

I was a slave in Puglia

**Exploited. Underpaid. Lodged in filthy shacks. Beaten to death if they complain.
Diary of a week in hell amidst the foreign laborers in the province of Foggia**

The boss wears a white shirt, black trousers and dusty shoes. He's from Puglia, but he hardly speaks Italian. To make himself understood he seeks the assistance of his bodyguard, a Maghrebin who is in charge of keeping everything under control in the fields. "Find out what this guy wants. If he's looking for work, tell him we don't need anyone, today." The boss speaks in dialect and drives away in his SUV.

The Maghrebin speaks perfect Italian. He doesn't wear any stripes on his sweaty shirt but it's quite obvious that he's the caporale, the "gang master." "Are you from Romania?" A grimace is all it takes to convince him. "I can hire you. Tomorrow," he promises. "Do you have a girl friend?" "A girlfriend?" "You have to bring me a woman. For the boss. If you bring him one, he'll put you to work right away. Any girl will do." He points to a twenty year-old woman and her companion, working on the conveyor belt of a huge tractor that is being used to gather tomatoes. "Those two are Romanians, just like you. She slept with the boss." "But I'm alone." "No work for you then."

There's no limit to shame in the triangle of slavery. The gang master wants a woman for the boss to screw. This is the price farm laborers have to pay in order to work in the heart of Puglia. A triangular area where there are no laws, which covers almost the entire province of Foggia. From Cerignola to Candela and upwards, in the North, beyond San Severo. It is hard to believe, but this area is located in the progressive region governed by Nichi Vendola, just half an hour away from the beaches of the Gargano; in the land of Giuseppe Di Vittorio, the hero of union struggles and one of the historical leaders of the CGIL, along the same road traveled by pilgrims on their way to the huge sanctuary of San Giovanni Rotondo.

In order to pass a week undercover amidst the slave laborers it is necessary to undertake a

voyage that takes one beyond the limits of human imagination. But this is the only way to report on the horrors that the immigrants are forced to endure.

They're at least five thousand people, maybe seven thousand. No one has ever carried out a census. They're all foreigners; all employed as so-called "black workers" the name used to describe illegal, untaxed and underpaid work scams. They are Romanians with or without work permits, Bulgarians, Poles. And Africans: from Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Senegal, Sudan, and Eritrea. Some have just entered the country illegally on small boats, only a few days ago. They came from Libya because they knew that in the summer they could find work here. It makes no sense to patrol the coasts if Italian businessmen decide to ignore the law. Down here they also ignore the Constitution: articles one, two and three. As well as the Universal Declaration of Rights.

To protect their affairs, farmers and landowners have created an army of ruthless gang masters: Italians, Arabs, and Eastern Europeans. They lodge their workers in makeshift shacks that are avoided even by stray dogs. Without water or electricity, in disgusting hygenical conditions. They make the men work from 6 AM to 10 PM. And they pay them only - when they pay them - 15 or 20 Euros per day. Complaints are dealt with by beatings with a steel bar. Some workers decided to seek the assistance of the Police, in Foggia: thanks to the Immigration Law named after Umberto Bossi and Gianfranco Fini, they were arrested or expelled from Italy because they didn't have the necessary work permits.

Others ran away. The gang masters searched for them all night long. It was a scene similar to the manhunts in Alan Parker's film, "Mississippi Burning." In the end, some of them were captured and some of them were killed. Now it's the season of the "Red Gold," it is the season of the tomato harvest. Almost all the produce used by the canneries that make tomato sauce in Salerno, Naples and Caserta comes from the province of Foggia. Fresh perino tomatoes grown here become pelati, canned peeled tomatoes or passata, cooked tomato concentrate. The ones that aren't ripe yet are used as salad tomatoes. They're picked in the triangle of the slaves and they end up being used to make the dishes of all of Italy and half of Europe. Then there are the pomodori a grappolo, the cherry tomatoes on the vine that are used to make pizza. Soon it'll be time to harvest other vegetables, like eggplants and peppers. The industrialists pretend to ignore what's going on and at the end of the harvest they all get in line to cash in their agricultural subsidies from Brussels.

L'espresso controlled dozens of fields. There isn't even a single one where the seasonal laborers are being treated according to the law. But one should not think that this is just a case of illegal competition inside the European Union: the most serious abuses against human rights are tolerated within these fields and olive groves.

