

JOHANNA EURICH, ORAL HISTORIAN OF MARITIME CULTURES, LED THE ORAL HISTORY EXPEDITION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN. BELOW IS A MOVING DOCUMENT FROM SOME OF HER EXPERIENCES:

I am not religious in the conventional sense, but my husband reading my emails during the trip to Italy, observed that it was a pilgrimage. He was right.

Italy - Why Italy?

Italy has fascinated me because of its role in the Mediterranean. Italy stretches out and divides the Eastern from the Western Med, and Italian fishermen are everywhere. The technology they developed is everywhere. So when Myriam and Armando said "Come and come now," I went.

They are everywhere, I said. Italian fishermen are even a force in my home in Alaska. I find the mark of Italian fishermen in some of the least Italian places in the Med.

In Tunisia Italians have, like elsewhere, left a complicated legacy. Italians came and aggressively fished the Tunisian coast. They did not just fish, but they came on shore and took sheep, goats, whatever they liked. To settle the growing resentment from Tunisians, they also took Tunisian fishermen onboard as crew... teaching them their techniques and absorbing them into their fishing culture.

Italians remain the major market for coral in Tunisia and have built fish farms there, as they have in their own country. The fish farms might be seen as a positive thing but there are dark things here, things dark beyond the obvious environmental challenges of fish farms and the over-exploitation of coral. It is these more complicated issues that this project is designed to find and tell in the form of stories.

Some of those stories surface in a conversation with Pierpaolo Zagoni, an elegant and sophisticated regional notary I met on the Lido in Venice during this trip. He had gone out with Italian fishing boats off Karkennah, a place in Tunisia I hope to get to this summer. He talked about the unbelievable quantity of fish caught and the reaction of the local community to the Italians on land and the way boats with Tunisian crews have stretched out throughout the Med because Tunisians don't want that kind of aggressive Italian fishing in their own coastlines. The way he talked about it one could see the aggression as a kind of rape in a social and environmental context.

We found Pierpaolo when we went to a bookstore to meet a publisher of books about the maritime culture in the Adriatic. Why the Adriatic? If you look on the map of Italy you find that most of the sea along its coasts is

fairly deep, with one exception - the extensive shelf of shallow waters in a huge portion of the Adriatic Sea on the northeast side of Italy that extends all the way to Croatia, Yugoslavia. This is a different marine environment than I have traveled to in the Med so far on this expedition, and I wanted to see it because I suspected it would mean finding cultures with slightly different responses to that morphology of the coast and the marine environment. I had no idea how right that would be.

It was a risk going there, because all the research on the web told me to head to Sicily and Sardinia farther south - the real center of the most aggressive fishing culture in Italy, but that was too far to go in such a short time. My collaborator, cinematographer and translator, Armando, had only two weeks before he would have to get back to work as a yacht captain. We decided to limit ourselves to the upper middle of the country -- and concentrate on the parts of the Adriatic, Tyrrhenian and Ligurian Seas we could get to easily.

There were lots of interesting stories. Each linked to the other magically.

Imperia in the Ligurian Sea

We started out in Imperia where the *Kiss*, Myriam and Armando's little powerboat they are buying and calling home, is docked. We learned the camera, and walked down to the port to talk to fishermen. Armando was already well known there, so it was not tough finding and talking with people. We stumbled on a fish war between the tiniest fishermen and the slightly bigger and more aggressive fishermen. Both of our interviewees from both camps are named Salvatore. The bigger boat owner is known as Turi.

Both Salvatores came from Sicily originally. Both families arrived at about the same time, in the 40's and 50's. They came for the same reason. They saw a coastline with lots of fish and few fishermen, while at home in Sicily the competition for available fish was fierce. They both had to put up with prejudice. Sicilians are the "niggers" of Italy and are viewed as lazy and poor by Northern Italians. They have a different language. They sound and look different. Both fishermen acknowledge this, but both have made a home in Imperia and intend to stay though one of their fathers returned to Sicily.

Turi is an example of the inventiveness and understanding of fishing that has made Sicilians one of the most influential forces in the Med and possibly the world (note the role they have in fisheries in California and Alaska just to name two.) Look at the finders they made out of beach balls.

