

PALIMPSEST

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It was 8 am on a Saturday morning in late October 2005, a beautiful fall day, sunny and mild. My students were in a group waiting for me just inside the security gate of the NATO base in Agnano, Italy. I noted that they had followed my suggestion to not wear shorts and t-shirts but rather long jeans and a collared shirt, the normal dress of young Italians. I would remind them to put their ID cards safe in a deep front pocket.

Buon giorno! I called out and all responded as taught: *Buon giorno, Professoressa!* There were 25 of them from my beginning Italian class and we were going to spend the day exploring the oldest and deepest levels of the city of Neapolis, which means “new city” in Greek.

I was teaching for the University of Maryland in Europe, Naples Program, and my students were primarily active-duty American military, average age probably 28, some married with kids, some single. They were taking advantage of the tuition assistance program offered to them as they slowly made their way toward a B.A. or B.S. while serving their country. Most of them had never been abroad before and an assignment to Naples seemed exciting, but perhaps not to all, as the city had an extremely negative reputation as being dirty and unsafe. In fact, very few got to live “on the economy” as the military preferred to house them in non-descript barracks and base housing. The schools, the hospital, the church, the PX and Commissary, and some of office buildings were all located on a support site at Gricignano, a small town located 20 miles from the center of the city of Naples. Everything they needed was inside this walled town. The orientation class required of all newly arrived personnel was full of warnings, such as avoid eating gelato or mozzarella as both are made with unpasteurized milk. Many felt hesitant about leaving the base unless on an organized tour.

The first-level Italian course these students had enrolled in consisted of sixteen 3-hour evening classes over a period of eight weeks, not an ideal schedule for learning a language. Fortunately, the language department of the university had a few years earlier adopted the functional proficiency method, which meant each student was evaluated on his/her ability to communicate, and not only on correctness of grammar and accuracy of pronunciation. This was incredibly freeing for both student AND teacher!

In-class time was important but, following my belief that language is a vehicle of culture, I knew that my students would greatly benefit by direct experience of Neapolitan life. I modified the class schedule to allow for two all-day Saturday field trips during which they could practice their growing language skills and observe Italian culture first-hand.

As I greeted my students that morning, I handed out the day’s itinerary and a map of the area we would be exploring. I told them I would not be counting noses, that they were responsible for keeping up with me. I also said that if they got separated from the group, they should call my cell phone and just meet us at the next monument on the itinerary. We then left the safety of the base and walked to the nearby Agnano Metro Station where each student was required to purchase two tickets, one to save for the return and not to be *obliterato* or stamped. *Napoli, due biglietti, per favore*, as they had practiced in class.

The walk from the Montesanto Station to the historic center of the city was a lively slice of Neapolitan life: narrow alleyways with cars pressing shoppers onto the already crowded sidewalks, horns honking, shops of every kind spilling their merchandise almost into the street, harried housewives yanking along large carts full of the day's food shopping, tables of dripping whole fish waiting to be selected and cleaned with the fastest knife you have ever seen, coffee bars exuding aromas of steamy espresso and freshly baked pastries, pajamas and tablecloths hanging from the doorways, shoeboxes stacked against the wall, a sample shoe on top, peddlers wheeling carts strung with socks and underwear, rainbows of fruits and vegetables piled precariously high on sidewalk tables, just waiting to tumble down. The cries of the vendors, the loud voices of the crowd, the frequent bursts of song were deafening!

At this point, I divided the students into three groups with the assignment to enter different coffee bars. Following Italian etiquette, each student was to say a hearty *Buon giorno!* to the cashier before ordering and paying for his *cappuccino* and *cornetto*, proceeding first to the pastry counter and then to place paper receipt and tip (10 or 20 eurocents) on the coffee bar in front of the hissing machines and overworked baristas who with incredible speed were placing hot cups of espresso in front of the customers, most of whom quickly downed the dark brown liquid and stepped away to make room for the next customers.

We soon regrouped back on the street, and all were smiling. Everyone had followed the prescribed routine and passed the first test, it seemed. We then made our way through the crowds to the Decumanus Maior, the main avenue of three primary streets of the ancient Greek grid plan, whose original streets, I reminded them, lie but 20 feet below the modern cobblestones. Today I wanted my students to FEEL the layers of history of this amazing city. Naples was founded in the 6th century B.C. to become a huge commercial port and remained Greek in language and culture long after the Romans took control. There followed a series of dynasties, each adding its own styles and traditions, eventually forming a fascinating palimpsest in which no layer is ever completely erased but contributes to each successive stratum.

Next on the itinerary were the excavations of the Roman market of the 1st c. A.D., once the Greek agora, discovered in the 1970s under the lovely 13th c. Gothic church of San Lorenzo. Down flights of steel stairways, we came upon narrow streets lined with brick-walled shops - a bakery, a dye shop, a tax office. I asked my students to imagine these underground alleys and stores just as full of vendors, shoppers, and excitement as we had found on the streets now above us.

Over a pizza lunch, we discussed what we had seen, what Italian words we had heard or read, how Italians interact with each other, what it might mean to a culture to have so many layers of history, never obliterated but assimilated.

To see those layers even more clearly, we next visited *Napoli Sotterranea* or Underground Naples. By narrow stone steps, we descend 15 stories into the earth, and come upon a *tuffo* quarry (in English, tuff, a yellow volcanic stone) where marks of the chisels used to cut out the building blocks for the original Greek city are still evident. These huge underground quarries eventually became water cisterns and later part of the vast system of Roman aqueducts bringing fresh water into the city from the mountains to the east. This water supply was used by the city until the late 19th c., when a cholera epidemic caused its shutdown, and the cisterns were not utilized again until they became air raid shelters during the heavy

bombardments by the Allied Forces in 1943. The underground air raid museum was extremely moving for us all as we reflected on the deprivations suffered by the Neapolitans.

We were all quite subdued as we came out into the bright sunshine. It was decidedly time for gelato! We made our way on tired legs (all those steps!) through the now less-crowded streets to the Metro Station for our return trip to Agnano.

At our next class the following Monday night, two students could hardly wait to tell me that they had taken their families plus some neighbors to Greco-Roman Naples on Sunday and had retraced our itinerary all the way. They had had new experiences, practiced Italian phrases, and observed Italian etiquette! I smiled to myself and thought, mission accomplished.

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