Immigrants at work in the fields.

It's not difficult to become a part of Europe's sleaziest agricultural market. All it takes is a phony name to be used from time to time. A photocopy of a decree that sanctions that immigration has not been granted, obtained last year at the immigration detention center on the island of Lampedusa. And a bicycle to escape as far as possible, in case of danger. The gang master who demands a woman for the boss controls the gathering of perino tomatoes in Stornara. He usually works on one of the first fields on the left, just outside the town, along the road that, through the haze, leads to Stornara. It's wiser to move on.

To get here, one has to pedal along state road 16 and then continue through the olive groves for another 10 kilometers. The hamlet is like a small island in the middle of a sea of fields. At the railway station in Foggia, Mahmoud, 35-years-old, from the Ivory Coast, had told me that the tomato harvest had probably already begun. He sleeps in a hole in the ground near Lucera and is unemployed. There, in the north, the tomatoes aren't ripe yet. So, for a small fee, Mahmoud sells information to the newcomers who arrive by train.

Today must be the hottest day of the entire summer: 42 degrees Celsius, according to the headlines of the newspapers at the newsstand in the station. In the middle of the fields, an abandoned stable appears in the haze. Africans inhabit it. They're resting on an old sofa under a tree. Someone speaks Tamashek, they are Tuaregs. A greeting in their language helps break the ice.

Racial segregation is rigidly applied in the province of Foggia. The Romanians sleep with other Romanians. The Bulgarians with other Bulgarians. Africans with other Africans. The rule applies to hiring as well. The gang masters don't allow any exceptions.

So, if a White man wants to discover how the Blacks are treated, he has to use a borrowed name. Donald Woods, from South Africa. The name of the legendary journalist who denounced the horrors of apartheid to the world. "If you're a South African, you can stay,"

says Asserid, 28 years old. He left Tahoua in Niger, in September 2005. He arrived in Lampedusa, in June 2006. After being locked up for 40 days in the detention center in Caltanissetta, he was finally released with an expulsion order. He says he's been in Puglia for 5 days. Asserid crossed the Sahara desert by foot and catching rides on old four-wheel-drive vehicles and managed to reach Al Zuwara, the Libyan headquarters of human traffickers and boats that set sail to Italy.

"In Libya, all the immigrants know that Italians hire foreigners to pick tomatoes. That's why I'm here. This is just a stop on the road for me. I had no choice." Asserid claims he hopes to save some money and head off to Paris.

Adama, 40-years old, a Niger Tuareg from Agadez, traveled the opposite route. He arrived in Paris with a tourist visa. Then he fell on hard times. He was expelled from France as an illegal immigrant so he came down to Puglia, lured by the harvest of the red gold. "This is the Northern-most Tuareg encampment in history," jokes Adama. But there is little to laugh about. The water they pull up from the well using re-cycled containers is undrinkable; wastes and herbicides pollute it. The bathroom is a swarm of flies over a hole. Two men sleep on each of the filthy mattresses strewn on the ground and each man pays 50 euro a month for the privilege. And they are the lucky ones.

Other gang masters demand ?5 per night for a sleeping space in a shack, that must be added to a 50 cent or even ?1 cut off their hourly wages, plus another ?5 for transportation to the fields. It doesn't take much to figure out that the gang masters have devised all sorts of schemes to earn their easy money.

At 2.30 PM, the gang master drives up in his VW Golf. The car is loaded to the roof. "This guy, is he really an African?" he questions the others about the only Caucasian in the group. Nobody knows what to say.

"I pay 3 euro per hour. OK for you? Ok, jump in," the man says to me. He's dressed in shorts and a sleeveless undershirt, with a tattoo of a woman in a bikini seen from her back, on his biceps.

Immigrants at work in the fields

We're off. Nine of us in the Golf, 3 in front, 5 on the backseat. And a young boy, bent over like a toy furry animal, stowed away in the luggage compartment. The 10-minute-long drive is worth ?40 for the gang master.

The guys call the man Giovanni. They've already worked from 6 AM to 12.30 PM. The 2 hour-long break wasn't granted out of kindness; today it was unbearably hot, even for the bosses, so they decided to grant everyone a siesta.

