

THE REVERSE INVASION.

HOW A IULIA CAN BECOME A GIULIA

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2000 years ago the Romans came to Dacia and conquered the land where Romania lies nowadays. The Romans targeted gold, but when arriving, they also bonded with the locals and from the romance never recorded by history, a new people was born, the Romanians, who started to speak a language very close to Latin and its descendant, Italian.

At 6 o'clock in the morning, many people queue at the check-in from Bucharest airport. Men that are around 40, with strong bodies but also a pillowy stomach that betrays good living, chatter nervously as they would hate to lose the plane. Women dressed like a typical neighbour from a Romanian block of flats, with slightly kitsch clothes and a lot of jewellery waits impatiently to cross on the other side of the security check to get to Italy faster because work and life are there. Those people looked to me very reassuring as I thought these were men who worked in constructions and women who worked as "Badanti" - who take care of sick or elderly people. But the situation in the field proved to be quite different because I find many more characters with entrepreneurial stories.

Lorin was my neighbour during the flight, together with his Romanian girlfriend. He moved to Italy while in high school and is now a student at the Tourism faculty. He said he learnt a lot from the Italians, who are much more open and don't care so much about what people say about them. He said that Italians consider Romanians hardworking and when I half-jokingly asked if they are more hardworking than in their own country, Lorin commented that they just want to make quick money and go back home.

Before going away on this trip to Italy to document how Romanians adapt in Italy through their workplace, I was a bit worried of not being able to find my fellow citizens easily, though I was warned of the country.

"Dani, pune si tu o muzica mai interesanta!" (Dani, please put some interesting music on) I heard when I was quietly enjoying a cappuccino on a Roman terrace in front of my hostel. A group of Romanian women were also enjoying a coffee before work. Carmen Stefan, a good looking blonde woman of around 45 said that when she came to Italy it was tougher. She had to buy a visa and smuggle her daughter in hidden by a blanket.

Her friend, Cristina from Radauti, said that life is hard, especially for a single woman with a child, when half the money goes on to babysitting. Cristina said that she works harder than any of her relatives back in Romania.

This group of chattering ladies said that Italians have a good opinion about Romanians, especially Romanian women, because they can work hard. On the contrary, Romanian men don't have such a good prestige since they seem to like to drink. "Spaco botilia, amazo familia" was actually a meme going around the social media, parodiating Romanian men who can't pronounce double letters in Italian and like the liqueur (the correct version would be "Spacco bottiglia, ammazzo famiglia" and means "I break the bottle and kill the family", as hard-core as it may seem).

A question comes into my mind - how come these women adapted themselves so easily, how come they blend in almost like real Italians? Cristina is quick to answer "We changed our behaviour after receiving a hint or two". Resilient. Ready to fight for a good life. The Romanian woman.

We part after they give me a final piece of advice "Be careful not to get your stuff stolen by our fellow Romanians". The topic of Gypsies is unavoidable. A cloud of shame passes everybody's faces, as if their effort to be good is zeroed by other forces they can't control.

My fellow colleague Andrea is waiting for me at Santa Maria Novella train station in Florence. I barely set foot on Florentin soil, he already lines up all the interviews in the following days. He is most excited especially by Melania Cotoi, a woman tour guide who is native from Brasov, the place I live in. It's not long until we meet her, near the Boboli gardens. She is a small woman, with dark hair that is hanging around her face and black fiery eyes. She speaks with a velvety voice with an Italian way of rounding the end of sentences. She arrived in Florence during a winter's holiday and when she was standing in front of the Dome, she realized she wanted to live here.

Melania had a rough but ambitious beginning in Italy. She worked as a waiter and as a regular worker in a shoe factory, where she had to make balls of papers to fill in the shoes. She followed the courses of a guide school for a year. She is proud that she is part of the first generation of schooled guides from Florence, especially that back then not very many people were accepted in the programme.

Now she guides Romanian and Italian tourists equally. She funded a Facebook page called Following Michelangelo.

Melania is very passionate about the Romanian community. She says that she knows Romanians who live together 7-8 persons in the same house and just want to make money and leave. There are also others who don't want to have interactions with other Romanians because they don't want to be mistaken with them.

