
Comiso e il movimento pacifista inglese

“La Ragnatela” su “Peace News” (1983-1986)

a cura di

Matteo Ermacora

“Peace News” è una delle riviste “storiche” del pacifismo inglese, pubblicata a partire dal 1936 a sostegno della “Peace Pledge Union”, sezione inglese della War Resisters’ International, rete pacifista internazionale fondata in Olanda nel 1921¹. Nel corso degli anni Ottanta, la rivista costituì il punto di riferimento per le lotte che si svilupparono contro le basi militari in Gran Bretagna, dando conto – in una apposita rubrica *Peace Camps News* – di tutte le iniziative pacifiste contro l’impiego delle armi atomiche. Sulle sue pagine ebbero grande spazio le vicende di Greenham Common, così di molte altre lotte condotte a livello mondiale, con particolare attenzione all’Europa e ai paesi che facevano parte del Patto di Varsavia. In quegli anni la rivista si dimostrò attenta non solo nella denuncia delle politiche militari della Nato e alle conseguenze della guerra atomica (radioattività, inverno nucleare, morte di massa, malformazioni, inquinamento) ma fu aperta a tematiche ambientali ed ecologiste, alle istanze femministe, vegane, gandhiane, schierandosi a difesa degli omosessuali, delle minoranze, prestando attenzione alla questione irlandese, lottando a fianco dei minatori contro le politiche neoliberiste di Margaret Thatcher.

La rivista, nel complesso, non dedicò molto spazio al movimento pacifista italiano che stava lottando contro gli Euromissili, tuttavia – proprio perché al suo interno vi erano anche militanti pacifiste inglesi e irlandesi che giungevano dall’esperienza di Greenham Common – diede importanza all’esperienza femminista del campo di Comiso della “Ragnatela” in una serie di articoli ed interviste che qui riportiamo integralmente.

¹ Si veda il n. 643 di “Azione nonviolenta”, marzo 2021, n. mon. *Un secolo di resistenza alla guerra*, centenario della War Resisters’ International (1921-2021).

Gli articoli risultano interessanti in quanto riflettono il punto di vista delle femministe “straniere” che giunsero in Sicilia; si tratta quindi di un punto di vista al tempo stesso “esterno” ed “interno” a questa esperienza. Gli articoli si prestano pertanto ad una duplice lettura: da una parte è possibile ripercorrere i principali snodi della vicenda del campo femminista della “Ragnatela” tra il 1983 e il 1986, dall’altro mettere in luce il punto di vista delle attiviste che ne furono protagoniste, particolarmente attento a cogliere le differenze culturali, all’ “incontro” con la società isolana. La scelta separatista fu faticosa e difficile da far comprendere, sia ai pacifisti maschi, sia ancora alla realtà circostante. Costante fu la preoccupazione di intrecciare relazioni con le donne siciliane, per far conoscere gli obbiettivi della lotta e solidarizzare; si trattò di un faticoso lavoro “porta a porta”, tuttavia considerato essenziale per avviare un dialogo che – come notavano le stesse attiviste – partiva dalla “vita reale”: era infatti necessario prima mettere in discussione una società maschilista che marginalizzava le donne dal punto di vista economico e sociale, per poi giungere a contestare la presenza dei missili nel nome della difesa dei propri figli e di un futuro migliore. Lungi dall’agiografia o dai toni entusiastici, gli articoli non nascondono i problemi incontrati, lo scetticismo, l’isolamento e le difficoltà dell’esperienza del campo femminista.

Da ultimo, la lotta contro gli Euromissili, come ha sottolineato la più recente storiografia, appare come un movimento transnazionale, in grado di far circolare, rielaborare e contaminare legami ideali, forme di lotta, simboli; ne offre una piccola conferma anche questa breve serie di articoli; oltre ai legami diretti instaurati con gli altri campi pacifisti femminili, tra i quali il punto di riferimento è costituito dall’esperienza di Greenham Common, i pacifisti inglesi, per protestare contro le azioni repressive della polizia italiana a Comiso, a più riprese fecero sit-in, veglie e presidi all’esterno dell’ambasciata italiana a Londra, a riprova di un forte intreccio ideale e di una lotta condotta a livello sovranazionale.

