

the captives of Asinara

Growing up in Sardinia in the 1980s I got used to forbidden areas. Vast portions of the island were shut out of our reach, dedicated to various governmental uses. There were NATO bases, regular army camps and nuclear submarine stations. And there were the prisons. Most of them were located on the coast. Sardinia has amazing coastline all over, but I often found myself thinking that beyond the fence, the beaches would probably be emptier; the nature would be wilder; and some secret would be waiting for me. Asinara was part of this myth.

Asinara, back then a prison island, is not far from the northwestern shore of Sardinia. You could see it through the clouds – a long arch enclosing the gulf – but you couldn't go near it. (At risk of being shot, as it happened with the Swiss tourist who had crossed the 500 meters limit, and fortunately didn't get hurt.) The island was first made inaccessible in 1885, when the state evicted local families to establish an agricultural penal colony. From then on, Asinara's story reflected the most dramatic events in Italian politics. During World War I, it served as a concentration camp for prisoners of war. In World War II it was turned into a base for anti-submarine vessels. At the end of the war it returned primarily to detention purposes. During the 1960s, hopes of transforming it into a tourist haven were put forward: they died in 1971, when following a wave of rebellions in Italian prisons, the most insubordinate of the inmates were transferred to Asinara. Those were also the years of Italy's struggle with ultra-leftist terrorism. From 1975 it held selected prisoners who were part of radical subversive groups. From then on, Asinara became a word attached only to red brigades terrorists and news of mafia trials. These dramatic events altered the nature of the island, which began drifting away from Sardinia, turning almost into something abstract. And like all things abstract, the moment you didn't think about it, it ceased to exist.

A few things maintained the island's attachment to reality. One was the guards on leave, who would come ashore for a few days. In Porto Torres, a harbor town on the Sardinian shore, locals always knew a guard from Asinara when they saw one: "they would walk around town, as if dazzled, and you could see they were not familiar with cars: they looked different," said Eugenio Cossu, former mayor of Porto Torres and first president of the Asinara national park. Guards had very few days off. They could spend up to six months without ever leaving the island, which in itself explains the alienation they felt. If they were not from Sardinia, life for them would be even harder, as a great deal of their already short leave would be spent traveling home.

Another disheartening reminder were the relatives of the prisoners who would visit family members imprisoned at Asinara. Isolation was a problem also, for them: families had to endure harsh travel to reach the island, dramatically reducing the number of visits. In the 1980s Marianna would travel monthly to Asinara, to visit her husband Mario Marcello, who at the time was serving a very long sentence for kidnapping. "This one time we went for a visit, and on the way there the weather was beautiful. I had all my kids with me, they were so excited about the sea and the fishes," she said. "On the way back, the sea became so agitated, that we would roll over from one side to the other of the boat, and everybody was sick. I was so scared, that I remember swearing that if I would get out of it safely, I would never go back." All this reinforced the reputation of the island as the most dreaded of the national prisons. Nobody, prisoners and guards alike, wanted to end up there. Often, when they boarded the rickety boat that would take them across to the island, they would cry.

The prison functioned until 1997, when the government finally decided to transform the whole island into a national park. It all happened very quickly. Suddenly the decree was approved, the order became executive, and in a few months all prisoners were transferred to other penitentiaries. So were the guards, and other prison workers.

Over ten years have passed, and now, in summer, it is not hard to visit the place. In one of the nearby towns, locals are trying to make a few dollars by taking tourists to the island. In Stintino, one can book an all-inclusive tour, and board a boat with some 40 other passengers.

I signed up. As the boat left the pier, the tingling of the steel cables on the sailing boats' masts started to fade, and so did the honking of cars looking for a parking spot in the busy seaside town. The long winding shape of Asinara became sharper: a few scattered buildings became visible, but no trees – they had been all cut off for surveillance reasons, said the guide.

