

Now we have been in Italy for one month and twenty days.

Twenty days in some center... In quarantine, twenty days. But after the center, we were lost.

Lost in the streets, eating in the streets, sleeping in the streets.

Even our mind was lost.

We had to, we had to arrive in France, we had to... We have many families in France, we have houses, we have...

We were lost in Italy, very lost.

Many cities in Italy.

Lampedusa, and then Sicily. We left to Bologna, we left for Torino. We arrived to Florence, Genova. And the last station was Ventimiglia.

During the three days we spent at the train station, I can't even sleep. I was holding my child like this, in my arms, since there is no blanket to put him on the ground. I know he's sick, I prefer to take him like that, in my arms. And I put the bag behind my neck like this, until the morning.

I don't even know where I can go, and so I gathered my courage, I decided to go to France at my cousin's place. And I met a brother, and thanks to this brother I entered the train to leave and when I arrived there, it didn't work. When I arrived at the border... the police got on the train to ask us for our documents. I said "no, I don't have papers, I want ask asylum for the care of my child". And the police told me "get off, get off!" and there was another policeman who said "there is someone on the train, get them off!". And they made me get off and the child too, we went there and then they put me in a room, and then they made me go out and they told me "madam, you have to go back to Italy". I said "no! Help me, no, have mercy on me" and the police said "no no no no no". And they were violent to me, to the child too, even though he is sick, but they forced me to go in the car and the child too, and that's how they left me on the other side.

It's not easy for us.

We who don't have papers in Europe don't live well.

To live better, we have to live in secret.

- There is a woman here. With a big purple suitcase and a black hat.
- There is a child.
- There are even two children.
- Two children, a little girl, small blue backpack...

So there is a grey Traffic van that has just arrived in front of the border police station. We have already seen this van several times since yesterday evening, because we are doing monitoring since yesterday evening. It's a vehicle that parks at Menton Garavan train station. Since the re-establishment of internal border controls, given that this is the first French train station when one arrives from Italy to go to France, there are systematic checks of the trains coming from Italy done by CRS, but it can also be police officers. These checks are often based on racial profiling. And the people who are stopped by the CRS or the police officers who carry out the checks are then brought in these vehicles to the border police station. They are notified of a "refus d'entrée" and then either they are locked up in the border police station for periods that can be very, very long, several hours, sometimes dozen of hours, or they are sent straight back to Italy. Knowing that among these people, there may be people with health needs, or

people who wish to apply for asylum, or minors... The framework of these expeditious measures does not allow to take into account each individual situation and to respect the rights of the persons.

- We will wait for the broom truck to pass...

- Suddenly, you have the whole view on the bottom of the Roya valley, in the hamlet of Libre, on the pass of Vescavo until Olivetta... There is Grammondo mountain over there, you see? And then, what we see there, that's actually Italy.

- Here, we are not really on the border, we are next to it ?

- So, the border itself... I don't want to say anything stupid but I think it's the ridge in front...

Wait, that's... No, no, no, I'm telling you nonsense, it's that ridge line there! It's the first one because behind it's Fanghetto... It's Fanghetto, so the part in the sun is already Italy. And then from there, it goes up there, and from here... The olive trees over there are Italian, and then it's the Chior, the Mulassier and the Grammondo, and then it goes a bit like this, it comes back, it's a zigzag. So it's this whole area of lawlessness, where the right to asylum doesn't apply. Any refugee, any person who sets foot in France can apply for asylum and therefore there can be taken in charge. Afterwards, whether or not they have asylum, that's another process, but the fact of requesting asylum is normally as soon as you set foot in France. And here, over this whole area, this request doesn't apply and people are systematically sent back to Italy. It's materialized by all these checkpoints, they are called 'PPA', meaning "authorized crossing points", right ? But we just call them checkpoints. Because it's nothing more or less than a checkpoint, where they look in your trunk to see if you're hiding someone and so on.

- Those are gendarmes. You see ? Those are gendarmes.

- You said that if it's the gendarmerie that brings them, it means that they come from...