They are a lot cheaper than conventional ones and work fine for their fishing boats. You can see homemade fishing gear everywhere. Turi, when we met him, was experimenting with a different way of hanging a drift-net - literally hanging it upside down... in terms of the kind of web he put where. He also showed us a net he and his son use that has a meter dip in it to allow dolphins to escape. But these nets are a huge 20 kilometers long and they do catch everything. He also fishes 14 kilometers out where the sea plunges from the shallower coast to the depths. It is these boundary areas that are the most productive for the large swordfish and tuna he and his son like to catch. They are part of the cooperative and sell their catch at auction legally and some is probably sold on the black market. Both of them are both relatively affluent.

Salvatore is about Turi's age and is a gentler soul. His clothes are frayed. He used to fish with Turi as crew and was shocked by how much fish Turi would throw overboard as by-catch, un-targeted species caught inadvertently. Salvatore's boat and nets are much smaller than Turi's. He worries about protecting the fish and keeping the fisheries sustainable. His harvest is much smaller. He sells it off his boat at the docks. He talks about learning to fish off a rowboat with his father. This is another thing that both Salvatores share. This Salvatore would be willing to stop fishing for a year to help the fish stocks rebound. He knows he may be alone in this. He, too, makes his own gear and, sitting on his nets, will demonstrate happily how the fish get trapped in the drift nets. He loves his life and loves the fish. He knows that he needs a fuller sea to be able to have fish in his nets and that is why he supports marine reserves and worries so much about overfishing. He hates the growing trend of recreational fishermen who use nets as he does and end up competing with him for the fish.

Storm story

There is a story of storms in the Mediterranean that repeats itself with many of the fishermen we interviewed. It goes like this. The fisherman is a young man/boy on his father's boat fishing with a net on a clear calm day. The father tells the son to pull the net in fast. The boy objects because he wants to keep on fishing. The father insists and they start pulling the net in. As they do, a huge storm develops and the two end up fighting for their lives as they try to find shelter from the storm. The boy wonders how the father knew the storm was coming... but he learns to recognize the unique conditions of the Mediterranean Sea. While many now rely on weather forecasts and maps, their fathers of these men/boys got the information more directly. Some variation of this story is told over and over again.

There is also a story about the power to calm storms that I first found in Valencia in the Cabanyal fishing community. There we heard that some people have the power to calm storms and that power is passed from father to son... but only the firstborn son, and only at a certain time. This was confirmed but it was "only a story."

On this trip to Pesaro in the Adriatic, I got more specifics on that story. It goes like this. The captain of fishing boat, when faced with danger, (this was in the time when they used sailboats to fish) would take a knife with a black handle and throw it into the wooden mast while making a curse. The actual curse was a secret that would be passed from father to firstborn son. It only occurred on Christmas night and was seen as a sign that the father was passing on the command of the fishing boat to his son. The flinging of the knife and the curse would keep the danger away and since the biggest danger facing any small fishing boat is a storm it is clear that this rite is the origin of the "calming of the storms story" I first heard in Spain. It probably arrived along with "The Little Boat that Could" -- that double-ender with the Latin sail that is all over the Med and in California and Alaska -- wherever Italian fishermen have gone and shall I say conquered?

We also met a fish seller in Imperia who is working in the store where his family used to live, back when they were just simple fishermen. He talks about the changes he has seen and his hands glide through fish as he cleans and cuts them like an artist working a canvas. He talks about the Sicilian invasion and how they out-competed the locals like his family. But he says this gently.

The trip across Italy to the Adriatic and meeting a "sister"

Throughout this project, I have had to explain to people the value of what we are doing. In Italy I met a woman who totally got it and is my sister. Though we don't speak each other's language, we understand each other completely. Maria Lucia De Nicolo is my kind of woman. She is younger than me but so much wiser and more accomplished... She brought me to the Adriatic. She has collected amazing stories and she has a vision of the future that marries the strengths of the past with the need for sustainable reality in the face of tourism and globalism. She believes in the power of story. Her life is about that. She studies the past to find the tools to help shape a future. She knows the intimate link between culture and place. She is the reason we headed to the Adriatic, though I did not know it at the time.

The interview with Maria Lucia (we are using the intimate form now) was the longest we did on the trip and it is so full and thick that it took Armando days just to translate the first twenty minutes. He was the first to

observe that she and I are sisters. He was our intermediary -- the midwife to our twin-hood. I knew I had to talk with her, because she had been recommended to us by three different people. And Myriam and Armando had also found references to her work on the web, as had I.