Setting foot on the island, the herd was briefed about not littering and not feeding the animals. We boarded a bus and began the visit. We were permitted off the bus at the most scenic locations, where guides talked about the plants and animals that are found on the island. The untamed nature of the place seemed to belong to another time, and that summer day was so bright, that everything felt overexposed. We proceeded to visit the former maximum-security section, in Fornelli, the southernmost point of the island. A tree lined entrance was a stark contrast to the almost fortress like perimeter. Inside, the light changed completely. The metal doors of the cells were all half open, making the place look as if it had been abandoned in a rush, like time had frozen, as in Pompei. Life, it seemed, had left the building in a snap. I started to sense the absurdity of this kind of tour in such a storied place.

Leading us through the long corridors, the guides repeated third hand folkloric anecdotes about the prison's most dangerous inmates and about the only successful escape, making sure to underline that there was nothing heroic about breaking out from what was considered to be the safest prison in the country, from which nobody else had ever managed to flee. Judging by the impressed expression on the faces of most visitors, she wasn't very convincing.

The white paint was starting to peel off the walls, but all doors and windows were still in a good state. All of them had been painted in a beautiful bright turquoise that felt out of place: I wondered whose decision that was. I tried hard to listen to the guides, but instead found myself staring at the wire mesh that had been placed to act as a roof over the courtyard. Then I heard the guide saying that prisoners hated it because it blocked the clear view of the sky, which she said was obviously a lie, the real reason being that it prevented them from trying to escape via helicopter. I suspected it was a mixture of both, even if I didn't find the first one so hard to believe.

At the end of the day we were allowed to take a swim in the crystal clear water of Cala Sabina, a secluded bay on the east coast of the island. Soon our brief visit was going to be over. Soon we were going to be taken away. The guides tried to discipline the group: everyone seemed really resistant to the idea of going back. Like children who don't want to go back home after playing, so too, adults made up excuses to procrastinate leaving the beach. As the guides finally managed to drag the sandy group back to the village and the bus, I realized that as soon as we left, the place would fall back into its strange silence. The community that once lived in the village had left, and its stories had gone with it. Most of the houses in the village looked empty, except for one or two. I wondered who still lived there, and what it had been like for all the others to be told, suddenly, they had two months to leave that life behind. On a winter day in 1997, they packed up their lives and walked out of their small houses – their homes – out into another world, into another time.

The history of the island for over a century, had been one of forced departures and arrivals, regulated by a distant bureaucracy that nobody really seemed to be able to tame. Both at the opening and the closing of the prison, respectively in 1885 and 1997, people had been removed from the island like chess pieces from the board at the end of a game. In this time span – directors, guards, prisoners – most with the perspective of staying there for a long time, had to fight on arrival with the difficulties of adapting to the extreme conditions of life; but after this struggle, the island would extract their resilience and innermost talents, which were necessary to survive in this context. For many, this meant after the initial troubled reactions, an evolution of commitment to the place, which seems hard to understand at first, but that is what made the island such a unique place. At the same time, the island molded some characters so significantly that, in different ways, their whole life came to be defined in terms of Asinara, and many of them, have never really given up on it.

As we sit in his office in Cagliari, the very first thing the general administrator of the Sardinian prisons told me was this: "In Asinara there was a saying; that on the island everyone always cries twice: once when they get there, and a second time, much more, when it is time to leave." Francesco Massidda was born in 1943 and grew up in Asinara. His father worked at the quarantine station in Cala Reale, a bay on the east coast of the island. Boats suspected of carrying cholera or other contagious diseases would be required to station there to be disinfected. The passengers also were kept under surveillance, divided in first, second and third classes, between the various quarantine buildings, until it was considered safe for them to carry on with their journey. On the side, his mother ran a small store, and also operated one of the two telegraphs, which for a long time remained the only means of communication between the island and the main land.

Life on the island was very primitive: electricity arrived only in the 1970s. Until then, there were no fridges, no washing machines, and reading was done at candlelight. A great deal of the food was grown, bred or captured on the island, the rest had to be brought from Sardinia. Nothing could be kept for long, especially considering the hot temperatures of the summer. Nature was something they both depended on and took for granted. "Sometimes when there was no food, my father would fetch the rifle, and two cartridges," he recalls, "We would walk to the field in front of the house, and I would throw stones to the bushes, and my dad would invariably shoot a rabbit. And that was it. We would never look for a second one. We would shoot just the one we needed." As an adolescent, Massidda would go fishing with his brother, and then ride on a Vespa with the fish in a bucket to distribute whatever was caught among his and other families.