After the interview, Melania offered to take me to visit Palazzo Vecchio. On the way, she told me all the history of Florence in a nutshell. About the Uffizi Galleries that crossed the river Arno, about the Medici family and especially Cosimo, the patron of arts and sciences. When we reached Piazza de la Signoria, she showed me the replica of David and she said "can you see, his hands are larger than in reality, so you can look from below and see the normal proportions. Michelangelo was aiming for perfection". I could see that Florence and its history had really become Melania's own.

After the visit at the museum, Melania took me to the Central Market San Lorenzo, where a couple of Romanians work. Mihaela Rojsteanu, a blonde woman with bright eyes was quick to ask us what we want from the store. You could find every Romanian essential product like pastrami, sour juice for tchorba (borsh) or Poiana chocolate. Mihaela told us that she and her husband came to Italy in the year 2000 and they waited for 3 years until their papers came through. They asked a "comerciale" (accountant) what they needed to do to open a business, took a course and quickly opened their first store. They get along fine with the neighbours, but still feel sometimes they are treated awkwardly because they are "another race". They have an 18-year-old daughter who wants to become a psychologist, but they are not sure that it's a good job that can offer her a future. Meanwhile, their shop is going great. They say that the best business they have is on Christmas, when every Romanian wants to have everything on the table. Before leaving, Melania buys some pastrami because she wants to cook a real Romanian tchorba with beans and pastrami.

We passed near the small touristic market Loggia del Mercato Nuovo, where you can find t-shirts with funny texts about Florence, leather goods and the statue of a piglet you can touch if you want to come back to this town. There we found Florian Gugu, from Craiova, a blonde very tall guy, with a threatening stature, but very kind demeanour. Before coming to Italy, he was a taxi driver in his hometown. Here he says he earns as much as a businessman in Romania, but has a nice schedule since he's coming to work at around 10, after sipping a nice coffee. He lives quite close to his stand together with a mate who is also his business partner. He has a Romanian girlfriend. He argues that it's simpler, because they are from the same culture, they get along with each other. "Italian women are more complicated", he says. "It's just the Romanian women who get in relationships with Italian men, not the other way around". Mihai seems at ease at his workplace, chatting along with stand neighbours and leading a comfortable life.

Following the online research, Andrea my fellow journalist had set up an interview with Gheorghe Leordean from the Maramures region of Romania, a former candidate from the Partidul Identitatea Romaneasca (Romanian Identity Party) on the lists of Italia dei Valori party for the local elections in Firenze. Gheorghe invited us to the office of his tourism and intermediation agency. He dismissed our intentions to talk politics and he said we should talk about migration, the specialty in which he wrote his dissertation for his doctoral degree. The alert rhythm of his speech gave us a chance to understand that his stay in Italy was made possible by studies he took at the University of Siena and the one in Firenze. It was a good path to enter the Italian society.

In faculty, he had as a colleague a beautiful woman that he accidentally met once outside work when she was working as a promoter for cigarettes. He was shocked that such an intelligent beautiful woman had to work in a job he considered degrading. It was in the same time a realization for him that intelligent adaptable people would stop at nothing.

Romanians kept on coming and going from his office. A woman came in to cable money for her daughter. She sent 500 euro. She also intended to send 50 euro for her husband, but she reconsidered and sent him 70, in spite of the fact that he's workless at home and won't do anything to get out of it.

Another Romanian man came in, who was working as a cleaner for a company. He was unhappy because he got 2 hours cut from his payroll weekly. He said he argued with the trade union, but they didn't help him. He said that many Romanians don't work with a contract because they want to get more money, but they won't think on the long run, for example, about retiring funds. When almost leaving the agency, the man said "The Romanians imagine themselves bigger than they are, they don't know where they come from anymore, especially the Romanian women."

Gheorghe argued that we cannot generalize that women do such and such, and men are different. He said that maybe some don't get what they deserve, but the major problem is that there are many families who came here and their children need a proper education. This is why he intended to found a sort of after-school for the Romanian children, in cooperation with the local authorities.

