



The Optician and the Drowning

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Zwischen Empathie und Angst – Flucht, Migration und die Zukunft von Asyl
Gerald Knaus, 2021

Carmine Menna has had a guilty conscience ever since that day in October 2013. At the time, he was the only optician on Lampedusa, the southernmost European island in the Mediterranean. One day, he left to relax on the open sea with his wife and six friends on an acquaintance's 15-metre yacht. They drank wine, chatted, and went to sleep. The next morning, Menna heard screams. He thought they were the screeching of seagulls, but as the yacht sailed towards the sound, he realised: it was the shouting of drowning people. Desperate people fighting for their lives a few hundred metres from the coast of Lampedusa.

It was one of the deadliest accidents in recent years. The ill-fated ship had already sailed the almost 200 miles from Libya to Lampedusa before it caught fire within sight of the island's coast. Now those who had escaped the sinking ship fought death. Menna and his friends managed to pull 47 of them onto their small yacht. 366 drowned, most of them from East and West Africa, from Somalia, Eritrea and Ghana.



Carmine Menna and one of the Survivors¹

¹ <https://www.mylondon.news/news/west-london-news/ealing-journalists-book-migrant-rescue-12282284>

Upon his return, Menna did not want to be seen as a hero. It is human to respond to cries for help, he explained. In fact, he was overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. A book that a British journalist later wrote about the Lampedusa disaster explained why.¹ Carmine Menna had closed his eyes to the fate of migrants before the accident. He kept seeing young Africans on his island and decided „not to think about it too much“. He discovered wrecks of wooden boats that had brought people from Libya to the island, but all that he could think of was that he should buy sardines for his wife. He heard a report about migrants drowning off the coast of Sicily and turned off the radio. After the accident, Menna now blamed himself: „I had seen them every day, but I hadn't really noticed them. I hadn't reached out to them. They had been reported on television, in the newspapers, on the radio. I could have heard their voices. But I hadn't cared.“

But then Menna learned something that startled him. One of the rescued Africans told him that a boat had already passed in front of Menna's yacht but had not stopped. The captain had apparently decided to let the people drown. Menna thought of the lessons his father had taught him about human nature, lessons learned during the Second World War: everyone „carries a hidden tendency to cruelty and indifference in their heart; we are all capable of terrible things.“ Like the crew of the ship who, in their cruel indifference, behaved as humans often do: inhumane and cowardly.

Only a few days after the disaster, the next tragedy occurred. A fishing boat carrying Syrian families, including many doctors, with a total of 480 people, was hit on the open sea by machine-gun fire from Libyan militias who wanted to rob the refugees. The boat sprung a leak 61 miles from Lampedusa and 118 miles from Malta. A Syrian doctor, Mohamad Jammo, called first called the sea rescue centre in Rome pleading for help at 12.39 noon: „Please hurry!“ But although other boats were nearby, including a patrol ship of the Italian navy about an hour and a half away, timely help failed to arrive. The Italian military command gave their ship no order to act, despite insistent pleas also coming from the Maltese authorities. After five hours, the refugee boat capsized. Now, far too late, a rescue attempt was made, and life jackets were thrown into the water from the air. About 300 people, including 60 children, drowned. The doctor who had sent out the call for help lost two of his children.

A few days later, the Italian government declared the start of a national sea rescue programme the likes of which the world had never seen before: „Mare Nostrum“. The goal: to save lives. Using five ships and three aircraft, the Italian military would actively keep a lookout for migrant boats along the North African coast. . The plan had strong support in parliament. Laura Boldrini, the president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, spoke of a humanitarian „war on the sea“. At the time, Italy was governed by a grand coalition. The Minister of the Interior was Sicilian Angelino Alfano, the head of Silvio Berlusconi's party. Only the separatist Lega Nord under its new party leader Matteo Salvini attacked the sea rescue policy.

„Mare Nostrum“ was accompanied by an intensive public relations campaign. In 2014, the navy created a short film. In it, people in the sea fight against drowning, dead bodies float in the water and there is a ship with a deck full of coffins. Next appears Pope Francis, who speaks of a „disgrace“, and then comes the approaching Italian military. In the background, dramatic music plays, reminiscent of the film *Gladiator*. The video has a simple message: the sea is a humanitarian battlefield. The Italian navy uses state-of-the-art technology and medicine to save lives. The clip ends with the image of two children holding up a placard with the words: „Thank you Italya.“² In the same year, a seven-part series about the uniformed rescuers, *Catia's Choice*, was broadcast on state television. It is the story of Catia Pellegrino, the first woman to command an Italian military ship. Pellegrino and her men appear as heroes, part of a humanitarian army of 900 marines, frigates and corvettes, helicopters, drones and search planes. In one year, in hundreds of operations, the Italian military rescued 82,000 people who they brought to Italy.