- Often, it's because people have been arrested either in the Roya valley, for example. Because there are often gendarmerie controls in the Roya valley, or it can also be on the footpaths...

It really started after the Nice attacks. There was a big influx of military, gendarmes, customs officers, 'RG' {*special intelligence officers*} and company. Everyone was shocked by the violence of the attack and when the first soldiers started patrolling the village, people would applaud them. It was like "we're protected", they were considered as heroes. With time, the discourse gradually changed. So for a while, there were patrols in the village and checkpoints at strategic roads because here there are not many roads and you have to go through small passes, so there are not thirty-six thousand points of passage - by car, on foot it's different. So at the beginning, there were controls 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And you could pass by ten times in a day, ten times you were checked. Afterwards, little by little, they lightened up the system a bit. It became more random checks, but there were many more patrols on the footpaths. They are often alpine hunters or the foreign legion who are used to the mountains. There is a whole technological arsenal, big drones, ground radar, infrared sighting, night vision, thermal vision...

- I'll make a copy and bring back the passport.

- So, what is your equipment for?

- It's to record...

- The sounds.

- Yes, the sounds. It's for the radio, so there's no image.

- Right, right. And it can record what we say over there?

- No, it doesn't.

- Because you're not going to do any interview there?

- Not with you.

- No. And with whom? Oh, right, the migrants when they come up.

- Yes, maybe. Maybe also with the people from the associations.

- Okay, great! Goodbye, have a nice day.
- Goodbye.

Frankly, I would say that this atmosphere makes you very anxious, to be always in this military universe. It becomes commonplace to be controlled, to have your car systematically searched, to have checkpoints, to see soldiers all the time, at any time of the day or night, it becomes routine. When it should be the exception.

One time, I was in Olivetta, the first small Italian village, and my car broke down. To save time, I started to walk up. And so I took the path of the migrants in the middle of the night, it was in winter, it was 7 o'clock, it was already dark. And then suddenly, a van of cops arrived. They stopped. And they talked to me like I was just a piece of shit. Anyway, I've heard so much as a kid that it doesn't surprise me, but what made me think was "if I had really been a migrant, would they have just talked badly to me or would there have been something else? They would have taken me away and I would have been alone with five cops in the van, what would have happened?. That's what struck me the most, more than the "yes I'm black, I have dreadlocks..." thing. But because I have this huge privilege to be able to say "I'm French, I have my papers and I live in the town where you are controlling me so you should calm down". But for the others, I don't know...

- Wait...
- What's going on?
- There are three people who just got out and are going to a van and there is a man who looks pretty bad, who looks like he has a leg injury, who has trouble walking...
- He is supported by two people...
- Yes he is supported by two other people because he can't walk alone. The two people who are supporting him are trying to help him to get into the vehicle that will probably go back to Italy with all those people.
- They are not going to take him to the hospital?

- We'll check, but he's being taken to a police van and clearly not to a medical facility.

- And so there are six people who have just left in a van for Italy.

For a while, when we were distributing food in Ventimiglia, we had set up a small "boo-boo" corner to treat small problems, because the smallest wound, in these hygienic conditions, can become a huge deal... And there were quite a few injuries that were linked to falls while running away after having seen the soldiers, or to beatings by soldiers. Moreover in Sospel, it is what turned over a part of the population. There are some who saw or heard the screams of those who were caught at night, who said "it was horror!". I was talking to a neighbor who said "at one point, I was so scared that I barricaded myself in my house, what are they doing to them?". They were real cries of pain... Afterwards, it is difficult to quantify because there are few testimonies, but when you see the testimonies from Garavan, the conditions in which it happens... There were some people who were burned with cigarettes, beaten. Here, without witnesses, I can't imagine...

- Can I speak in Italian?

- Yes!

We are at the border of Italy with France, it is one kilometer from the border, just on the road. We are an international collective, there are people from France, Italy, Germany, Holland. We come here every day with food, tea, coffee. We are here to help, to support the people who come out of the French police containers, who try to cross the border to go to France, to join their families in France, or in Germany or in the north of Europe. They are detained for hours or sometimes entire nights, without food or water, often suffering a lot of violence from the police.

