

The Boat People in Italy: A story of community and conviviality

Historical background

Nowadays, the media and news outlets convey almost daily images of immigrants trying to cross the seas on little boats. Images of desperation and sufferance are transmitted daily and become almost “normal” for us in our privileged position. This anecdote does not aim to provoke political debate, but rather to understand what history might be able to teach us for our future, and how even small gestures for some people can mean everything.

Slightly over forty years ago, the world was in the middle of a turbulent geopolitical situation dominated by the spectre of the Cold war and continuous rivalry between the two super-powers, the US and the USSR. It is in within this context that the Vietnam War found itself.

The war began in 1955 and was conducted between the insurrectionary pro-communist forces, based primarily in the north of the country, the authoritarian pro-US government, and the military forces of the Republic of Vietnam, established in 1954 after the Geneva Convention and following the first Indochina war. The war continued for almost 20 years, even despite several notable global anti-Vietnam War protest movements, such as that in the US led by students in 1968.

On 30 April 1975, the pro-communist troops, the Viet Cong, conquered Saigon, officially bringin the Vietnam War to its conclusion. Two years prior to this, the Amercians, who entered the war in 1965, decided to withdraw their troops — a move which ultimately contributed to the fall of the city.

Once the conflict ended, the new pro-communist regime embarked on a project of repression in the newly-occupied South of the country. It forced many southern Vietnamese to live in so-called “new economic zones” which essentially amounted to just inhospitable areas in the middle of the jungle that the Communists had aimed to develop, depriving the people of their property and generating large-scale poverty and famine particularly. The situation was unbearable and slowly, more and more Vietnamese decided to leave everything behind and flee the country. First, it was the rich Vietnamese merchants of Chinese origins who fled, followed by those who were part of the antique bourgeoisie, and finally the poorer middle-low-income families.

Leaving the country was not easy. The Vietnamese regime offered the possibility of issuing emigration visas, but only on the condition of leaving the country empty-handed and at a high price. Even with the right documents, leaving was still not easy. Migrating on land was virtually impossible since the neighboring countries gradually started to deny access to Vietnamese immigrants. The only possible way out of the country was by sea. However, immigrants still faced many obstacles leaving the country in this manner. Strong waves, unpredictable maritime condition, pirates (or rather Thai fishermen that tried to strip the migrants of the few things they had), and hostile neighboring governments and naval armaments left many fleeing Vietnamese stuck in the middle of the South China Sea on broken boats that were basically rafts. These are the “boat people” that became internationally relevant in 1979, when the tragic situation reached its peak.

It is in this context that the Italian mission “Missione Vietnam” was established. Having learnt of the tragic situation of the thousands of Vietnamese “boat people”, then-Italian President Pertini asked Prime Minister Andreotti to take action. Having gathered the opinions of Defense Minister Ruffini and Congressman Zamberletti (former coordinator of the earthquake emergency in Friuli in 1976), Andreotti officially set the expedition in motion. The Italian navy was the most effective element to offer a prompt response. In just under four days, the vessels Vittorio Veneto, Andrea Doria and Stromboli were reconfigured from military boats to well-equipped hosting centers ready to welcome thousands of people. On 26 June 1979, the mission commenced and nearly a month after, the first rescue was made.

On 26 July, the vessel Vittorio Veneto had, in fact, encountered a small, almost broken 25m-long boat with 128 Vietnamese. It approached the boat and sent a small dinghy with some doctors and two translators to have the first contact with the little boat. The interpreters broadcasted a clear message: “These cruisers are from the Italian Navy, if you want, you can embark as political refugees, if not we can provide you with food, medications and clothes”. The answer was a unanimous cry of joy. They were the first rescued ‘Boat people’ by the Italian navy. The mission continued for almost a month until 21 August, when the three boats, full of Vietnamese political refugees, returned to the *Bel Paese*. Waiting for them and for the new ‘Italians’ was a warm crowd in Venice’s harbor, Italians were enthusiastic and proud of what their country had just accomplished. Once in Italy, the Vietnamese refugees were settled into different “Welcoming camps” set up mostly in the northeast of the country. Slowly, they recommenced their lives again and integrated into the Italian community.

Angelo's story

Among the people saved by the Missione Vietnam was Angelo, a 9-year-old Vietnamese boy. After the Italian mission and his arrival in Italy, his family was welcomed in a small village close to Bologna, in northern Italy. When asked about his first memories of those first days, Angelo immediately recalled the sensation of bitter cold, completely new for someone coming from the Mekong delta. That strange feeling of cold, but also, the simultaneous sensation of a new world that, from that moment on, would be his new home, were his main memories.

