

A Guitar Is a Guitar in La Maddalena

Pauline Fry
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After an eight-week term teaching in Tehran (January-early March 1977), I was offered an unusual assignment: meet a submarine, then teach its sailors English 102: "Introduction to Literature." The submarine was due to surface in early April, out of sync with the regularly scheduled Maryland classes, so I'd be teaching a condensed six-week course, twice a week for three hours, plus two Saturdays.

La Maddalena, one of seven islands in the archipelago off Sardinia, was home to the American Naval Support Activity (NSA) usually referred to as 'La Madd,' set up (according to *The Stars and Stripes*) by a secret accord between U.S. and Italian officials, without the blessing of the Italian Parliament (which would have later repercussions). It served as a logistical and technical hub for submarines transiting the Mediterranean Sea and on the hunt against the Soviets from 1973-2008. A larger base, which housed military personnel and their families, was on an adjacent island, San Stefano. (Giuseppe Garibaldi, sometimes called the father of Italy because of his heroic fighting for Italy's independence, is buried on another island, Caprera.)

I would meet the submarine sailors who would be my students. Once again, University of Maryland was—literally—fulfilling its mission of going to the troops to offer them education, its initial goal when University of Maryland's European Division was founded in 1949.

Those days of travel! If we weren't booked on a military transport, flights were not cheap, unless one booked an inconvenient hour. On a Saturday, I flew from Paris to Rome, then took a night flight from Rome to Olbia, arriving after 9:00 pm. From Olbia I'd take a ferry to La Maddalena, find a hotel, and show up at the education center on Monday morning. That was my youthful plan.

On the plane to Olbia, I learned otherwise. A well-dressed Italian gentleman was in the seat next to me. Politely, he asked if I were on vacation. "Oh no," I replied, "I am coming to Sardinia to teach." He spoke careful English. "At the University of Cagliari?" I had no idea where Cagliari was. "No, La Maddalena." Then it dawned on him, "You are teaching Americans at the base there? But it is very small. Perhaps you mean San Stefano?"

He looked at his watch, then at me. "You can't get to either island tonight. The ferries have stopped running. Have you booked a hotel near the airport?" Of course I hadn't booked a hotel. I was teaching for Maryland, and had gotten used to hopping on trains (once after one had already pulled out of the station), arriving in unknown places, and usually, finally, figuring things out. And then I started to be a little suspicious.

Was this well dressed Italian a travel agent? Or trying to make a move? Yet he seemed genuinely concerned. "No, I haven't booked a hotel yet," I responded. Silence. What was he thinking? "The best way," he finally replied, "is you come home with me." The lights dimmed as the plane was about to land. I couldn't speak. "My wife and daughters will be happy to meet you," he added.

That is how I ended up on the *Costa Smeralda* (The Emerald Coast) at the stunning estate of the Aga Khan. The estate manager, I'll call him Signore Osti, lived on the same property as the Aga Khan's *Le Cerbiatte* (The Fawns), a huge villa set on a wide lawn rolling down to the sea and dotted with perfectly manicured gardens. The Osti's house shared the same view, which I'd appreciate the next day. It was dark when his driver left us at the front door and a lovely woman opened it as two young girls rushed out. "Papa!" We were home.

What an introduction to Sardinia! I was shown into the luxurious guest suite, then asked to come back to the kitchen for an informal supper. Over a seafood pasta and white wine, the Ostis explained to me the *Costa Smeralda*. Karim Aga Khan made an initial investment in the early sixties to develop the northern part of the island. He made laws on what building materials could be used for new villas, ensured that power lines were buried underground, and set up the area's own fire brigade, rubbish collection, and security guards. He attracted established (read: rich) Italian families and developed *Porto Cervo*, *Costa Smeralda's* central town and port.

I woke up at dawn, opened the French doors on to a private terrace and a sweeping view of green lawns and emerald water, studded by banks of flowers. Enchanted, I was interrupted by a discreet knock at the door. Morning coffee. For a wild minute, I thought of trying to get work with Sig. Osti or the Aga Khan, just to stay in this paradise. Reason prevailed, and after breakfast my gracious host had arranged a car to drive me to the ferry. How would I ever thank these generous people? "*Buona fortuna*," said Signore Osti, "good luck with your teaching."

Teaching? Yes, of course! The ferry left from Palau, about half an hour away. It was a gorgeous ride—clear water, a view of tiny islands everywhere, no submarines. Once on the island, I made an initial survey, walking the length of the small port, looking up at houses tucked into the stunning landscape. I was enchanted. Then I found the small compound that housed the American Navy and the education center where I'd be teaching. It was deserted, except for a marine at the reception desk who suggested I call the woman in charge of educational services.

"Pasta!" He shouted, he gestured, and led me to a door off the living room. "Eccolo! Here it is!" I was a bit astonished, having just walked into this gathering for the newly arrived instructors with UMUC, and will never forget the pride of this man, the husband of the educational services officer (sadly don't remember their names). He swung open the door and there, instead of coats or linens or shoes, were shelves of neatly arranged pasta.

I thought of spaghetti-o's when I was a kid, out of a can and barely warmed, and rather mushy. Overcooked spaghetti or macaroni & cheese (sometimes with crumbled potato chips on top to add crunch) was "pasta" to me. Clearly, I had stepped into a new universe: capelli d'angelo, conchiglie, fusilli, cappelletti, fettuccine, pappardelle, quadrucci, tagliatelle, trenette, penne, rigatoni, bucatini, ziti...

I thought of this evening as another universe surfaced. Fourteen sailors, underwater for longer than I cared to think about, were now on land, and about to embark on a new voyage: Introduction to Literature. As they came into the classroom, on a Tuesday afternoon (class was held from 5:30-8:00 Tu/Thurs), the textbooks hadn't yet arrived. *Perrine: Structure, Sound, and Sense* was an anthology widely used, covering fiction, drama, and poetry, with essays explaining how to write about each genre. Cleverly, I'd xeroxed copies of a poem,

which would give students an introduction to our class. No wine, but women and song after weeks on a submarine!

“This is a poem written by Frances Darwin Cornford,” I began. “The Guitarist Tunes Up”:

With what attentive courtesy he bent
 Over his instrument;
 Not as a lordly conquerer who could
 Command both wire and wood,
 But as a man with a loved woman might,
 Inquiring with delight
 What slight essential things she had to say
 Before they started, he and she, to play.

“Darwin?” queried a student. At least a question, though not about the poem. “Yes, an English poet, she was the granddaughter of Charles Darwin, the naturalist.” Some interest. Another hand up: “Why can’t she just write this in a paragraph?” Ah, so what is poetry? Then, “Wire and wood?” As I hoped, a lively discussion ensued. Which words stand out? We worked up to simile, “over his instrument.../as a man with a loved woman might/”

This was too much for Randy, the first of the students’ names I’d remember forever. “Ma’am, excuse me, but this isn’t right! A guitar is a guitar. A woman is a woman, but he’s playing his guitar.” Randy didn’t go for the simile. He added, “I play the guitar; it ain’t like no woman!” Looking back, maybe he was right. He was offended for his guitar; today women might be offended for being alluded to as the guitarist tuned up. Clearly, my clever idea had missed the mark.

Yet it seemed so right for that class of young men just off a submarine, the guitarist “not as a lordly conquerer” but “with what attentive courtesy” as he played, virtues I was hoping my submariners would appreciate, “not commanding,” but “inquiring with delight.” The faint allusion to sex, which was probably on their minds. But Randy was having none of it, as our first class—and me trying to teach poetry—came to an end. He walked out muttering, “A guitar is a guitar.”