The island had only an elementary school. It was a multi-grade school, and all the children from all the different corners of the island were taken there to attend class. They were split between two levels. When it was time for middle school, his mother had to move to Sassari, the main town in the north of mainland Sardinia, so they could attend school there. His father stayed behind to work on Asinara. It was a dramatic relocation and the family had to spend several months a year separated. One of the rituals of life on the island that Massidda remembers best, is the communal television watching. He had an uncle who, after serving in the military as a radio technician, opened a shop in Sassari where he sold and repaired radio equipment and television-sets; his family had one of the first TV's in the entire region. To make it work, it had to be connected to a huge generator, for which it was very hard to obtain fuel. Massidda and the other kids would trade fish for fuel with the sailors from the military ships that often stopped by. Once a week, entire families would walk up to ten kilometers to reach Cala Reale, to watch 'Lascia o Raddoppia', the immensely popular quiz-show that between 1955 and 1959, bewitched the entire nation.

All through his studies, Massidda continued to come back to the island as often as he could. "I studied law, but I graduated late, in 1971," he said laughing, "because I was so busy doing all these other things at the time." These things included setting up radio transmission between the island and Sassari. At some point, the whole village came to rely on it – if anyone needed anything, like particular medicines only available on the mainland, they would tell him over the radio and he could bring it from the city on the following visit.

After his studies, he went on to a successful career in the Department of Corrections, directing several prisons including Asinara itself. He has now reached the top post in his department, and has all the requirements to retire. Having worked in many different types of prisons, he is convinced that over all, it was a shame to close Asinara completely, since for common detainees, it was by far the best place to be. To him, the penal colony experience, where detainees can work outside instead of rotting in a cell, is by far the most positive form of reintroduction of offenders into society. Maybe, with this in mind, at the end of our interview he confessed to having never given up the island. "I submitted my resume to be considered for one of the positions in the Park, but unfortunately I know I lack the political support," he said, vaguely. At the age of 66, he seemed full of ideas, and is still convinced he can do something there.

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Inspector Lorenzo Spanu arrived in Asinara in 1965 as a young man. His wife joined him a few years later. "She came to visit while we were still engaged, and she liked it," he said, "then when we got married in 1972 and she moved here with me." At the end of his 33 years there, he was better known as the mayor of the village of Cala d'Oliva – the biggest conglomerate of houses on the island – and as directors came and went, he became a constant reference on the island. Spanu now lives in Alghero the Catalan town on the west coast of Sardinia. He met me in a bar opposite the prison, where he went on to work until he retired, after Asinara closed.

When he first got there, Asinara was still operating with regular detainees, and was a so-called 'open' prison. In 1971, the most defiant protagonists of the rebellions were transferred to Asinara in an effort to isolate them, not only from the other inmates, but from the cities. "In Asinara there was us; the inmates; and the seagulls," said Spanu. "There was no public opinion outside to be stirred by climbing on a roof making noise."

In the 1970s, the politicization of the jails, carried out especially by incarcerated members of the radical left, forced the state to rethink the placement of convicts. At first, the government put those accused of belonging to the Red Brigades, as well as other terrorist groups, together with ordinary inmates. But it was soon realized that these special prisoners were recruiting new converts in jail, thus leading to the foment of insurrections within the penitentiaries themselves. The state decided it was better to separate the alleged terrorists from ordinary inmates. Super-prisons were born out of this new philosophy. In these preferably isolated sites, whole prisons or sections of the prison, would function under entirely different security rules than in other facilities.

Prisoner's rights would also be different. One such facility was established in Asinara, in a wing called Fornelli. The arrival of the 'brigatisti' disrupted that implicit respite that until then had flourished in the relationship between guards and inmates on the island. "They would call us 'servants of the state'," said Spanu, then, still a young man, and the state was the enemy they had set out to take down. Compromising with the guards, for them, would have signified abandoning the very foundation of the philosophy that defined them.