Giovanni introduces himself to me, glancing in the rearview mirror: "I'm John and you?" Then he warns me: "John good if you good. If you bad?" The conversation ends there because he speaks neither English nor French but the big diver's knife, laid out on the dashboard completes the message, clearer than words.

Amadou, 29 years old, a Nigerian from Filingue, reveals the workers' concerns: "Giovanni, today it's Friday and we haven't been paid for 3 weeks. We've almost finished our supplies of pasta. For 15 days we've had only pasta and tomatoes to eat. The boys are exhausted. They need meat to keep on working."

The promised ?3 per hour were only a lie. But Giovanni makes more promises. Whenever he answers he says: "We Turks," even if the license plates on the car are from Bulgaria. Judging by his accent he could be Russian or Ukrainian.

"I swear in the name of God," continues the gang master, "today we'll get the money and we'll pay you all. You must believe me. I work just like the rest of you do, in Stornara. I'm not making fun of my colleagues."

Giovanni lives on the outskirts of the hamlet. In a brick villa on the right, half way down the stretch to Stornara. Just across the road from another stable that seems on the verge of collapsing, without water and inhabited by slaves.

The overloaded Golf runs and swerves on the provincial road, heading towards Lavello. The speedometer reads 100 kilometers per hour, pure madness. Just abreast of the first farms outside the village, Giovanni turns right and heads down a dirt road. After 2 kilometers he stops the car and we continue on foot, in single file.

When the boss sees the group of African workers approach, he starts making noises like a monkey. Then he barks order using the insults made famous after they were pronounced by the vice-President of the Senate, Roberto Calderoli: "Come on Bingo Bongo!" In the same instant a van discharges nine Romanians. Three of them are women, the only females in the group.

We work looking at the ground. If someone raises their head, they're immediately screamed at: "What the fuck is there to look at," yells the boss. "Put your head down and get back to work," he yells, approaching the culprit with a menacing demeanor.

Leonardo, roughly 30-years-old is from Puglia. He's wearing Bermudas, an undershirt and fancy sunglasses, almost as if he'd just arrived from the beach. By the way he talks, it's possible to gather that he's the owner of the farm. Or more likely, the owner's son. He's in charge of the work force, a sort of commander of the gang masters.

His farm is some 10 kilometers further down the road, on the outskirts of Stornara. Just off the same road Giovanni has taken to drive the slaves to work.

Another Italian, the gang master of the Romanians, assists Leonardo. He's wearing a white polo shirt; he has long hair and a well-groomed mustache.

Most likely the third Italian is the buyer of the crop. He's thin, short blonde hair. His cell phone is hanging on a golden chain and dangles in front of his chest. He speaks with a strong Neapolitan accent.

He parks his SUV and immediately makes himself heard. Someone has mistakenly laid several full cases of tomatoes on the plants. So he screams like a madman: "I swear to God, if anyone else puts another case on the plants, I'll break his head with it."

The three Italians are sweating but only on account of the heat. They don't move a muscle except to watch the slaves.

Giovanni goes to pick up some other slaves. Then he returns twice with supplies of water. Four plastic bottles, each one filled with 1 and ½ liters, are all there is for 17 thirsty people. The bottles have been filled up only God knows where. One of them has a hole and is almost empty. The water stinks but at least it is cool. Anyway, it's hardly enough for all. Two swigs of water in more than four hours of hard work in 40 degrees Celsius can't quench anyone's thirst.

Most of the Africans haven't had any lunch or even breakfast, for that matter. Some of them manage to eat some green tomatoes without getting caught by the gang masters. They eat the tomatoes knowing that they've been sprayed with pesticides and poisons.

Maybe that's why, for days, nobody has any mosquito bites.

Leonardo wants to know how come there are Whites in Africa. He walks among the curved backs like a professor among his students. Mohamed, 28 years old, from Guinea, is given permission to speak. To stop working or to speak, one always needs to ask permission.

Mohamed knows why there are Whites in South Africa. He has a degree in Political Sciences and International Relations from the University of Algeria. He speaks Italian, French and Arabic. And he answers, while remaining on his knees in front of that Italian who shows no shame in admitting he's never heard of Nelson Mandela.

