

LIVING IN ITALY

THE REAL DEAL

Version 1.0

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THE REAL DEAL

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For Nico
My own padrone di fiducia

It once occurred to me that one way to talk about Italy would be simply to make a list of all those Italian words that are untranslatable, or whose translation tells you next to nothing, and then give dozens of anecdotes showing how they are used.

An Italian Education - Tim Parks

November 2008

When we bought our home nine months ago it was ready to move into. And now?

We are shipwrecked in the kitchen of the downstairs apartment. A single sheet of plastic between the hall and the sitting room is the only thing that protects us from the heavy dust of the building site. All day, we are assaulted by the sound of workmen shouting, drilling and hammering. A couple of hours ago the electricity cut out and it's starting to get chilly in here. Every evening we escape upstairs via the dusty, grimy staircase, where we try to find solace by watching TV in our future living room. The living room is also separated by a sheet of plastic from the kitchen, the bedroom and the office. There are gaping holes in the walls in all of these three rooms, made weeks ago in preparation for the doors and a new window. Now they are serving as tunnels bringing in the draught and the cold. Exhausted and numbed from the endless turmoil surrounding us, we are staring out into space in silence. We are hardly aware of what's on the screen.

WHAT HAVE WE LET OURSELVES IN FOR?

I

Pavia

SEPTEMBER 2007 – FEBRUARY 2008

Non ci sono problemi

With my right foot still on the pavement, the estate agent's car was already pulling away. My reaction was fast: I pulled both legs inside and slammed the car door, averting an accident. The estate agent obviously had no time to waste! We were going to look at two properties in the Oltrepò Pavese, the area lying south of the river Po, which traverses Northern Italy. I sat in the front and the estate agent prattled on in hundred-mile-an-hour Italian. I only understood bits of what he was saying, partly because I was too disconcerted by the traffic which we were navigating with Italian flair.

For the last few weeks, we had lived in the quiet, historical, university town of Pavia. In the next 6 months, I was going to continue with my MA in Medieval Culture, and my husband, Nico would enjoy his well-earned sabbatical. He was going to Hoover, do the shopping and cook, whilst I could immerse myself in times gone by. But there was this secret, unspoken wish that didn't leave us alone: could we...., what if we..., imagine if...?

And already, just a couple of weeks into our stay in Pavia, we started looking at properties, with the intention of permanently settling down and setting up a B&B! Soon after our arrival in Pavia, we discovered the wine region of Oltrepò Pavese, an area about half an hour's drive to the south of Pavia. It was love at first sight. What beautiful countryside! And this is how our secret wish began to take shape: to find our own idyllic home on the top of a hill with panoramic views! In one of the free leaflets from the numerous estate agencies (*agenzie immobiliari*), our excited eyes spotted the perfect house that ticked all our boxes. We were now

on our way to this house, with an estate agent whose main talents seemed to be smooth talking and rally driving.

Once we got out of Pavia, the roads became quieter and I was able to follow Olita's - as he was called - Italian a bit better. He was busy showing off his property know-how and reassuring us about the top quality of the houses we were about to see. If there was anything not to our liking, it could be easily sorted, without any additional costs, he said. He had already made an agreement with the owners. "*Non ci sono problemi!*" he exclaimed with much enthusiasm. If we didn't like the colour of the house, it could be painted over, before completion, in any colour at all, even violet, maintained Olita. "*Non ci sono problemi!*" And the garden that had become a jungle from months (probably years?) of neglect would be completely cleared out, just for us.

We took in the landscape in front of us: it was mainly flat, covered in rice fields (growing the famous Italian *risotto*), farmland and poplar plantations, as far as the eye could see. Along the country road, we were driving past settlements: an endless mish-mash of houses and farm buildings of all shapes and sizes. We raced through small villages with stores, restaurants and cafés. Olita was consistently indifferent to the numerous white traffic signs warning of upcoming speed cameras. Did his employer pay the fines? Or was it going to become a hidden charge on our bill? We were fully aware that we were going to have to pay Olita commission if we were to buy our house through him. We had done our homework in the Netherlands and were well-prepared for all the traps that a would-be house buyer could fall into when trying to buy a house in Italy. We were on high alert! Olita, unaware of my misgivings, drove on at full speed. Here and there along the side of the road, there were small shrines erected by friends and relatives of beloved maniacs, who