This is probably the most dramatic chapter in the history of the island, also associated with a director, Luigi Cardullo, who was remembered as despotic and cruel, and ended up in jail himself. It was Cardullo who ordered guards to fire on the unsuspecting Swiss swimmer. After the arrival of Renato Curcio, the head of the red brigades, tension between prisoners and guards rose, and news leaked to the press that various sorts of abuse were being perpetrated against the special detainees. The confrontation on the island culminated in the revolt of October 2, 1978. Conflict exploded in other prisons all over Italy; the request of insurgents was the same: close the special wing of Asinara. The state capitulated: the wing was closed in 1980. Looking back on the rebellion, which he experienced on the frontline, Spanu admits that it was somehow inevitable, and that the transfer of the 'brigatisti' came as a relief to the whole island, which could go back to its natural rhythm, that had been partly disrupted by the crises of the late 1970s.

That was what made Asinara special: the unique level of freedom the prisoners could attain on the island, that was unthinkable of under the conditions of regular prisons. Firstly, most of them were fully employed. New arrivals worked in the fields, until they gained the trust of the administration, who could then assign them to the most random duties. "On the island, builders, bakers, shoemakers, carpenters, the person who cleaned the bar: they were all prisoners. They were regularly paid and lived their lives among us," Spanu said. "One of them made the ice cream. The children would call him uncle and would bother him constantly to find out if the ice cream was ready."

Once a week, the prisoners were allowed to swim in the sea. According to Spanu, the job of the guard was also radically different in Asinara. "I never liked the office. I liked living in the middle of them, and really understanding who was standing in front of me," he explained, alternating memories of his island to uncountable anecdotes about the many faces who

inhabited those cells, most of whom, effortlessly, he still calls by name. “I think I treated the prisoners with humanity,” he said, “often putting aside the crime they had committed, and just considering them for who they were.”

As I listened to this man, I was struck by the balance and the deepness with which he seemed to have treated his job all through his career. Whether dealing with terrorists, from which he was separated by such a wide cultural and ideological moat, or with murderers, to many of whom he conceded that anyone can make one mistake, and that doesn't make him a bad man. “My job was to keep them there,” he said. “Not to judge them.”

Sardinia is an island that had always a very distinct identity. This meant some of its people had very painful reactions to the island's fast redevelopment. Starting from the 1960s this was felt even harder. Their previously slow history felt ruptured by Italy's economic boom. The island was plagued by a wave of kidnappings, a phenomenon that originated in the mountains in the interior of the island; the kidnappers were almost always from the same group of villages – the area where I am from – where they also kept the hostages. Some of those incidents in particular, like the brother and sister whose kidnappers arrived by boat to the beach where they were spending the day with their parents, shocked Italians, who could not begin to understand in what kind of economic and social setting these crimes were taking place.

Once convicted, many of the perpetrators were sent to Asinara, to serve very long sentences. Mostly shepherds, according to Spanu, they were the ones who adapted best to life on the island. He insists that they were the best-behaved detainees he ever dealt with, who honored their word, and whom he relied on and who he entrusted with younger or more vulnerable prisoners in their youth, who had not yet become accustomed to the harshness of prison life. Many former inmates spoke of Spanu as a credible counterpart, who understood them and who, while maintaining his institutional role, crossed the line when he could, possibly also out of his own desire to understand human nature a little more.

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Speaking in dialect, Mario Marcello, concedes he was never treated so well in any other prison. After serving part of his sentence on the island, Marcello was moved to another prison, closer to home, in which he was allowed to work outside everyday, with the condition he went back to sleep at night. “I asked to be sent back in. I was more comfortable in Asinara than in the other prison, with the permission of going out.” The transfer was denied, since it would slow down the process of his release, and Marcello never went back to Asinara, but he maintains very positive memories of his time there.

“There is really not one bad thing I can say about them,” he said, almost smiling. “I say bad things of prison, because it's prison. But as far as I'm concerned, we were actually better off than the guards. At the end of the day, when night came, we slept peacefully. They had to be on duty, looking after us.”

