence, the fact is that these missiles' range is only 1500 miles. Thus they are incapable of reaching either Moscow or Leningrad. However, they are capable of reaching Libya and the Middle East. In effect, Sicily is being transformed into a nuclear offensive launching pad.

Who in the name of the American people made this epic decision, and by what method was it made, and for what purpose? Unless an aroused American electorate brings these issues to the forefront in the next few months, we will be accepting one more horrendous step toward annihilation.