- Ciao! I have some bread from yesterday...

- Thank you!

- It's yesterday's but it's very good.
- Yes, for sure! We can heat it up...
- Here on the sun ! [*Laughs*]
- Thanks, bye!

There are people who really start to question the situation. There are even some shepherds, some farmers who are kind of rough -you know that with them, it's better not to talk about politics because after thirty seconds, you are going to argue- but when they see someone at night under the storm they'll say "go ahead, come and sleep in my home". But when you hear them talking about strangers... When there is someone in trouble in the mountains, it doesn't matter who it is. There is -maybe not for everyone, I don't know- but there is still a kind of solidarity. I think it's like at sea, there is this mutual aid because anyway, alone, you can't manage here, you always need others, you can't be individualistic in the mountains, it's not livable. Afterwards, I don't want to see you, so you go away, but at least I don't leave you outside in the storm.

- Yes, these are very dangerous places. If you don't know the mountain, you can get lost easily...

- Completely. Get lost. Fall. If you fall in a hole between two rocks, it's...

That's something that we will never know. Often, we hear about deaths of migrants who want to cross the border on the railroad tracks down, along the seashore, but unfortunately, I'm convinced that there are some people who died here and that we will never know about, we will never find them.

- Me and my friends want to go to France. No problem. Not anything. Study. College. Live. But it's a problem. For two days, arrested. Monaco, Nice, arrest, arrest, arrest. Why?

- [*Speaking Arabic*]. "The French police have repeated abuses against us. And it's not fair, not fair." Do you understand?

- [*Speaking Arabic*]. "It's a dangerous road, dangerous, extremely dangerous but we will try. It's a tough road, mountains and cliffs. We have a friend who broke his hand falling. What can we do? We have to. We can't stay here. I have to cross. I have to follow the duration of fate. I cannot leave my family. I can't stay here in Italy. I am waiting to see it. Justice has an obstacle." Do you understand?

- We are sorry.

- I am sorry to tell you all this but... Thank you!

- Thank you! [*Laughs*] Good luck!

- Good luck.

Five days ago, another person was killed by the French-Italian border system near Ventimiglia. A 17 year old man from Bangladesh was electrocuted on a train. This death is a new consequence of an invisible border, open for Europeans and tourists but closed and deadly for undocumented people. Since the end of last summer, in Ventimiglia, more than 10 people have lost their lives in similar dynamics. About 6 of them died on the rails of the train to France or were electrocuted while trying to climb on the roof. Others disappeared without a trace in the mountains. All these deaths are the consequences of the closure of the borders and the indifference of a hostile city like Ventimiglia. A city that does not give access to toilets, to a roof, to the possibility of spending time in a dignified way in dignified places. For this last death in Ventimiglia, as for all the others at the internal and external borders of the European Union, the institutions and this political-economic system are responsible. Our task is to continue to fight strongly and daily against the policies that kill and for the self-determination of all!

To all migrants, solidarity ; racists out of our cities! To all migrants, solidarity, racists out of our cities!



- Are you ok? Yeah, I'm fine.

So, here we are at the Ventimiglia train station, which is the gateway to France.

At the very beginning, when people started to arrive, when France closed the borders, there was a room, a big hall in the train station that has been opened to let them sleep. Many people from Ventimiglia came to bring them blankets and food. It didn't last long because, under the pretext of unhygienic conditions, they quickly closed. But that's how it started : the opening of the station. That's it, it was open. And now, symbolically, everything is closing at the station.

So, the people who arrive at the Ventimiglia station, even if they manage to reach the main hall, there is no indication that says that there are associations present on the territory, to indicate the distribution of meals, or medical help, or associations which take care of minors in Ventimiglia. No indication. The associations monitor the station regularly. They try to get in touch with these families, with these women and with these young people who arrive in Ventimiglia station. This remains very, very difficult. Of course due to the traffickers. But also because all the activists or associations who go to the station are kindly asked not to stay in the station. I, for example, am controlled every time I go to the platforms and I'm asked to leave the station if I don't have a good excuse, and the good excuse is one hundred and fifty thousand authorizations to stay in the station, to stay on the platforms, to go around the station. Thus it's difficult to intercept these families. And also because the traffickers are much faster than us anyway. And for a year and a half now, the station has been completely taken over by them. We have the impression... they have taken over the territory. It's very clever of them because they catch the people who get off the trains, they take them directly, they make the night accommodation and they put them back on a train after these people have paid for their trip. The payment of the trip can be in money, in forced sexual relations, in transport of drugs.