had died in tragic road accidents. Olita didn't seem to worry about suffering the same fate; he overtook slow drivers without mercy, regardless of whether the white line was broken or solid. Later on, having lived in the Oltrepò for several months, we discovered a *santuario* nearby; a memorial chapel for all the victims killed in road accidents in the area. The legendary recklessness of Italian drivers might have some foundation after all. Olita, for his part, did his utmost to conform to the stereotype. Occasionally, we met two cars side-by-side coming from the other direction, but luckily three cars in a row could easily be accommodated on this two-lane road. *Non ci sono problemi.*

We reached Ponte della Becca, the one kilometre long iron bridge built in 1912 that spans the merging of the Po and the Ticino. The Oltrepò stretched on the other side, flat at first, but soon undulating with hills. There in the distance our dream house was waiting for us somewhere. We saw the first vineyards appearing here and there. On one of the hillsides we spotted a remarkable-looking castle and we inquired about it from our local regional expert, a.k.a. Olita. "Which castle is that?" we asked full of curiosity. He didn't know. But "*Non ci sono problemi,*" he would investigate and let us know. Maybe our house was not going to be violet after all.

It soon became apparent why Olita was in such a hurry: he was lost and was zooming up and down the hills in search of familiar landmarks. Against all expectations, we managed to find our chosen house, which didn't look as perfect as we at first had thought, not even if Olita would have it painted violet. On one side it leant against a slope, and the other side was blocked from view by an unsightly shed. The garden was no bigger than a postage stamp. What a shame. Luckily, on the advice of Olita's *Agenzia*, we had also made an appointment to view another

property that was on offer at a bargain price. This second house didn't look appealing in the brochure: a faded grey concrete block without any character. But now that we were here...we might as well take a look.

It took Olita a lot of cursing and muttering under his breath during the second stretch of our mystery tour, to finally bring us to the cheaper property. The frontage made no false promises. There were not enough colours in the rainbow to change that. But the inside! The house was made up of two apartments, each a hundred square metres. The downstairs apartment was completely modernised, had brand new flooring, central heating, a fitted kitchen, and there was a sitting room *with* sofas and a ready-to-go modern bathroom. The apartment was ready to move into as soon as gas and electricity were connected. We felt enthusiastic.

After having seen the downstairs flat, Olita led us upstairs and opened the shutters of the bedroom overlooking the valley. An enchanting view of rolling hills and vineyards in the style of impressionist paintings unravelled before our eyes. In the distance, we recognised the characteristic but still enigmatic castle from earlier. And a bit further on, there was *another* castle. And over there *another* one. We were sold. *Non ci sono problemi!* For once we all agreed!

Via Moruzzi

Our base in Pavia, which we were renting until we found a house to buy, was a flat owned by Giorgio and Franco. It was a lucky find. In the summer of 2007, we visited Pavia for a week to find an apartment for my six months study abroad and Nico's sabbatical. At first, that week seemed as if it would end in total failure because all the suitable apartments we found on the Internet in the Netherlands fell by the wayside one by one. In one case, for example, we were allowed to view our chosen flat but later it transpired that it wasn't quite clear whether the present tenants were really going to leave. Why didn't the owner tell us this earlier, we wondered feeling annoyed. What was the point in looking at a flat that wasn't (yet) available? Did the owner worry that he would disappoint us and let us carry on with the viewing? But now we were even more disappointed. Maybe this is the Italian way of doing things, we thought, quite put out by the way things were handled.

We had nothing left but to hope that the last of the apartments we had selected was still available and that we would like it. Although our appointment for the viewing was later on, in the evening, we decided to have a quick look around the neighbourhood in daylight. We saw at the entrance, where the doorbells and tenants' names were listed next to the apartment numbers, that the name plate next to our chosen apartment was empty. The flat was seemingly still free: that was at least a positive sign! We returned that evening, full of expectations, and rang the bell. But what on earth was that? We stood looking in disbelief at a name next to the number of *our* apartment! That could only

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