

## First Night on the Border – By Lisa Ariemma

In the northwestern Alps close to the France-Italy border, where the 2006 Winter Olympics took place, lies Susa Valley; a point of passage for millennia travelled by Celts, Saracens, Romans and, rumour has it, even Hannibal and his elephants. Over the last five years, the valley has become a popular point of passage for migrants and refugees wanting to reach France and other parts of Europe and the UK because the Ventimiglia route along the Mediterranean coast, between the Italian and French Riviera, has become increasingly militarized.

Indeed, history is repeating itself because in the post-World War II era, Italians, mainly from the south, did the same thing in search of a better future. They risked their lives hiking through the snow, dressed inappropriately, without knowing where they were going and sometimes had the means to pay local guides to accompany them. Often, they would depend on the kindness of strangers for a final meal before attempting the crossing.

This particular winter, it is mainly Nigerians, Malians and other Sub-Saharan Africans who are taking the train from Turin to Oulx and then waiting for the evening bus to Clavière – the last Italian town before the nearly 2,000-metre Montgenèvre mountain pass to France. Every night, local activists, including myself, travel to the upper valley trying to ensure safe crossings at that Alpine border.

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My first time is a gelid February night with over a metre of snow that is hardened on the surface and powdery below. The pass has peaks as high as 2,700 metres on either side and a steep descent leads to Briançon, the main town on the French side and the initial destination for those who cross. Temperatures can dip below -20°C with the wind chill, and yet, every evening after seven p.m. a group of people – sometimes dozens of them – wait inside the train station for the bus to Clavière.

They are usually young men, but not always. Sometimes there are families with young children or pregnant women, often at an advanced stage as a child born in Italy is not granted citizenship because of the country's *ius sanguinis*, or blood-tie policy. Instead in France, the *ius soli* rule applies, which means the parents' nationality is irrelevant and so children born in France are European.

I meet a local activist in Susa, a historic city about 500 metres above sea level, in the lower valley. Roman ruins mingle with pagan sacrificial sites and medieval buildings along narrow cobblestoned roads in its centre. Though it only has a population of about 6,000, it once had its own currency and the Marchioness Adelaide living in its castle, so it is referred to as a city, perhaps as a nod to its past glories.

We enter the expensive toll highway from Susa, which is much faster than the construction-mired state highway, and proceed to the upper valley exiting at Oulx, a ski town at 1,100 metres. It is several degrees below zero and warmer than the previous week when a 29-year-old man from Togo died trying to make it to France, most likely of hypothermia.

My friend grabs a large thermos of tea and some plastic cups from the car and we enter the station. There are seven men of African descent waiting there. We begin chatting with them as inconspicuously as possible, offer them a cup of tea and try to figure out their intentions and what languages they speak. Most of them are Nigerians but there are also two or three from ex-French colonies.

We look at their feet. One is wearing a pair of leather shoes with light socks. Others have leather or canvas shoes that are slightly sturdier than running shoes. They are not wearing gloves. One wears a baseball cap with gold sequins on the visor. A couple of them speak more openly with us while the others just observe us warily.

We talk about the dangers of the passage: the snow and ice, the cold, the unmarked trails and the darkness. It is unclear whether all of them intended to try the walk that night but, after talking with us, four of them take the train back to Turin. Three remain. The youngest is hostile when we ask him questions and assures us that the two remaining men have appropriate attire in their knapsacks. We leave the station and chat briefly with the bus driver who had told them not to wait outside in the cold.

My friend and I head to the hostel, supported by a local priest, a few minutes' walk from the station. Downstairs there is a room full of cots – about 20 – with a sleeping bag, a wool blanket and a pillow on each of them, as well as a pair of plastic slippers beside on the floor. Along the wall near the entrance are racks with winter jackets of different sizes. A poster is taped on the inside of the door with drawings showing the dangers of the passage and warnings written in different languages including Amharic and Arabic.

A grey-haired couple is on hand and the woman takes us to a storage container outside where we get a few pairs of wool socks and gloves, hats and emergency thermal blankets. We walk back to the station as mainly French passengers are boarding the bus and then depart in our car heading toward Clavière on the state highway, a tight and curvy route that ends in a series of hair-pin turns and tunnels leading to the ski resort town.

We park across from the bus stop and hear British English as a group of young people dressed in ski attire run down a narrow lane laughing. It is several degrees colder here. The streets and town square in front of the church are festive with Christmas lights. The pulse of music escapes from a nearby bar.