Comiso Disrupted²

The arrival of three peace marches at the proposed Cruise missile site at Comiso, Sicily, in recent weeks has culminated in blockades of the base which stopped construction work there this week. The march from Milan arrived on December 18; the walk from village to village around Sicily, led by Buddhist Monk Jinjo Morishita arrived on December 22. And the international nonviolent march from Catania – involving up to 500 people – reached Comiso on Saturday January 1, having called at many of the island’s military bases. That day, fifty people got over the wall into the base before police intervened and brutally removed them. On Sunday, twelve more people entered the base and walked round with a “Nuclear Free Zone” banner until they were discovered and thrown out; two were taken to hospital. On Monday January 3, women blocked the entrance to the construction site in the early morning and wove wool around the gates. The police stopped workers attempting to go in, “to avoid tension”. On Tuesday, women had another early morning blockade. They had with them letters to give to the workers, many of whom they were able to speak to. When the police tried to reach the site they couldn’t get there at first because such a long queue of cars had built up. When they finally did arrive, one woman was injured being removed; but again the police decided to stop the work on the base for the day.

Contact: Campo internazionale per la pace, via G. Morso 29, 97013 Comiso (Rg), Sicilia, Italy (tel.0932-966319)

In support of the Comiso actions, there was a continuous vigil outside the Italian Embassy in London, on Monday and Tuesday. There was also an open air meeting there on the Monday evening, and a petition was handed in on Tuesday.

Comiso women attacked³

Women from many countries were at the peace camp at the proposed cruise missile site at Comiso, Sicily, on International Women’s Day. They blockaded the base on the Wednesday morning, March 9. Police attacked the blockade, breaking a Swiss woman’s arm. There was another women’s blockade on the Friday morning. Police removed the women five times, and each time they returned. Eventually

² “Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution”, 2186, 7 January 1983, p. 4.

³ “Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution”, 2191, 18 March 1983, p. 6.

police attacked them, breaking a British woman's arm. She was one of the twelve arrested, who are all being held in prison until a court hearing today (March 18).

Several political and trade union groups in Italy – as well as peace organisations – have protested at the police's behaviour, and there have been demonstrations in a number of Italian cities. In London there was a vigil near the Italian Embassy, all this week. Protests can be sent to: Italian Embassy, 14 Three Kings Yard, Davies Street, London W1 (tel 01-6298200).

On the same day that they attacked the blockade, police bulldozed the camp itself, destroying belongings and burning down shelters. The peace Campers are now at their house in Comiso. Contact: Campo internazionale per la pace, c/o via G. Morso 29, 97013 Comiso (Rg), Sicilia, Italy; or Marina tel.0932-966319 or 0932-966256.

Reaching out in C♀mis♀⁴

In March, the authorities bulldozed the peace camp outside the proposed Cruise missile site near Comiso in Sicily (see n. March 18). Since then the campers have been based at a house in the town itself, and are trying to raise money to buy land immediately outside the military base. Meanwhile, some of the women there established a woman's camp halfway between the town and the base last month, but they're finding that to assert themselves as women, in the social climate in southern Italy, is a struggle in itself. Theresa McManus, who recently visited Comiso, reports:

I arrived in Comiso on April 20, just three days after the Women's peace Camp had begun. A deposit had been put down on some land with a small concrete house, some 4 kilometres from the town. Four other English women were already there, and had established a good relationship with the neighbouring farmer, who allowed them to take water from his tank. There had originally been a women's house in the town, nearby the main peace camper's house, lent by three old Italian women; but it had been difficult to maintain a women-only space there. Women were coming to the camp but often leaving a couple of days later, finding that there was no place for them, that they couldn't fit easily into the work that was going on there, and that their presence was superfluous. Some women had the unfortunate experience of meetings in which decisions were made that they were unhappy with and in which their voice wasn't heard. A meeting was arranged with some local women who were interested to hear what was happening, but, as they explained, their lives were so full of domestic tasks, child-care, husband-care, and jobs, that even to find time to attend a meeting was difficult. However, some links were made, and a feeling of solidarity and mutual support established. The work I see the woman's camp doing in the coming weeks and months is focused on strengthening links already made, and reaching out the other local women, so that as well as their finding a way to support our struggle against the establishment of the cruise base, we can support them in their struggles in an oppressive, male-dominated so-