In his everyday work, Gheorghe is all the time in touch with his fellow citizens. He sort of blames the politicians from Romania because they didn't do enough to save the economy. He says "a lot of Romanians would go back to Romania instantly if they had something to go back to".

Gheorghe laughed loudly when he heard the question if there are resemblances between the Romanians and Italians. He said "of course, there are, both people love the good life, they are Latin like us, they like to eat well. We are brothers, after all."

One morning I was going out of the 3-storey house where I was living during my stay in Italy and I had trouble opening the door. A lady dressed for house chores came to help me and asked what the problem was. When I answered in poor Italian, she asked "where are you from?". She was also from Romania and when I told her what my mission in Florence was, she told me that she and her husband came in Italy years ago and took the lowest jobs, that generated "indemnitata" - meaning no dignity. She said she doesn't want this "modo di vivere" for her children because this picture "wouldn't be why they suffered for".

Melania took me through the maze of the narrow streets of Firenze, filled with tourists and shops dedicated to them. We reached Marcel Zaharia, a guy from Iasi, who owned a small store selling souvenirs and bling-bling. He had an American smile and a warm Moldovan way of speaking. He came to work into constructions, but after a few years he seized the

opportunity to become a shop-owner. He knew every shop-owner from the street and was amiable with each one. He said he and his wife tried to go back to Romania. They even began to build a house, but they couldn't make ends meet and came back to Italy where it was easier to make money. Trouble with the health of his child made him even keener to stay in Italy.

The picture of the Romanian entrepreneur started to take shape in my head. The Romanians pride themselves that they can find a way anytime, they can manage. Back home, where they weren't used to get entrepreneurial, they might have searched for other types of jobs. But if the occasion arises, they embrace independence. When times are better, they may take this lesson back home and seed also there the entrepreneurial spirit. This might indeed give a boost to the Romanian economy.

Marcel is quite similar in his story with Giovanni, that is Ionel Sava, from Vatra Dornei. Maybe Ionel was gutsier or had more time or was more entrepreneurial. We met him near a bridge on the river Arno and he took us to his pension, situated in an ancient building between Palazzo Vecchio and Santa Croce. Ionel was quite proud of the bright orange walls and heavy wood furniture that decorated the place. He came in Italy to work in constructions and together with a younger associate who had legal papers started a small hostel business. Now he is independent. He's very much in contact with what happens at home, since he goes to Romania once a month. He had a guest house back home that burned down, but this won't stop him in having other plans for tourism business in his homeland. He also intends to import doors to Italy, made of wood from Bucovina, his home region.

Giovanni speaks passionately about what politicians should do about the Romanians here. He calls a friend Mihaela "PSD" - the nickname stands for a political party. He supported "the others", PDL, but he says he's quite sick of them.

Ionel was a contact suggested by a friend who was a tourist in Florence for a few days. She and her boyfriend had stayed at his guest house and had the misfortune to have their car taken by the police. Since they were out of money, Giovanni offered them to stay for free for a night and even took them to Uffizi Galleries for a private tour.

At the end of the visit, the guy suggested we should go around old Firenze and meet other Romanians. We stormed around the narrow streets and our guide of the moment showed us a few restaurants where Romanians worked and even a laundry place owned by a Romanian lady. I might have done my report just with all the people this man introduced me to. He was shiny and warm and the people behaved similarly with him. He alone had the power to create a community around him.

In the evening, when I meet the friends of my journalist friend Andrea, we speak about the most famous Romanian that was in Firenze, Adrian Mutu, who played for Fiorentina for 5 years. They are amused but also somehow tender against the football player who was famous for scoring for his team but also for hard partying. The second thing that always came up with Italian friends was they each had a grandmother who was being taken care of by Romanian badanti.

The Romanian immigrants that come from a more educated background fare along better, says Andrea Seno, a functionary at the Romanian Consulate in Firenze. He says Tuscany is not a good place for mobility, especially for the ones from the lower classes.

In Firenze there are almost 7,000 Romanians, this is about 2% of the entire population of the city. Their arrivals peaked in 2011 says Seno. The entire region of Tuscany hosts 70 thousand Romanians, out of which almost 60% are women, since they find work easily as colf - taking care of house chores or badanti - they take care of the elderly.