I remember once I was going to Nice, I was traveling and I saw this guy. He was sitting, and the smugglers were loading people into the train hold. But he hadn't finished paying his passage yet. And so, when the train was about to leave, they pulled him in such a violent way, saying "Get out! You didn't pay! You didn't pay!". I stopped the guy and said "he didn't pay what? Why?". They knew me because they already saw me in Ventimiglia, I had been there for a long time and so, when I insisted, they left the guy. But they didn't want to leave him. If I wasn't there and there were just random people, they would have beaten him up because they were so violent! And on top of that, in his pockets he didn't even have 20 euros, he had 15 euros. And he told me he had to go to Bordeaux. After he arrived, he called me.

- Now we are next to the train that goes to France?

That made me happy.

- Yes, there is one every half hour. There, the train is at 55.

There are controls based on racial profiling which are perpetuated by the forces of order on the platforms. That is to say that people who want to get on the train going to France are checked by their facial features. And they are sent back without any explanation, without any indication of where to find help in Ventimiglia. It's just a gesture from the policemen on the platform, they make a gesture with their hand to send them back, to tell them to get out of the station.

- And how this situation is possible ? Because there is a lot of police presence in this station. How come there's a lot of business too, they shouldn't be things that go together in the same space, no?

- Normally not, but I think the police is just watching who gets on the train. And they don't go a little bit further. Right behind us there is the whole traffickers' stronghold and I think it's a little bit... is it tolerated?

We're looking for the explanation, but we can't really find it. A rather basic hypothesis is that, finally, it suits the Italians that there are traffickers in Ventimiglia station, so that Ventimiglia gets emptied of this illegal immigration. But it's a paradox because on the one hand, they control who gets on the trains, but they don't want to be responsible for Ventimiglia filling up. So they give the job to the smugglers to empty Ventimiglia but without taking responsibility. They will have done their job : “I send you back because you can't get on the train because you don't have documents, then I turn a blind eye on the traffickers so that Ventimiglia gets emptied”. Who knows...

- This is the time when the businessmen usually wake up. They come and go, running, as soon as they've collected the money, they go. They take the money out of the pockets, then they go back to hide it. Get on the train, hide the people, get off.

There are many smugglers in Ventimiglia train station. Often the same ones we met 4 years ago.

- He, with the grey jacket, is someone we see all the time here, talking with the lady.

And they've set up their headquarters at the end of the platforms, which is a place where no one else has access.

- You start to see them coming out of the end of the platforms...

That's where they bring the women who are waiting to cross the border. They keep them... I would say prisoners since the girls don't even know where the station is in the city. That is to say, they arrive by train from various parts of Italy, they end up in Ventimiglia, they get off the train, they are taken in charge by the traffickers directly. They get off the train and are taken directly by the smugglers, and they are brought to this place while they find a way to cross the border. With a lot of physical and verbal violence at the end of the platforms.

- In general, when you don't see the women before and you see them on the platform like that, there are some who have slept at the end of the platforms. Since they come out of nowhere, they didn't get off the train from Savona, you don't know where they come from, you didn't see them in town, you didn't see them at the station or anywhere else, so you assume that... that they slept there.

I remember once, I have a friend who said to me "listen, I have a friend who arrived in Ventimiglia". I asked him "where in Ventimiglia?". He explained to me that she is at the train station. There are guys who took her, I don't know but they took her... There are abandoned houses. She told me "it's unlivable, it's impossible, it's impossible. It looks like hell".