⁴ "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2196, 27 May 1983, p. 6.

ciety. There was still very basic, practical work to be done when I left, such as fixing the well so that there can be water, and finding money for this. The women's peace camp is appealing for contributions from women only. The position is currently too vulnerable to take actions – there are regular visits from the *carabinieri*, and many hassles from men passing by. It was difficult to be clear and open about our presence and purpose there with only 4 or 5 women. The *padrone* of the land was questioned closely by the police as to why he was selling it to us, and it is not yet secure. Any women or women's groups who want to help can send contributions to: Antonella Giunta, Women's Peace Camp, c/o Campo Internazionale per la Pace, via Morso 29, 97013 Comiso (Rg), Sicilia, Italy.

Comiso⁵

The expulsions of peace activists from Italy are likely to be brought, at last, before a court. Lawyers acting for the women from the Comiso peace camp who illegally entered the country last month (see last issue) say that the action has forced this move. It is thought likely that such a court hearing would nullify the precedent which has been used, since the eleven Comiso women's expulsion last year, to deport any foreign peace activists the Italian authorities want to be rid of. The eleven have already been acquitted of the mayor charges made against them following action at the cruise missile base in Sicily. The expulsion order – based on the falsehood that they had no money – still stands. For further information contact: WRI, 55 Dawes St. London SE17, tel 01-703-7189

We talk real life⁶

Some of the women of Comiso have begun educating other local women about the cruise missiles to be deployed near their town, and organising them to oppose that deployment. They are going door-to-door, talking to their neighbours about local events or whatever is on their minds. After a while, they introduce the subject of the base and the missiles. Eventually they ask if she would be willing to come to a meeting to discuss these things further, and if so they ask if she would be willing to host it. If she is, they make arrangements. If not, they continue talking to others until they find someone who is willing to have a group in her home. At the meeting, they show a short film, continue to discuss the issue, and pan actions such as further door-to-door conversations, leafletting, and "hour of silence" demonstrations.

⁵ "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2196, 13 July 1983, p. 6.

⁶ "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2196, 13 July 1983, p. 6. Sulle successive vicende di Comiso non specificamente relative all'esperienza della Ragnatela, si rimanda a "Peace News. For a Nonviolent revolution": *Scrambling Comiso* (2201, 5 August 1983, p. 3); *Comiso problems* (2203, 16 September 1983, p. 6), Franco Perna, *Total objection in Italy* (2206, 28 October 1983, p. 8); *The growing militarization of Sicily* (2235, 14 December 1984, pp. 14-15).

Sara: We are not doing political work. We are working for the future of our families. We seek to reach the conscience of the female population and to stimulate them to take part in the political arena. People say that women don't want to participate, that they are occupied with problems of the nuclear family. This isn't true. They are seeking ways to be informed, and to add their voices.

Women's Strength

Giovanna: The women tend to be fatalistic, to think that they can do nothing. When they hear us, they are stimulated to learn more. It is hard to break the pattern, but if they can be given something feasible to do, they will.

Maria: Women demonstrated their position once. But the church applied pressure, saying that such activity is not the will of God. However, the women have shown that they have a will. For instance, the votes for divorce and abortion – against the position of the church. Sixty-eight per cent of the women came out to overturn the issues. Because the Sicilian women are not economically independent, this has been a restraint, an antiquated tradition used to contain them. Today, women have come out and voiced their own choice. We still remember this victory. Even the elderly voted for abortion because they remembered their own hardships. Even the most religious participated.

Giovanna: In the past year, our fear has increased, the sense of insecurity due to the missiles' presence. The base is accepted fatalistically because it does not appear to do any harm. Our difficulty is helping the women see that it is having an effect.

Maria: People go to work in the base, though few, because they have money now. But we need to develop the culture and economy of Comiso. The base doesn't help this. We have to be able to offer the people an alternative so that they can overcome their fatalism. The economic issue is an important and difficult one.

Giovanna: We wish to become a force to challenge male authority – not only to stop things, but also to create alternatives. Once women are able to overcome their timidity, this creative force comes forth. We want to build a mass movement, even to the point where men who are oppressed at work will take the initiative to stand up for their rights. We want to get everyone to stand up. This work is stimulating, invigorating, stirs hope in me. Because, perhaps, I am dealing personally with people.