Yet, as Sardinia still lagged behind in terms of economic development, choosing to join the police or the army was considered a reasonable choice to young Sardinian men who did not have the means to study, or to start a business. It also represented a quick path to emancipation from their families. Gianmaria Deriu started working in the prison as a guard in 1980. “Mine is a strange story. I chose to join the police to leave home. I used to work with my father but there wasn't much harmony.” So when the time came for military conscription, and his friend Angelo suggested that becoming prison guards was a valid alternative to the regular army, he agreed.

At first Deriu was overwhelmed: on his first day, one of the inmates kept swearing he was innocent. “My heart would rip,” he said, “thinking that at night, I would go away, I'd go to the park, I'd drive to visit a friend. And he will sleep here, and tomorrow, and again. You don't know who you are anymore.” And then the true nature of some of the inmates started coming out, and the disappointment was crushing.

As a reaction to the disappointment he started exploring Sardinia. "I started breathing," Deriu said. He discovered bars. He made new friends. His cousins who went to university in Florence returned home for the holidays. "They had all these new records, all this stuff that my colleagues and just normal people couldn't know. I discovered the pleasure of music, of spending the night in Alghero, in some bar, with someone messing around with a guitar, or a saxophone." Using the night shift at the prison as an excuse, he would not return home for days and days, and his mother couldn't object to it, since he was working.

At the time in Italy, especially in the south, a position in the public service was considered extremely desirable, and Deriu had figured out by now the independence that stemmed from having a job. So, when the conscription year came to an end, and he was given the option to join the Department of Corrections, he considered his options. "Having tasted freedom, I said to myself: I'd better stay in jail, because if I go home, they'll put rules back on me, and limits. I was growing up. I was 20 years old."

So he signed up, choosing life as a prison guard.

To his despair, news arrived that he was going to be transferred to Lucca in Tuscany. He broke into tears. Among Sardinians, the continent was regarded as far away and hostile. Deriu had done his training there, and the memories were not very nice ones. His mother was not at all pleased with the idea of having him so far away, and as a good Sardinian matriarch, she pulled some strings. It was planned that a relative – a politician - would put it in good word for him, and he would be allowed to choose any destination he wanted.

Deriu had Alghero in his heart. The old town, the bars, and the music, and the girls. Alghero, with its warm yellow lights, almost orange, with the night waiting to be explored. His mother had other plans. Sensing that he had begun to taste life, she wanted to have him in some place close to home, with no distractions, and no danger of leaving some young girl pregnant. After all, to her, he was still growing up, still a baby, who knew nothing of the world and who still needed guidance. She instructed him to request to be sent to Asinara.

When the day came, he went to the commander, who asked the question: "Son, things for you have changed." To which Deriu replied, "I want to go to Asinara!" In his mind, he was thinking, "No, I don't. I want to go to Alghero, with its orange lights, and its narrow streets."

The commander stared at him, puzzled. "Nobody wants to go to Asinara. People get sent there, but they don't choose to go." Deriu remembers the Commander asking the question again. "Son, I will try to reformulate the question. Can you tell me where..." he begun. But Deriu interrupted him; "Asinara, commander, Asinara." Deriu remembers the Commander's expression: he was surprised, almost compassionate. "Son," he said with gravity, "as long as you are happy," and wrote the transfer order. Deriu was dispatched immediately.

At the harbor in Stintino, Deriu asked about the boat to Asinara; an old man showed him a decrepit old barge. "I was wearing my white cotton suit," he said. "My mother was obsessed with properness: my suit was so white, like a sail, you couldn't get a whiter suite." A small bus arrived, with all the colleagues coming back from leave. They were all loaded with bags and wine flasks, and food and more bags. "I didn't know yet, that in the island, you knew when you got in but you didn't know when you would get out."

The trip was short, and as they approached the pier, everyone started moving around nervously, making the boat rock, trying to get off first. Deriu wondered why all that rush. Once on the ground, they all started running towards the trucks, to get the front seats. "Of course I got the seat in the back." As they drove off, on the bumpy and curvy road, a red glittery dust started covering everything. On the way some guards got off. "I was able to move a couple of seats forward," he recalls, "but the suit was covered in red dust."