"Have you understood?" Leonardo asks the other two Italians, after a while. "In Italy, the fair skinned people live in the North while we in the South are dark skinned. In Africa, in the South they're White and these people from the North are Black."

The incident happens suddenly. Michele is the oldest of the Romanians. He's in his sixties, grey hair. He's loading cases full of tomatoes onto the trailer hitched behind the tractor. The wooden case is thin and dry and it cracks, and 12 kilos of tomatoes roll on the ground. Before Michele has a chance to bend over and gather them, Leonardo, with his hand closed in a fist, strikes him on the head. "Pay attention, asshole," he screams. "Do you think we're gonna stand here and wait while you drop the cases?"

Michele mumbles an excuse. He's too tired and too offended to speak out loud.

"Sorry, my ass," says Leonardo. "You've gotta pay attention."

We all stop working and watch. A girl stands up to protest. The man with the Neapolitan accent runs up like a fury. "Get down, nothing's happened. Get down or nobody goes home until the work is finished." As though anyone of these people had a home to return to!

Michele returns to load the tractor helped by other Romanians. Half an hour later, he's sitting on the ground again, holding his head. He's bleeding heavily from his nose. One of his companions squeezes a ripe tomato on his forehead to soothe the pain.

The man with the mustache tells Leonardo what happened.

"I had to hit him with a stone right between the eyes. I had to do it. That asshole got pissed

off at me because you'd beaten him and because there's no money for them tonight. As though it were my fault. He grabbed a stone and I took it away from him. As if we can allow some shitty Romanian to threaten us."

Leonardo smiles.

We stop working when the sun goes disappears behind the Dauni Mountains. Michele is feeling better. The Romanians gather around their gang master. Giovanni takes a photo of his group. The photo is used to know who's on the payroll and in case someone runs away. Then it's time for everyone to sign the register with the number of hours they've worked. Today we've finished working earlier than usual.

The gang master explains why to Amadou during the return drive: "The carabinieri are out here."

Giovanni points to a field of tomatoes along the road. "Do you see this field? This afternoon the carabinieri came and picked up some of my boys. I've got people working here, too. But don't be afraid. The field where you guys are working," he says, pointing to his shoulder, as though he were wearing stripes, "is controlled by the mafia."

Sometimes these raids happen on payday. Sometimes it's the bosses who call the municipal police, the State police or the carabinieri, alerting them to the presence of the immigrants in the fields. An anonymous phone call will do the trick. This way the gang masters get to keep their money and the prefectures can update their lists with the names of the new immigrants who've been expelled.

Amadou points out that, once again, no one is getting paid. "Are you a Muslim?" Giovanni asks. "Yes. Well, I swear in Allah's name that next week I'll pay all of you. And if you need meat, I swear I'll invite you all over to my house. Obviously, next week, when you can pay for the meat."

On May 14 1904, the police attacked a demonstration of farm laborers. Young Giuseppe Di Vittorio was among the group. Four people were killed, among them 14-year-old Antonio Morra, a childhood friend of the future union leader.

Nowadays, the protests are dealt with before they start. The gang masters act as a sort of

parallel police force. The businessmen ask them to intervene whenever there are any problems.

The gang masters establish their power by enforcing the rules. "Tomorrow morning I'll pick you up at 5 o'clock," says Giovanni, after he's unloaded all of his passengers.

It's almost 10 PM. Taking into account a quick shower with the water from the well and the time to consume a miserable dinner, we're left with only five hours to sleep.

The Africans warn me about the sanctions. If someone shows up late for work, once they arrive in the fields, they're beaten. The fine for skipping work, even if they're sick, is ?20, and that means having to work for free, for almost a full day.

If you travel fifty kilometers further north, you can hear similar stories. The map shows the town of Villaggio Amendola. It used to be a farming hamlet. Now it's only a ghost town inhabited by Romanians and Bulgarians who've been reduced into slavery. Just like the former sugar refinery in Rignano or the town of Ghetto where, in the evening, you can hear township music, it seems like Soweto.

Here 100 per cent of the inhabitants are non-Italians. They're all pickers, all foreigners with a single exception, 51-year-old Giuseppina Lombardo, from Calabria.