Sara: When I first agreed to attend the regional co-ordinating meeting, which is dominated by men, I was afraid the discussion would be too intellectual and I would not be competent to participate. What I found was everyday talk. When I heard something that angered me, I spoke up. I realised they were no more competent than I. The second time, at the planning, I found that they were all afraid to go to the piazza and contact the people to hand out leaflets etc. They were afraid that

people would reject them. These men lack the ability for human contact. I think the more feminist one is, the more humane one is.

Maria: It is hard to get women out of their homes because they see the complexity of the work and they feel incompetent. They tend to admire us just for going to visit them. Often the women talk of their own problems for a long time before we get onto our subject. But this is necessary because they must feel that we are interested in them. It's always a dialogue. With men, a dialogue is difficult because they have been "politicised" and have a line which they begin to recite to you. Women are more open.

Creating the Will

Maria and Giovanna. We've also talked to older women. One elderly woman offered to organise a gathering. When we returned two days later, she'd got at least 20 local women. Our projector broke down so we started a discussion. We discussed everything! Constitution, missiles, politics, the economy etc. It was great! We never thought these women could do it. She did. We know now that on every street there is someone waiting and capable. We just have to knock.

Maria: Now these women who attend mass everyday will approach the local clergy and see what they are prepared to do.

Giovanna: We are recreating the will and ability of the people to act. That's our work. Our women are not bourgeoisie. They are aware of reality. Through us, they see a way to enter into the issue, to unite with others. Few have joined us in this work, but there are few. We must be careful and patient not to disrupt the families and to give them time to work at it. We do not engage in high talk or blah, blah. We talk real life. We are forging a relationship that will not easily be destroyed.

Comiso Camps evicted⁷

On May 11, Italian police arrested people from the three different peace camps near the cruise missile base at Comiso, Sicily. This followed an action of a group from the women's peace camp a fortnight before – they'd scaled a water tower on the base and spray-painted it. Non-Italians were given five days to leave the country. The camp sites – in enclosed spaces – were locked and sealed by the police, and armed guards placed outside them all on May 12. Magistrates have now made sequestration orders on all the areas of land of the Verde Vigna mixed camp being owned by 1035 people and organisations – including groups, like the War Resisters' International, based outside Italy. There's limited time to object to the orders, so part-owners in other countries may need to object even before official notification reaches them! The authorities' actions in Sicily were denounced by Italian MPs at press conference in Rome last week – not only by representatives of the Partito Radicale, but by some main stream party members as well. For more infor-

⁷ "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2221, 25 May 1984, p. 6.

mation, contact: War Resisters' International, 55 Dawes St. London SE17, tel. 01-703-7189.

La Ragnatela is alive⁸

A report from the women's peace Camp at Comiso

La Ragnatela (Italian for "spider's web") is the name of the women's peace camp in Comiso, Sicily, and the network of women who support it. Here Veronica Kelly describes her own experiences of the camp and the problems which women in different parts of Italy face in trying to organise and take political action.

At an international meeting to prepare this year's International March for Demilitarisation in Denmark, I was a bit rattled to hear an Italian Pacifist man declare la Ragnatela dead. Granted, a Dutch man there said a colleague of his had just had two invitations from wimmin's groups in Italy to do nonviolence action training with them, and she had been very encouraged by their response. Granted too, this Italian man was later to say that – "maybe because he'd been raised in a matriarchal culture" – he felt the difference between men and wimmin was "like the difference between people born in October and November". Although he was deliberately provoking, this did seem to cast doubts on his qualifications to pronounce on the wimmin's peace movement. All the same, I thought, what do I know? He lives there; I can't even go to Italy to check my theories, being one of the foreigners expelled for ever for undesirable activities at Comiso and only allowed back on sufferance (to go to court). Keeping track of Italian wimmin's doings from War Resisters' International office in London, and judging the enthusiasm and organisation of the wimmin who welcomed our group of defendants on our quick trips back for trials, maybe I'd got the wrong impression. Now – three weeks, another short visit and many conversations with Italian wimmin – later, I declare, without hesitation, la Ragnatela is alive, viva la Ragnatela! What's confusing Northern Europeans especially is circumstances in Sicily, for example, where the second batch of 16 cruise missiles has now been deployed at Comiso, are so different from, say, those at Greenham. Men in Milan may think they're living in a matriarchal culture – I doubt if many Sicilian wimmin do. In Comiso we met many dedicated local wimmin who sympathised with our direct actions at the base but said that is wasn't their way of working for the peace – they felt more comfortable going around schools and showing slides than "going into the piazza to demonstrate". The wimmin did join us, though, in a procession "against violence against wimmin" after a 15-year-old had been raped. (The rapists, we were told, wouldn't be prosecuted, while the victim and her sister would now be kept indoors or chaperoned until they were married off).