Stories from Maria Lucia

There is so much to Maria Lucia that I am forced to give you only a taste. The interview started strangely because she decided to use our arrival to teach a group of female high school students about dealing with media. Once we got started she realized we weren't conventional media and so did the girls. As the discussion got longer and deeper, they left, and we were off on our voyage.

Some highlights: There was no fishing in the Adriatic, with only a couple of exceptions, until the 1600's, because the ocean was thought to be the home of demons and monsters. Previously the only fishing that was done was done in lakes and rivers. The church changed that when they ordered people to have a lean diet and eat lean fish creating a need for more fish. In Pesaro, the Duke of Urbino brought in fishermen from an island off Venice to teach the locals, and they ended up becoming part of the town. The transition from freshwater fishing to ocean fishing took only 15 years because the use of nets was a technology that was easily transferable.

Pesaro also became a center for boat building. They took the French Tartan and retrofitted it for Adriatic conditions creating the Adriatic Tartan which quickly spread through the region. It does not use a lateen sail but uses something closer to a gaff-rig.

Fishing people everywhere are clannish, and here in the Adriatic it manifested itself in the way sails were decorated. Each family had its distinctive design. In fact the ships were treated like part of the family and there was a process that was used to give soul to the ships. First they were all built with eyes on the bow. In Pesaro the eyes were sculpted on the bow, in Chioggia, they were painted on the ship. The plisso, a kind of toupee decoration on the bow, is an ornament that represents hair. There is also a procedure including a sacrifice of animals to ask for safe return to port.

The ship is always launched stern first into the ocean with the eyes painted on the bow looking toward land so the ship will always be able to find its way home. It is baptized and named to become part of the household. They would also put a coin under the mast. Some sailors do that today to bring luck but for the fishermen it was not about luck, it was to invoke wealth and make money

In the Adriatic they also made sails with distinctive black designs -- all different according to the family, but designed to be used in the fall when there are tornados. The idea is that each sail looks like a tornado and it says the to the tornado, "Don't come here. There is a tornado here already." Italian fishermen would also take their pants off and hang their butts off the side of the boat to insult or ward off the tornado.

The history of fishing here is amazing and the role of the Little Ice age in enhancing the use of ice to deliver fresh fish instead of just salting or drying it is fascinating. They would make holes lined with rock and use them to compress and keep ice to use during the short summers to preserve and transport fish.

The role of Women:

Maria Lucia wrote the only monograph on Italian women in fishing communities. The women ran the businesses and were given a share and status similar to the captains of the family ships. If their husbands died they became patriarchs in terms of deciding who did what, etc. They ruled.

The boys fished but the women managed and educated them. And when there were no boys in the family, a female child would be trained as a boy on the fishing boats - wearing pants and the whole deal.

Antonia, a woman who most of her life was called "Tony," a boy's name, was chosen to work on her father's boat. She is in her 80's now but remembers her life. It has been documented by Maria Lucia.

The use of story to educate the kids along the coast runs throughout the culture. For example there is the story about the monster Garbino's wind, a bad giant. Children were told that if they were on the shore and they felt wind on their necks, from the land, that was Garbino's breath, and to go home and tell your mothers. The land wind brought currents that could wash the children out to sea.

The women mended nets and sewed clothing for the fishermen, which involved developing special technology for each layer of clothing to help keep the men dry and warm at sea. The final layer was a stinky jacket of felted wool treated with linseed oil called "Salonic," after a city in Greece because the design was brought to the region by Greek sailors.

The ingenuity and strength of these women runs throughout the history and culture. It is there today and we met it in the person of Agentina Luciani on the docks of Ancona, Italy. There she was, selling fish off the back of her husband's trawler, surrounded by her family and supervising a mechanic fixing a leak in the motor. She says if she were a man, she would

be fishing. We met her uncle, who had just paid 85-thousand Euros to put in a new motor in his trawler, because he is investing in his son's future.

We met another relative who had taken a government buyout and dismantled his ship... but was still coming to the docks every day. He says he doesn't know anything else. He has been working on fishing boats since he was five, like his father and grandfather, but he is in his 60's now and has no children to carry on the business so they decided to get out because there are not as many fish to catch as there used to be.

It turns out that all the fishermen in Ancona are related. It is so bad that they have given up on using surnames and instead use nicknames to designate the families. Argentina's family is known as Muchacha because they came from Argentina originally.