We had a testimony from a young girl, a mother of two children, 2 months and 2 years old, who slept there, taken by a brother to make her sleep in a safe place. She obviously believed him because the man was of the same nationality as her. She went to sleep there and in the middle of the night, the young man arrived. He wanted... he wanted to take her to sleep with her, as she said. She refused. And after several refusals, he took a beer bottle, a big beer bottle, he broke it on the wall, pointed it at her chest and threatened her with death. And she said, "Go ahead and kill me. Kill me here in front of my children, I have nothing left to lose in this life". She hid in a small corner until morning and... She came to the Caritas afterwards to tell this story. And she was one of the few who told us. In general, the girls, when they are in Ventimiglia, they don't tell us these stories. They make us understand what happened, but they won't tell it because they are terrorized by these guys who are at the end of the platforms.

- For someone who doesn't know the station at all, how would you describe it?

- Cold, militarized. And paradoxically militarized but not secured. Because for the most vulnerable, there is no security that you could expect with all these military and all these cops. It's scary, it's not a nice place, it's not a place of hope anymore.

Yes, it was. It was because in 2015 there were no police on the platforms to control people getting on the train, so everyone was rushing into these trains. There were starting to be controls in Garavan, sure, but they couldn't catch everyone. There was no filter in Ventimiglia, so there were many people who pass with the train at that time. So yes, that was hope, of course. And there was hope in the traffickers too because we knew them, they were smugglers who went through the mountains, their prices were minimal. But now all this is over, it's done, it's done. It wasn't like now where it's 150 euros and it's only once, if you get sent back you have to pay again to try to cross the border another time. It's really a big business on a big scale. It's really big networks and it's heavy, it's heavy and they are more and more violent, more and more possessive with their "clients". Of course, people risk to face violence to cross this border and we are not aware enough of it in Ventimiglia. I think we are really blind to this in Ventimiglia.

- Well what time is it? You go up there, Charlotte?

- We're going to the Info-point, and then I'm going to come back here to take the car. Do you want to walk with us?

- Yes, I'll walk with you. Always.

When I arrived here in 2016, it was not easy at all and my idea was not to stay here in Italy, it was to go to France.

- Now I'm recording.

- Yeah ?

But I never tried. I knew a lot of people who tried several times and couldn't make it.

I was at the Red Cross, which is called Campo Roia, and after 3 months and a few weeks, I was transferred here to the Ventimiglia city center.

Really, I felt so alone.

- So now we're leaving your work place.

- Yeah, where I work.

The fourth day I tried to come here to Caritas, I met Manuela. She is my mother here in Europe. And she really helped me a lot. She is the one who proposed me to come here to help them, to volunteer here. I said "ok, no problem". So I started to come here and then I met a lot of people who helped me too.

- It's windy today.

- Yeah, too much.

- So here we are at the old Info-point. All the guys who were sleeping outside were coming here to charge their phones or to go on Facebook to get news about their parents. I took the opportunity to come and help them.

- What's it like now?

- It's been closed for two years. Because the neighbors weren't so open, I could say...

I'm not saying directly that it's racism but it's something like that, because they didn't want to see black people. They said we were messing up their cars, we were leaving trash. It's a little bit complicated. Well, it's not complicated but it's hard to understand. Because you can see someone, he is sitting with you but his spirit is not with you. To pick up the garbage and go throw it away, he can forget just like that but it's not his fault because he has too many worries. That's what some people can't understand.

- How does it feel to come back here and see this place like this, closed?

- It makes me... it makes me think a lot because... I've known a lot of people here, thanks to this place...

In fact, my first love here in Italy, I met her at the Info-point. I can't forget, every time I pass by, I remember. We met there, it was really cool. But the problem was the distance. I've been living here in Italy since 4 years, I still haven't got my documents. And she is not Italian, she is Spanish. So there was too much distance. That's why it didn't work.

- Now it's closed, it's for sale.

- It's for sale but it's been 2 years, nobody even wants to rent it.

- Are the policemen who stopped behind us are still there ?

- Yeah, yeah.

- Are they watching us ?

- Yeah yeah.

During a day, I was checked 6 times. In 30 minutes, I was checked 4 times. They know me well because sometimes they make me come at the police station to translate. I speak Arabic so I go there every time they need me. So they know me well but they still check me.