They even sat singing in a circle with us outside the base on March 8, 1983, weaving a Ragnatela with coloured wool. But they didn't want to live in a peace camp. That would be less of a cultural giant step for wimmin from the mainland, but there are still major problems. In Italy – 20th century, industrialised EEC mem-

⁸ "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2248, 24 June 1985, p. 12.

ber – they don't give peace campers the dole (or anyone else, either, four months after you've lost your job). OK, food grown in fertile Sicily can be had for next to nothing, and there is seasonal work on the land and a bit of teaching, maybe, but wimmin in gainful employ are understandably more anxious to stay that way than in Britain (Can you imagine Greenham without the dole?). Also, look at the shape of Italy. Sometimes it doesn't seem too paranoid to suspect that the real reason for putting the cruise base way down in the Mediterranean wasn't the Middle-East or North Africa after all (with cruise's range they certainly weren't thinking of the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe) but to make it impossible to sustain a peace camp there. By public transport Comiso is over 12 hours from Rome and over 24 from Milan. Sicilian feminists have an extra link to make with militarism and social evils: they have the Mafia to contend with. A doctor we met belongs to a wimmin's anti-mafia group in Catania (where 50 out of 60 city councillors were recently sacked for involvement in Mafia speculation, and you may have heard of the spate of arrests of magistrates late in 1984, also for Mafia corruption). Her father was assassinated in February 1984. He was the founder of "I Siciliani", a magazine which specialises in documenting mafia involvement in local affairs and particular in the militarisation of Sicily (which breaks Italy's post-World War II peace treaty)⁹.

North of Naples, or Rome, anyway, life is very different from the South: the wimmin's movement is strong and well established and the peace movement seems to have drawn a lot on its talents and experience. In recent years many seasoned feminists have joined the peace struggle – in the *Unione donne italiane* (Union of Italian wimmin) in Bologna, for example, one of the wimmin who organised around our expulsion trial remembered the suffragettes. Many of these UDI wimmin, for example, as well as doing peace work, are trying to change the rape law and help wimmin fight discrimination at work. Wimmin do come all that way and further for Easter demos, for Christmas, and for March 8, of course, but impromptu excursions. Like the British wimmin's to Greenham are fairly impossible for most, even at week-ends. This has meant that most of the wimmin who have lived at the camp for any length of time have been foreigners, and because of dire communication difficulties, added to distance, many of these have felt isolated from the Italian women's peace movement. Meanwhile, back in the "continent", many Italian wimmin who haven't lived at the camp still feel a part of it. They see *la Ragmatela* as a web spreading from Comiso and linking them with wimmin everywhere who are working for peace, especially with the foreign wimmin who have brought a square metre of camp land and will fight the expansion of the base by refusing to be expropriated when the time comes. For information on UK support for *la Ragmatela*, contact Veronica c/o WRI 55 Dawes St. London SE17.

Veronica Kelly

⁹ Elena Fava (1950-2015), ematologa, educatrice, figlia di Giuseppe Fava, fondatore del giornale "I siciliani", assassinato dalla mafia il 5 gennaio 1984.

Machismo and the military in Sicily¹⁰

On January 25, 1986, the Italian military expropriated a 30-metre wide strip of land surrounding the Comiso cruise missile base in Sicily, in order to put pressure on peace campers there. As a result, 16 farmers were also robbed of vineyards and cultivated land. Following her deportation from Italy, also in January, Patricia Melander spoke to *Peace News* about the camp and the peace movement in Italy.

Peace News: Is there any national movement along the lines of CND in Italy?