The close-knit nature of the fishing communities illustrates another important point made by Maria Lucia. The language used by fishing communities is unique and quite different from those used by their farming neighbors, who may be living with them in the same community. She says it is easier for members of the fishing community to relate to other fishermen in the Mediterranean than it is to people from the interior or farmers. She says that is true of fishermen from different countries and it is because they share a common language.

Maria Lucia stumbled on this language while researching documents from the 1500's as a doctorate student. Her project was looking at the way land was distributed in the dukedoms. She looked at documents filed by the notaries and found words that were strange and obviously could not be translated by the notaries that used them... but those notaries were forced to use them nevertheless. This struck her as peculiar and in looking at thousands of documents she stumbled upon a key to translating them in documents in Venice. That began her on the voyage that would become her task. She has no family ties to fishing but came to it out of intellectual curiosity and has since become a major source and expert in the older ways of this maritime community.

Fish Wars in the Adriatic

The industrialization of the fishing fleet in the Adriatic, like most of the rest of the Northern Mediterranean, occurred in the 30's and 40's. It was part of the buildup to World War Two. But the fish wars in the Adriatic were taking place even in the days of sail. The Italian fishermen went looking for fish on both sides of the Adriatic and that led to conflicts, which became more violent with changes in the technology and politics.

If you look at a map of the Adriatic, you quickly realize that fishermen in the northern part of the Adriatic are operating in a closed sea with not much room to navigate. During the Second World War, that was particularly difficult because their coastline was mined and going out to fish meant running the risk of blowing up your boat and crew. Many died. After the war the mines were still out there, but they had sunk into the water where they would come up in the fishing nets and explode on deck killing and maiming the crew. These risks did not stop fishermen from going out, nor did the political risks posed by the Yugoslavian Coast Guard, who under Tito would shoot fishermen caught in their waters. Up until the 1960's the lifespan of an Italian fisherman on the Adriatic was less than 50 years.

The man who has documented this fish war is Pierpaolo Zagoni. His father was a doctor who loved the sea and there are pictures of the doctor's son, now a distinguished regional notary, historian and author, as a two-year-old playing with the net his parents were using to catch fish on the beach. Pierpaolo Zagoni got interested in fishing as a child, and later became committed to understanding the politics and condition of fishermen's lives when his schoolmate was killed by a shot through the throat from Yugoslavian Coast Guard officer. He was shot in front of his family while working on the family's fishing boat.

Pierpaolo says while it is true that some fishermen were fishing in Yugoslavian waters, some of these boardings took place in international waters. He says they were part of Tito's retribution for the Italians winning a territorial dispute. This was going on throughout the 70's and into the 80's. He said it helped forge a certain kind of determination in the fishing communities; a determination, which may be leading to their own demise now.

He talks about how after World War Two, money from the Marshall Plan was used to build a bigger, more efficient, faster and more powerful fishing fleet. And how this fleet continued to grow, supported by the community, and how they have now depleted the fish in the Adriatic Sea.

"It's a tough story," he says. "They did it to themselves. Those in the south can head elsewhere, but the fleet based in the north is stuck because it just takes too much fuel to get out of the region." That is what has led to the government programs to buy out the fleet.

Some are taking the buyouts. Many are just downscaling, using smaller more fuel-efficient boats and shifting the focus of their fishing to shellfish. Pierpaolo says there is another fish war beginning as the fleet intrudes in other fishing grounds looking for more and more shellfish. We saw trawler gates in Ancona that had been modified to dig into the bottom

like giant metal combs to literally scoop up everything on and beneath the bottom of the sea.

Pierpaollo has little hope for the future because he sees the young fishermen wanting more and more and already gearing up with support from the communities to improve their boats to catch more. He yearns after the years when there were thousands of fishing sailboats and plenty of fish. But he thinks that conservatin now demands restraint that the fishing community does not have. It is a restraint that goes against their history.

We left the Adriatic to go to the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Maestro D'Ascia off the coast of Tuscany in the Tyrrhenian Sea

It took us a day to drive across Italy through the mountains, passing some beautiful cultivated terraced lands with great wine and great food, which we had a tiny by love taste of. We needed the time to think about all we had learned.

For Armando it was a trip home to a coast where he had lived and worked. I was excited to find out about the sea that had shaped my companion, who is a true sea person and an interesting and passionate man.