Melania was intrigued when I told her I would visit the priest from the local Orthodox Church. She used to be close to that community, but said the priest should have done more to unite the people, like priests do in other towns, such as Arezzo, where the Romanian community is strong exactly for that.

Me and Andrea climb a hill on the other side of the river Arno to reach a medieval building that hosts the Romanian Orthodox church. We arrive out of breath and go inside where it's very warm and the fans barely move the air. The ladies have scarves on their heads like it's the custom at home, especially in the countryside. On a table, I can see the customary sweets that are offered to the community in remembrance of the dead. Mingled between the sweets are bottles of Italian wine from Tuscany and local brioches. This for me is the key image of integration of Romanians in Italy.

We meet Ionut Coman, the priest, after the service and he tells us there is a lot to be done to get the Romanian culture to Italy, especially the classics of the literature and translate them in Italian. I was wondering aloud why the Italians care of the Romanian classics already full of dust should. He then said that they must do that for the Romanian children that no longer speak Romanian, they speak Italian, but they must keep in touch with their culture of origin.

Melania invited us to her place in the outskirts of Firenze to offer us dinner. We took a bottle of Chianti wine and arrived at her small but coquettish place overlooking a park. She was preparing pasta Carbonara, that she learnt to make from Italian friends. She became friends with them because she fed some wild cats that were roaming around, so those people were impressed by this.

Melania speaks Italian with Lara, her daughter and she motivates her choice by saying "she needs to speak Italian correctly because I chose that she should grow up here where she has everything. Romanian comes second. She can catch up in 2 weeks if we go to Romania."

In the house, we also find Alex, her nephew, that takes care of Lara while Melania is at work. He doesn't speak Italian yet, but he watches some football games in the hope that something will catch on. Melania says in a soft and not pushy voice that he can stay here and if he likes it, maybe he'll also find some work.

Actually, it is now that we find that Melania had a great opportunity to integrate herself in the community while she took a prenatal course. Then she met other moms to be from various nations. They consolidated their relationship after giving birth while driving the babies around in the park in their carts. Melania is pretty proud of her accomplishment, but says she considers herself more outgoing than other Romanian ladies who prefer to flock together rather than mix. At the opposite side of her, she speaks about a couple of Albanians who lived at the ground floor. She was amazed to see that the wife wasn't even allowed to leave the house and one day she disappeared, probably back to Albania to her relatives, without saying a word of goodbye.

After finishing the delicious meal, Melania offers us "afinata" - an alcoholic beverage made out of blueberries, imported from Romania. We get a little tipsy and we speak enthusiastically about everything. We also mention the husband, that left some time ago back to Romania. Melania said he didn't feel at home here. The best moment he had, was working voluntarily for Misericordia, a local ambulance service and one of the oldest charity organisations in the world.

Melania walks us to the bus and before saying good bye she says amusingly that she feels so at home here, that she knows everything that happens in the neighbourhood, like the old ladies back home, be it a funeral or a wedding.

The long road back home takes me through a hostel in Bologna where I meet another nice soul that speaks Romanian, a young woman by the name of Alina. I ask her how come she spoke Romanian, is she Romanian? She answers no, to my big disbelief. She tells me immediately that she is from Moldova. Here, I can see no difference between Romanians and Moldovans. She tells me that life is hard on both Italians and Romanians because of the financial crisis. A sort of financial crisis brought immigrants to Italy, but the financial crisis happened because of the gluttony of Western civilisation that just

wants to consume. This kind of discourse really impressed me coming from a hostel clerk. I guess with that kind of mother her children will certainly have a good start in life and improve on the last generation.

After speaking to so many people, I arrived home thinking that it's all about the survival of the fittest, regardless of national identity. National identity keeps us bound and sometimes keeps us from getting the best out of a situation. When jumping towards a new life, an integrated life in another national identity, there is always the danger of becoming too chameleonic, of losing oneself. But since the national identity is made of tastes and emotions and culture, something will remain even in the minds of the offspring that were born on another soil in the hope of a better life. Something like the taste of chorba with beans and pastrami or a sad folk song.