Patricia Melander: No the peace movement in Italy is a movement of resistance closely connected with the workers' movement, the communist party and another left groups. Instead of an autonomous peace movement, there are various dispersed groups like the nonviolent movement, which is very old but also very small. There are lots of people willing to take nonviolent direct action. Many founder members of the nonviolent movement are people who lived through the fascist period in Italy. There are also various political parties involved in peace. This may be political opportunism, but some of them are very sincere. Most of the left-wing parties are into peace and there are church movements, especially within the protestant church. All these groups are all working towards the same goal of getting rid of cruise missiles¹¹.

What has been the political response to the expropriation in Italy?

I was expelled at exactly the same time as the order came into force, which might have been more than coincidence. Otherwise, I'm sure that I would have done something at that point, instead of keeping a low profile and trying not to get expelled. The injustice of it makes me very angry. The land all around the base

¹⁰ "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2264, 7 March 1986, pp. 8-9.

¹¹ Questa descrizione del movimento pacifista italiano innesco la risposta di Franco Perna: "Taking into account relevant socio-political conditions in Italy, I strongly feel that the peace movement there has made fantastic progress during last 10-15 years. Patricia doesn't mention the nonviolent Movement and some church-related peace groups, but there are more. There are hundreds of local groups, some autonomous, others linked with the Nonviolent Movement, the IFOR, the Christian Movement for Peace, Pax Christi, women's peace organisations, trade unions, alternative life-style and ecological groups, the League of Cos, Unilateral Disarmament and Peace Tax Campaigns. Admittedly structural and organisational strength is lacking at national level and particularly in the South; but if all these groups did not exist, how could one explain the modern phenomenon of about 10.000 conscientious objectors each year, over 3.000 military tax resisters, the 2.400 clergymen and other church people, including many bishops, who recently issued an appeal in favour of the Peace Tax Campaign, followed by a more revolutionary one originated from 23 religious and missionary institutions? Perhaps I should also mention the intellectual output, literally hundreds of periodical and other publications, including many books and research works now available. Peace education and training in non violence are likewise gaining ground, on no longer need be embarrassed to state her/his pacifist, non-violent views. This does not mean, though, that the anti-peace forces are now weaker, but they are certainly less arrogant. There is altogether a new climate and a more receptive, sympathetic public opinion, to which even judges and magistrates are paying attention by fully acquitting all peace tax campaigners so far tried, totalling about 30 in six court cases". *The Italian Peace movement*, "Peace News. For a nonviolent revolution", 2267, 18 April 1986, pp. 16-17

isn't going to be used by the army, but it is used by the local people. The vineyards there have taken five or six years to reach their first fruit. People went up to Rome with a petition that all the local farmers had signed, and the nonviolent movements held a demonstration outside parliament. We were quite surprised that so many of the farmers did take action.

Shooting Range

Of course the ministry of Defence has the ultimate power, but if there's enough support things can change. The situation is hopeful. The Italian Army wanted a huge piece of land in the mountains near Palermo in Sicily for a shooting range. We thought it might be connected to NATO exercises at one point. They began evicting people, but there was such response from parliament and local government that it has been delayed for the time being though not actually scrapped as yet.

What are social conditions like?

The social system is archaic, with a lot of hardship, a lot of poverty, of unrest and political insecurity. The literacy rate is very low, people can't afford to pay for the books. As you go further south it gets worse. The women suffer more hardship, they have more kids and the church oppresses them. The day struggle is enough without having to worry about the future. It's very difficult to talk about peace in places like that. There are people who come down to Comiso with doves, and it's just not very convincing. It has to be much more solid. If we worked within these problems, with the community, it would be easier to get over the message. The Vigna verde peace Campers are working with the farmers, on the land and they get to talk to them.