He got off at the village of Cala d'Oliva, and at the office was assigned first post, in Trabuccato, a wing located on a bay that faces south towards the coast of Sardinia. The evening came, and he sat alone on a rock right by the water, looking out at the whole gulf. The quietness of the island appalled him. It got dark, and among the lights that were starting to shine on the coast of Sardinia, he spotted some that were warmer than the others, almost orange, just like in Alghero. He thought that probably there was a nice seaside town, with bars, and music, and girls. He started crying, not realizing he was staring at the chemical plant of Porto Torres. He was 21 years old.

A few months went by, and he grew very depressed. In December, Massidda came back to the island to direct the prison. He remembered Deriu from his former post, and after observing him for a while he concluded that something was wrong. Worrying for him, he granted him a month of leave. When he came back, he was assigned to the office. He started going to the beach a lot; it was almost spring and the island was looking less grim. As the holidays came, students came home to their families, and guests of the Ministry of Justice started popping up everywhere, bringing life to the community. "It almost felt like a normal place," he said. He took a course for piloting boats. Meanwhile he was assigned to take care of Raffaele Cutolo, the most glamorous of the bosses of the Neapolitan Camorra, who was locked in a special cell in solitary confinement.

Until then, everybody had looked on Deriu as the office guy, so when, for his next assignment, he was sent to replace a colleague in the wing of Santa Maria, a farming area, he decided to prove them wrong. "I realized I was going to spend quite a while there," he said. "So I decided to really make an effort on the place." At first he put the prisoners to work. After a while, he started working side by side with them. They planted trees and built fences so the animals would not roam everywhere. Many vehicles needed repairs, so he selected inmates with some mechanical skill, and set up a small workshop, which became one of the most efficient units on the island. New agricultural machines arrived, and they started farming the fields.

He decided to tackle the buildings. The bars at the windows needed new paint. "All the grids were grey. "They called it Autumn Grey," he said. "To me it was more like Prison Grey. I didn't like it much, but I ordered the paint anyways." He waited for a while, but the order was never delivered. Then at the pier he noticed a colleague who was repairing the boats. "I asked him if he had some extra paint, but he only had blue and white: I thought about it, and then I concluded it was better than nothing." He mixed the colors, and the result was a funny bright turquoise. At first he was nervous that this might not sit well with the administration; then he decided to take the chance and painted them anyways. The next time the director happened to pass by, he immediately noticed the change. "Deriu," he shouted, "What do you think this is? A kindergarten?" And he left. A few days later, passing by another wing of the prison, Deriu started giggling as he noticed that doors and bars had been painted turquoise. Within a few months, turquoise had become the color of the island; he had won. And the island had won over him.

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The 28th of February 1998 was a very sunny day. A few months earlier, the government had approved a decree that ordered the closing of the prison and the establishment of Asinara as a National Park. All the prisoners were transferred, all useful objects shipped to Sardinia to be used in other prisons, and Inspector Spanu and Giampaolo Cassitta, one of the social workers for the prison, were packing up their last few things. "It didn't hit me until I saw the office completely empty," said Cassitta. "I realized that all we had gone through there, all together, was going forever, and it was never coming back."

As the Cantiello left the harbor, taking them home for the last time, Cassitta suddenly became sad. On the island there was a tradition; when someone would leave, the siren in the harbor would ring as many times as the years the person had spent on the island. He realized that nobody was going to perform that ritual for them. "Every time I had heard the siren seeing

someone off," he said, "I had imagined my last journey. 13 times it was going to sound. It is my only regret." Him and Spanu went on to work together in the prison in Alghero.

The prison was locked for good, and the island passed under the control of the National Parks. The Department of Corrections left two guards behind, to hold the keys to the prison and to look after the buildings. After a while one of them left; Deriu, who has a wife and a daughter in his hometown, chose to stay. "As I child, I used to wonder what life would be like if there would be only a few people left in the world. Living in Asinara is a bit like that." Deriu said. At night, his house is the only one with the light on in the small village of Cala d'Oliva. "Staying on has been a bet," he said. "I wanted to see this island free from prison." Last winter he obtained a transfer from the Ministry of Justice and officially became an employee of the National Park of Asinara, and he intends to stay on indefinitely.

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