The first thing I want to change is that the people of Ventimiglia stop blaming people who didn't do anything. I don't know, it's like when an African does something, they will say "all Africans are the same". Even Italian children, when you come and you're black, they run away because at night, if the kid doesn't behave, his mother says "if you don't stop, I'll call the black man". So that's not right. I really want it to change. It's not going to be easy but still...

Sometimes I wonder why I'm still here. But I think that maybe I belong here. Because I have a lot of people here who like me, we are all together, if I need them they are always there beside me. I think that's what keeps me here.

- So that's how it is!

[*Greetings in Italian*]

- We had quite a few relationships with the Italians because there were some Italians who came here but they didn't know what "black skin" actually meant. For them, "black skin" means the one who hurts people, who smokes, who does crimes and all that. But then, when they realized that it wasn't that, we started to get closer. Until now, the Info-point is no longer there but we know each other well so every time I come here, if we see each other, it's like family really.

- At least here it was a place where people could meet a little bit...

- That's what it was like here. But then, everything closed so...

We think that there are no immigrants out there but they are there. We don't see them, but they are there. Besides, they don't have a single place to go. In my opinion, people ignore them. Because if you really want to see them, you can see them. Because I, for example, I see them. I'm like them, we're all the same. So I don't know why there are some people who ignore them, I don't know.

- Here, I don't know where it goes... Here? Here? Like this? There, is that okay?

- We stay here.

- Okay. I have to bring the microphone closer. Here we go. Can you talk a little bit.. I'll hold this...

- Can you tell us where we are right now?

- In Ventimiglia.



- And we're near the old Red Cross camp.
- Yes, Campo Roia.
- You lived in this camp?
- Before, I was in this camp in 2016, for maybe five or six months, I was there. There was a doctor, a lawyer, there was everything. There was room to sleep, to eat, there was a group that helped people. But now that it is closed, there are many people who used to live in the camp, but now they sleep in the street. Even for people who would like to take a shower, there is no place, they have to go to the beach. There is a Syrian person who died there.
- He drowned ?
- He died. There is a lot of problems here. But I hope there is a camp. It would be better for the people and it would be better for Ventimiglia. For both.

No, the situation, it's unbearable.

Look now...

It is unlivable. To see all these people, women, children, with the rats, mixed with the men, you don't know who is who, who lies next to you, who does what. It forces you to prostitute yourself to be able to sleep, or to be able to eat. It's dangerous. I don't know why they closed the camp. The camp was helping, the camp was helping. It was far away, they complained, but at least they knew they could sleep somewhere, shower, eat. It was prison, with hours of entry, hours of exit, it was prison but when you try to evaluate the situation, it's better compared to zero. Now it's zero.

There are a lot of people here in Ventimiglia who look at the people, they steal, they don't have food, they sleep in the street. They think they come here just to look for food. No. Everyone who came here has problems in their country. Nobody helped them, they have no money, they can't work. There are many people here who used to have a job, but they don't speak Italian. Even those who would

like to work, they can't, they don't have the right to work because they don't have documents.

In the end, we are human beings.

That's why, what can we do?

You throw us in the street, without any resources, we become savages. That's it. Then they complain. But they don't try to fix the situation. If we could help ourselves, we would. But in this case, it's impossible, it's impossible. So you need help. If people don't want to help you, you end up doing anything to survive. And survival is very dangerous.

Simply we, we ask that people in Italy or everywhere, just that they help people. That they listen to what they would like. Even here, there are many people in Ventimiglia who just need someone to hear them.

- To be listened to by someone.

- Yes. To explain what their problem is. Everybody here doesn't want much. Just to have the documents, just a place to sleep or enter France. Only that. It's not a difficult thing. It's not a big thing. I know a person now in Ventimiglia, he would like to go back to his country, he wants to go back to Africa. Nobody helped him. And now in his head, not even after one month here, in his mind, he is crazy now.

- He's gone crazy?

- Yes, that's it.

- Thank you.

- You're welcome.