Images of Violence

But Vigna verde is mostly a men's camp. It's mostly men everywhere. People aren't used to women speaking at meetings, they don't expect it at all. It's not just that men put women down, it's also the education, which is very religious, that separates the men and the women straight away. There's also a lot of porn, and images of violence to women in books that are sold really publicly. It's very difficult to understand how women feel, it's hard to really get through. There is a local women's group in Comiso, which opposes the base, and wants more facilities to enable them to work. It consist mainly of communist women, probably because they've been more politically involved, and had been able to study. It would be really hard to get poor, working women into rebelling. I did meet some wives of men who had emigrated from Sicily to find work, leaving mainly women on their own in the villages, and they were organising themselves. Comiso is one of the most developed and richest areas of Sicily, and it used to be Mafia free. Now it is getting more Mafia, because of the base we think – they're attracted by the dollars. Now there's prostitution and drugs. A vast percentage of all the heroin in the world is refined in Sicily, all organised by the Mafia. My ideas have changed a lot in the time I've been here. I had loads of preconceptions. I used to get quite hysterical about the blokes looking at me and following me around, but in the end it didn't bother me at all, but it did still tire me out. You have to somehow be able to adapt

to survive, to be able to do something politically, otherwise it blocks you, it's a waste of energy.

The need of understanding

The local people are usually very kindly and sincere, but visitors often get the wrong impression. Some people see Sicily as very violent, but seeing poverty for the first time can give you a real shock, and what you see as violence might be effects of poverty. We have to be careful not to bring our own preconceived ideas to Sicily, like the idea of all the men being really *macho*. It's easy for there to be misunderstandings. If an old bloke comes to the womens' gate to bring you grapes, he wouldn't realise it was a separatist women's gate. If you started yelling at him to go away, and that he is an old macho, it would be totally abominable, and feel more like discrimination than anything else. Several of us did try to get a communication going with the police, and the authorities, and blokes who came around. You'd always get a few hangers on, but they wouldn't necessary be bad people. They might be interested in peace, but not know how to express it.

Tolerance

You have to be tolerant of the culture, or if you are rebelling against it, then do it with Sicilian women, see what they want to do, not go there as someone freer and more aware. The time that there was a women's camp at Comiso was in fact very short. It began in June 1983, after the women's action in March. That whole summer was very good, and until about spring the next year. Women come and visit, they're still coming, but only about six came this summer. A lot of women have come and then been expelled. Any foreigner who does any action gets expelled, it seems inevitable.

What kind of support have you had?

We don't get any of the kind of support that Greenham gest. The people is bringing food. There were two women's groups, connected with the church and the communist party, who would invite me to eat and things.

What camps are there now at the base? What would you say to people who go there?

The main thing would be to contact the peace committees CUDIP (Comitato Unitario per Disarmo e Pace). They have a permanent office in Comiso, and keep the keys to the women's hut at La Ragnatela. They have a camp themselves IMAC (International Meeting against Cruise), it's a mixed camp. The Vigna verde isn't an open camp, but people can go and see them, or write to them if they want to spend a month or so working there.

What do you think could happen at La Ragnatela now?

I get exasperated, because La Ragnatela only existed as such for very short time, but people are still living on that image, and not doing the gritty behind-the-scenes permanent work, which is necessary to get things going again. And it's bad that things aren't on a more local basis, getting in touch with local feminist groups.

I don't think that many women who were freer would go and live in the camp, it would mean them giving up careers, and it's been a bit of struggle for them already to actually get that far. It would be giving up a lot, going back. Also there's no social security, so there's no financial security for them. It could become a summer camp. Or have specific women's actions there. Local resistance is really important, people getting their feet and really doing something. They're quiet resigned, as far as, actions are concerned, actually going to the base and doing something.

What are your plans now that you've been expelled?

I've been banned. If I go back I get 20 days prison, and then I'm re-expelled. I'll go back, but I'm not sure what I'll be able to do, in terms of protest. I might get married to a Sicilian friend, to get residence. That's my only hope of getting back and staying, and that's really what I want to do. I could forget it and do things elsewhere for Comiso. It's possible that I might get my expulsion revoked, I've got a good lawyer. Otherwise I'll just go back illegally, and get expelled again.

Patricia Melander¹²

¹² Si veda anche la registrazione dell'intervista a Patricia Melander a Radio radicale, 16 aprile 1985, <http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/10976/base-militare-di-comiso-le-iniziative-degli-antimilitaristi#!slide>; per un profilo biografico dell'attivista-pittrice, Giuseppe Calligaris – Cesare Spezia, *I madonnari delle grazie*, Mantova 2007, p. 71, reperibile online: <http://www.curtatone.it/index.php/cerca?q=i+madonnari+delle+grazie&Search=>