The bus arrives shortly after. Four young men get off. Two are the Nigerians we'd seen earlier. Another is from Guinea-Bissau and the fourth is from Mali. They've arrived from Sicily, Bologna and Milan. Some have been in Italy for two years and some a few months. Their ages range from around 18 to 35. The hostile young man is nowhere to be seen and was probably a *passeur*, in Latin America known as a *coyote*: people who are paid to get other people across borders.

Two volunteers from the Red Cross join us. Every evening they sit in a red and white van waiting for people who change their minds or get escorted back to the Italian border by French authorities. We try to dissuade the young men from doing the crossing that very cold night, speaking to them in Italian, English and French. We tell them that the French police – the *Gendarmerie* – use thermal imaging cameras to locate people in the dark.

The two younger men have appropriate boots – the kind we had seen lined up in the storage container at the hostel – but the other two, whom the hostile fellow at the station had guaranteed had proper footwear, have light walking shoes. We distribute socks, gloves, hats and thermal blankets while repeating the dangers of doing the walk at night. Frustrated, one insists he cannot wait any longer, that he has no life in Italy and has wasted two years. When we talk about the young man from Togo who'd recently died, they shrug saying they've already risked their lives crossing the sea and the question: "What's another risk?" hangs in the air.

They are determined and decide to attempt the crossing. The Red Cross volunteers remind them that they will be there until after midnight if they change their minds or need help. My friend and I are worried about the two with the poor footwear and decide to follow them at a distance.

The four men find their way to the cross-country ski trail below the town and immediately start walking the wrong way. We catch up to them and suggest they should check their direction. We cannot guide them. That would be aiding and abetting illegal immigration. The youngest of the group pulls out his mobile phone with a compass app turned on and points it southwest.

They walk in that direction for a stretch on packed snow and then cross a small bridge and begin climbing the mountain diagonally through deep snow into the woods. We continue to follow them

keeping our distance. Were it not for the circumstances, the evening would have been beautiful. A bright quarter moon reflects on the snow creating shadows but also permitting us to see the sharp light of hundreds of stars. The air is crisp and silent except for the crunch of our footsteps. While crossing a steep, icy point, one of them begins to slide, grabbing at the snow. With great effort, they make it to the other side of the slope where two of the men stop amongst some trees.

We cross the icy spot and join them. K.'s pants are tucked into the wool socks we had given him and they are covered in hardened snow. He stands hunched with his knapsack on his back breathing heavily. I approach him, touch his arm and speak to him gently: "I know you had it in your head to do this tonight, but you must realize now that it isn't safe."

"You can't do this with these shoes."

"A few extra hours won't change anything."

"You don't know where you are going."

"You are risking your life."

"Please change your mind."

The conversation lasts several minutes, his frustrated responses intermingling with my pleas. Then, after a long pause, in a tired voice, he says: "Why do they treat us like animals?"

I lose my self-imposed detachment and tears come to my eyes.

"I don't know why," I say. "It's wrong. That's why every night there are people who come here to help keep you safe."

The other man with the inappropriate shoes follows the path up the slope created by the two men wearing boots who are waiting for them and attempts to convince them to try again the next morning. But they are determined to proceed; they are younger and at least have proper footwear.

We begin the walk back to town with the two Nigerians. At one point, my friend, who is leading the way, stops and uses the light of her mobile phone to make sure we are going in the right direction. When we reach the cross-country ski trail, they ask us to confirm where they are going.

We tell them the Red Cross will take them to the hostel where they will be fed and sleep in a warm place. There they will be able to get whatever they need to dress properly for the crossing and, if they are still certain, they can take the first bus to Clavière the next morning.

As we wait on the main street for the Red Cross van to arrive, I chat with K. who wants only to move on to the next place and try his luck. He says once he has his legal papers he wants to go to Canada.

"It's a beautiful place," I say.

"I don't care if it's beautiful," he responds. "It's not racist."

We hand them over to the Red Cross and they climb aboard after revealing their ages for statistical purposes. On our way down the valley, we stop at the hostel, drop off the remaining thermal blankets and head up to the kitchen.

The two men are already eating a plate of pasta. Their faces are relaxed. They thank us. We wish them good luck and say good bye. Meanwhile, the other two men continue their trek through the cold, snowy woods and no one can really know whether or not they will make it.