We arrive in Porto Santa Stefano in Aregentario in Tuscany . It is a mountain at the end of a peninsula connected to the mainland by a long skinny stretch of land surrounded by a lagoons on both sides filled with fish traps and nets -- the kind that have been used on the coasts since before memory. The fishing port is tiny, filled with a mix of yachts, fishing boats and ferries. A friend, Armando was hoping to meet had just left on his yacht, and he and I were looking for a hotel -- something he had never used because he was usually here staying on a boat. We found one and dinner, but the next morning it was Palm Sunday so a day to follow the church procession, get caught up on some sleep and ride along as Armando showed me Aregentario. The next day we would head to the boatyard to try to find an old shipbuilder he knew. The yard is famous for restoring classic yachts along with fishing boats.

The man Armando knew was not available but we met a former Yacht captain like Armando. They even had captained the same super-yacht for the same owner but that is another story. Federico now owns a portion of the boatyard and he suggested another old boat builder, who had grown up here and had a shop up the hill. That is how we found the Cerulli boatyard and it's patriarch, the iconic Maestro D'Ascia (master of the axe in Italian) Giancarlo Cerulli. I could write a book on his life alone... But here is the short version.

He is an 80-year-old boat builder who still uses traditional

techniques and has trained his sons to continue the work, specializing in wooden boats. He described growing up very poor with his huge family living in a shed. One day as a boy in the mountains above the harbor he watched American planes bombing the fishing boats and harbor because they had been used to transport Nazi troops and build bombs and torpedoes. Later he participated in rebuilding the fishing fleet, fueled by Marshall Plan money. That was when he learned his trade. He showed us amazing ships his hands had built and the models he made to design them.

These half models are over a meter in size have parallel lines made out of pieces of different-colored wood, screwed one into the other at water lines and other important parts. They would take the models apart and scale them up to the boat. These boat designs were called "The plan of the woods". This is still a term used in modern boat building in Italy today. The Maestro D'Ascia would build the model and think "This should float" and "It's OK. Let's build this baby."

But first they had to create a flat area -- a thin piece of wood or nowadays plywood would be put on the floor and they would start by laying the keel. From the model they would build the frame. They spent weeks shaping the various ribs and parts of the frame. The assembly just takes a day or two. It's the first time you can finally see your design. The planking is relatively routine. He showed us the axe used to shape the frame and explained how the central parts are relatively straight but as you move out away, it twists. It's a precise job to shape the frame. You did it with a pen and an ax. He said the most emotional moment remains after all these years, when he gets the ribs shaped. After hundreds of boats, the moment he launches and sees the cut lines and water line is still exciting. It's the moment he sees if it floats the right way. The builder is the first person to step aboard. He needs to feel it to sense its stability... its character. He told me it was the only thing that transferred from building the fishing boats of his childhood to the yachts of today. We saw these beautifully varnished half models everywhere and the more functional wooden patterns made from them hanging on the walls of the boat hangars. The models are beautiful but I did not fully understand the role they played in building the final ship until Giancarlo took us through the process. It is especially interesting how they did not draw the designs but instead shaped these models by hand and the wooden forms they generated were simply up-scaled to make the ships. Our society has divided maker from designer in so many fields. It is a privilege to meet the two combined in a method all about material and function.

The boat-hangars at Cerulli's are full of beautiful wooden boats. Some owned by the richest people in Europe. All know that their ships are works of art and shaped by a master. He is confident about the future and so are his sons, and the cousin who works at the small boatyard. They are committed to training apprentices and say that the future is wooden boats, because plastic ones don't last. They ask, "What can you do with the plastic? I think their sense of the future may be grounded in the way the Cerulli boatyard was founded and the story of the first boat that was built there. The family bought the land in an industrial area uphill from the harbor because it was all they could afford at the time. It had a small building on it and they used it to build the first hull. This was in the late 1960's. The building had two columns. Giancarlo Cerulli shaped the hull to meet the requirements of the client but the vessel was too wide to pass through the columns. He called the family together and they lifted that hull by hand and turned it sideways to pass it through the columns. It was still too wide... so they carefully shaved the columns down and successfully got the ship out of the shop. They then built a new boat hanger.

Now they have two hangars and they are brought to boat shows to promote the traditional classic craft. They also have a woodpile. That may not sound like much but understand that it used to be that one generation of boat builders would gather and store wood curing it for the next generation. One of the first things I was shown, was not the boats, but the woodpile. That says a lot about Cerulli; the family, the business, the man.