For the local farmers she's a saintly woman. With her Tunisian friend who goes by the name, Aziz, she can manage to assemble a team of tomato pickers in less than half an hour. Giuseppina and Aziz live off the slaves. They own the only well in Villaggio Amendola.

The water is polluted but they sell it anyway: the price is 50 cents for a 20-liter jerry can.

They also own the only store in the hamlet. In case a worker doesn't want to lose a day's work due to dysentery they're more than happy to sell him mineral water. They also sell meat and chicken: of uncertain quality and at double the price compared to other stores.

It's not easy to infiltrate oneself as an immigrant in this ghetto and to overcome the fears of its prisoners. Because Aziz, like all the other gang masters, makes sure that everyone knows that talkers will be ruthlessly punished. In this town, Aziz and his companion set the laws.

Many here remember only too well what happened on Easter week in 2005. One afternoon a young 22-year-old Romanian, who'd just arrived four days earlier, returned to Villaggio

Amendola loaded with shopping bags. He'd been to Foggia and he passed in front of the gang master's store with his booty: a bottle of oil, some pasta.

The eyewitness who tells the story to L'Espresso is convinced that Aziz considered that behavior an act of rebellion. The Romanians say that, shortly after, two men confronted the new arrival. One of them, they say, is a relative of Aziz. They hit him right in the middle of his head with a steel bar. Then they threw the bleeding body of the semi-conscious man onto a van and drove off. The boy was never seen again.

A similar story happened this year, on July 20. The day before, 39-year-old Pavel had an argument with Giuseppina. He dropped ?15 in the store and she accused him of stealing from the till.

In Romania, Pavel used to work as a cook for ?150 per month. Ever since his arrival in Puglia, on March 20, 2004, he's had to tolerate violence and harassments. He tries to grin and bear it in order to send his savings to his wife and to his "fairy," his 15-year-old daughter who's still attending school.

Pavel has quick arms. Last year, working from dawn to nightfall, he managed to fill as many as 15 truckloads a day, 4500 kilograms of tomatoes. With the incentive pay at ?3 per truckload, he was making good money, he says. After subtracting the gang master's cut and the transportation fee, Pavel was making ?25 to ?30 per day.

But on July 20, Aziz prevented him from repeating his record. Someone had told Aziz that Pavel was complaining about low pay and that the laborers were being exploited. The Tunisian struck at 2.00 PM, on a day when the laborers were in their shacks resting, because there was no work to be done. Pavel used his arms to protect his head. The steel bar broke his bones and opened deep wounds.

Pavel is certain that the intervention of his roommates saved his life. But they left him bleeding on his mattress until 1.00 AM in the morning. The other foreigners were too afraid of Aziz to do anything. They were also afraid of being expatriated if they called the police.

At 8.00 PM the following evening, someone finally alerted the hospital. According to the official records, another five hours passed before the ambulance and a carabinieri patrol showed up at Villaggio Amendola.

On July 31, Pavel was released from the hospital in Foggia, four days after being operated. The doctors' report says he'll need almost two months to recover from his wounds. He's got steel pins in his arms, both of which are in a cast. In violation of their code of ethics, the doctors turn him over to the police. Regardless of the fact that as of January 1, 2007, Romanian citizens might be considered EU citizens, he's treated like an illegal immigrant. Since both of his arms are immobilized, Pavel can't use a pen. The official decree notifying Pavel that he is being expelled from Italy is signed by "Primo dirigente dottoressa Piera Romagnosi." On the document, a note by the police official states that Pavel "refused to sign the expulsion papers."

The prefecture of Foggia wastes no time: on the expulsion decree, a note states that the Romanian is "without a passport." With regards to the crime of illegal immigration, this is an aggravating factor. The truth is that Pavel has a passport.

In the end, for a lack of alternatives, an inspector gives him ?10 and has him taken by car back to the Villaggio Amendola. The police let him out of the car right in front of the store belonging to Giuseppina and Aziz.

The Tunisian decides to deal with the matter immediately. He needs to show everyone who is in charge. He threatens Pavel who finds refuge in a shack less than a kilometer outside the hamlet. Taking care not to be discovered, some of his countrymen bring him bread and some water.