Not a lot of people can usually remember sensations and emotions from earlier periods of their lives, but this was not the case for Angelo. The danger and the oppression his family were escaping from clearly remained in his mind. In Italy, everything was new: the language, the views, the colors, the food and so on. When his family arrived, they had nothing: no suitcases, no luggage, nothing. They ended up in this small village in the middle of the Po valley thanks to Mr. Ugo Campanini who, after having heard their story, decided to host them and to offer Angelo's father a job in his factory, the Campanini (now SLUM), where he worked with hemp.

For Italians, Vietnam was just a country of war, but not much more. The first day in town, Angelo and his family were welcomed by Don Antonio, the village's priest, who took them to the city center to get basic necessities. People in the town looked at them, smile and waved. They were curious.. There were not many immigrants in Italy at the time, especially from Asian countries and it was probably the first time in the lives of the villagers that they saw people who spoke a completely unknown language and looked completely different. They were not threatened however, they were simply curious. It was not easy for Angelo and his family to start a new life again, but the help of the locals and the courage of the family helped them overcome this situation.

Angelo especially recalls the hospitality of the church and its people. Although his family was Buddhist, local people went beyond religions, welcoming and treating them as family. Integration was not easy, with language being a huge barrier. Despite this, Angelo, his family and the local community found ways to bond even without talking. Emma, one of the first women to welcome and greet the family, highlighted some interesting and inspiring moments. Given that Italy was known for its cuisine, Emma wanted to help Angelo and his family uncover this enormous treasure. She gathered a group of women from the church and would

go to Angelo's house and teach his mother and sisters typical regional recipes, such as homemade Bolognese sauce and handmade pasta and tortellini. Emma, now a 82 years old retired grandmother, still remembers fondly the face of the children who did not understand what she was saying but were nonetheless able to enthusiastically learn and discover the culture of their new home. Cooking became a moment of exchange. With time Angelo and his family started to give back to Emma and the other ladies, teaching them traditional Vietnamese cuisine in return.

Community is an important word in this anecdote. Without the help of the entire local community, the integration of Angelo and his family would have not been possible. Everyone tried to make them feel welcome and part of that community. A particular episode stuck in my mind while I was reviewing my notes from these interviews. At the time, phones were not as common as today, especially for a refugee family who had just arrived in a new country. Since part of Angelo's family ended up in Germany, communication within the family was not easy. In her interview, Emma recalled a funny memory. When Angelo's brother called from Germany, he could not reach his brother's family directly and so would call Emma's house instead. After having received this call, Emma would take her bike and run towards Angelo's house to inform the family and bring them to her house to talk with their brothers and sisters. All these gestures seem small and irrelevant, but, especially at that time, they demonstrated the power that community and conviviality could have in fostering intergration.

In this little town in the middle of the Po valley usually surrounded by fog, Angelo studied, got married and had his children. Here after years of sacrifice, his father and himself opened their first store, an ethnic grocery store with food products from all over the world. A way to connect to their roots, but also to their present making Italians discover a different world and its diverse flavors and dishes. The company expanded to Bologna in 1991. In the middle of the University district, it is now a place of gathering, exchange and conviviality for Italians and foreigners. In 2002, for his story of integration, Angelo's father received one of the highest achievements in the country: he became 'Knight Order of Merit of the Italian Republic' on the proposal of the townhall of their city. For the past over forty years, Angelo has been living in Italy, acquiring its culture while at the same time not forgetting his origins. It makes him laugh when people are surprised by his Bolognese accent that accompanies his almond-shaped eyes. He feels 100% Italian and part of his local community, but he also recognizes that without every single person that he has met, he would not be the person he is today.

Frankly, I personally acknowledge the importance of all these people in his story since without them, I would not even be able to recount this anecdote to you. In fact, Angelo is my father and his parents are my grandparents. Their sacrifice and strength in starting all over again have allowed me to have many opportunities today. If they had not taken the decision to embark on that broken boat, I would probably not have the chance to study in one of the most prestigious institutions of the world at Sciences Po Paris. Without the people that they have met along their way and the hospitality that the town we lived in had given us, our story would be completely different.

As simplistic as it might sound, integration and positive stories start from gestures embedded within day-to-day life. In this context, the role of culture and tradition has an extraordinary importance. Indeed, integration cannot happen without exchange, and this is something that institutions and governments are slowly starting to realize.

In the present, the Future Food Institute, a non-profit organisation headquartered in Bologna focusing on the promotion of the UNESCO Intangible World Heritage practice of the Mediterranean Diet, has just recently opened its Paideia Campus in Pollica (SA). It promotes integration projects based on the concept of the Mediterranean Diet and the ecological transition, considering the integration of immigrants as an opportunity and asset not only for the demographic repopulation of underpopulated areas, but also as an opportunity for the comprehensive economic development of Italy and all its regions. Once again small gestures, such as the sharing of a dish, are being used as the base of a more solid future.