After nine days of pain and suffering, a Romanian friend manages to contact a lawyer in Foggia, Nicola D'Altilia, a former policeman in Northern Italy. The lawyer finds the shack and immediately brings Pavel to the hospital. His wounds are infected. The Romanian laborer is found to be in serious condition and undernourished. Pavel has to be cured for septicemia.

The rest of the story is recent news. On August 21, once again Pavel is released from the hospital. The lawyer who saved him accompanies him to the police to complete his complaint against the Tunisian gang master and his Italian accomplice; he'd only managed to register his original complaint on August 14.

After a day in the police headquarters, Pavel is arrested as an illegal immigrant: he's charged with not having obeyed the expulsion order according to which he was supposed

to leave Italy, departing from Rome's Fiumicino airport. The fact that he was unable to travel in his condition isn't taken into consideration. Regardless of his wounds, Pavel is forced to sleep in a cell on a wooden bench.

The following day, he's taken to court and a judge promptly postpones his hearing until October. In addition to having lost his job, under the provisions of the Bossi-Fini law, Pavel risks up to four years in prison. A harsher sentence than might befall the gang master who beat him and who's never been arrested.

"That man," says Pavel, who is still terrorized, "tried to hit me in the head. He wanted to kill me."

In this area the authorities have already found the bodies of a few laborers. Slavomit R., a 44-year-old Pole, was burned to death on July 2, 2005, in a field near Stornara. The case is still unsolved. Just like the case of two unidentified bodies found near Foggia.

The disappearances are yet another chapter in the catalogue of horrors. Nobody knows for sure how many Romanian, Bulgarian or African laborers have disappeared. When the gang masters hire them or beat them to death, they don't even know their names.

The only cases on record were opened after an official complaint by the Polish Embassy. The diplomats from Warsaw had to be very persistent: since 2005, they've been trying to find out what happened to 13 Poles who came to work as seasonal laborers in the triangle of slaves and who've never returned home. They just disappeared without leaving a trace.

The list compiled in August by the Polish Consulate is rather embarrassing for the Italian authorities. According to the Polish diplomats, who've sent 12 official requests for information to the Police headquarters in Foggia, they haven't received any answer regarding 9 of these cases.

After waiting for months in vain for an answer, they decided to pass the requests to the General Commanding office of the carabinieri. The anti-Mafia Prosecutor's office, in Bari, has finally ordered the Ros, the carabinieri's elite investigative branch, to open a formal investigation.

And yet, no one is investigating the death of a child because, it seems, what happened isn't

a crime. It seems that the baby was born at the end of August.

During the week of Ferragosto, Liliana D. was still working in the tomato fields even though she was 8 months pregnant. She was working in a field near San Severo. Evidently, neither her husband nor the gang master thought she needed to be protected from the intense heat and fatigue.

When Liliana became ill it was too late. She had a hemorrhage. She lay for two days without medication in the shack where she lived. There's no family doctor for the slaves in the province of Foggia.

In the afternoon of Saturday, August 19, her husband brought her to the hospital at San Severo. The woman was near death and she had to be taken into the intense care ward. The doctors used a Cesarean section to deliver the child, but the baby was dead. One could consider this death a case of "collateral damage" of industrial practices that reward price cutting at all costs.

The food industry in Campania pays 4 to 5 cents per kilo for the tomatoes from Puglia. On the stalls along the roads near Foggia, the price of perino tomatoes has already risen to 60 cents per kilo. In Milan, the ripe tomatoes to be used to make tomato sauce fetch ?1,20 per kilo and the price for golden tomatoes is ?2,80 per kilo. At the supermarket, the price for passata, cooked tomato concentrate from Campania, varies between 86 cents and ?1,91 per kilo. Pelati, canned peeled tomatoes can cost between ?1,04 and ? 3,00 per kilo.

And yet, in the ghetto in Stornara, even tonight, at the end of the month, the laborers still don't have enough money to buy a piece of meat. "Donald, don't go away," pleads Amadou. "Giovanni is very angry with you because you left the group. He's looking for you. I'll go let him know that you're here."

In the midst of all this misery, Amadou has figured out the most convenient behavior. Even though he himself belongs to the number of men forced to kneel to earn a living, he's chosen to side with the gang masters.

It's time to grab my bike and run. In the darkness. Before Giovanni decides to call his henchmen and they start hunting me in the fields.