Other coast guard or carabinieri ships rescued another 40,000. Politicians celebrated their military. In October 2015, during a visit to Rome by the UN Secretary-General, Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said that Italy was a country where soldiers on warships assisted in the birth of children whose mothers they had just saved from death: „We are proud of this Italy.”

Two years later, in May 2017, the Italian magazine Espresso posted a video online entitled „The Shipwreck of the Children“. It was about the fatal accident in October 2013 in which the Syrian doctor Mohamad Jammo lost his two children: one hears telephone conversations between Maltese and Italian officials of the sea rescue centres and the increasingly desperate pleas of the Syrian refugees for help. It is a document of horror:

12.39 pm

Hello, we have 300 people on board.

Are there children with you?

About 100 children and 100 women and maybe 100 men.

You're from Libya, aren't you?

Yes, from Zuwara. Please hurry. The water is coming in. Please hurry. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Please hurry.

Sir, are you moving or standing still?

The waves are moving us. I swear to you, we are in a real emergency. Please, I am a doctor, please.

What is the problem on board?

The boat is sinking. I swear to you, there is about two metres of water in the boat. On the floor.

What is your name?

My name is Mohamad Jammo. Call a doctor.

Sir, repeat your position once again...

North 34 20 18. and East 12 42 05.

Okay, thank you, sir, thank you.

1.17 pm

Hello, please, did you send someone to us?

Hello, hello, please speak, speak.

Did you send someone to us? We are Syrians, about 300 ...

Sir, I gave you the number of the Maltese authority because you are near Malta. You are near Malta, do you understand me?

Near Malta? Are we near Malta?

Yes, sir, yes.

...

1.48 p.m.

Sir? Hello, hello.

Please, I called Malta. They told us that we are closer to Lampedusa than to Malta. I told them the location. For us, you are closer. We are dying, please.

Okay, you're, you're...

WE ARE DYING. 300 people, we are dying.

Did you call Malta? Did you call Malta?

Don't leave us, our credit is used up. We are without credit, do you understand me?

Yes, I understand, I understand.

We have no more credit. The phone credit is used up. It's almost finished.

Yes, yes, yes, I'll call Malta, I'll call Malta.

My phone credit is running out. If you disconnect, you now have my number, please call me.

...

4.44 pm

ROME: Madam, regarding your last fax, I have some questions for you. You know that the warship is an important unit in sighting new targets in the southern area. If you want us to send a warship to rescue the people ... then we will have the task to take them with our warship to the nearest coast. And I don't think that is the best course of action. Because then we wouldn't have units in the area that would be able to spot the new targets. Normally...

MALTA: Okay, what about the P 402? The P 402 and this ship. The warship.

ROME: *No, actually not P 402.*

MALTA: P 402.

ROME: *P 402 is your ship.*

MALTA: No, P 402 is an Italian naval vessel. I don't know if it's your ship.

ROME: *Well, it's probably a naval vessel and not a coast guard vessel. I'm not quite sure about that.*

MALTA: Ah, OK, not a coast guard vessel, but it's the closest one. You understand, this boat. Because we have a plane in the area and they have sighted the migrants, there are about 250. And the boat has apparently stopped moving and they keep calling. They ask when the ship is coming. Your ship is the closest one. If you can't send your ship, we'll have to see what we have to do. We have also told a civilian ship to try to go to the area, but they are about 70 nautical miles away.

5.17 pm

MALTA: I am the duty officer, our plane informs us that the boat is capsizing, people are in the water. From the boat I told you about. The migrants ... the boat has sunk.

ROME: *Okay, but is it the same boat?*

MALTA: It is capsizing, people are in the water. It's the same boat, it is capsizing.

ROME: *Well, I have already passed on instructions to the Nave Libra. So...*

MALTA: OK, please tell them to hurry because people are in the water.

ROME: *They are in the water and the boat is capsizing.*

5.29 pm

(Video recordings of the capsized boat and the people floating in the water and calling for help)

A few days after the publication of the conversation transcript, an investigating judge in Agrigento, Sicily, opened an investigation against Italian military officers for failure to render assistance. The judge recalled the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea: „Every state must require that the master of a ship flying its flag render assistance as far as possible ... to anyone encountered in distress at sea and, in doing so, rush to the aid of persons in danger as soon as possible.“ He underlined that the Italian military vessel *Libra* had been in the vicinity of the endangered boat. It had „been able to intervene in time and in a timely manner to prevent the drowning deaths of 300 people, but this assistance was not initiated“. Among the accused was

the commander of the *Libra* who had not come to the rescue in time: Catia Pellegrino, the heroine of „Mare Nostrum“ and Catia’s choice.³

What is an inhumane border? An inhumane border is a border where people in small boats who are in distress at sea are not rescued. Where people who could be saved are left to drown. A humane border is a border where everyone acts like Carmine Menna. Here we have a yardstick against which we can measure. But in fact, this is only the beginning of the search for the right policies that can ensure that people do not die at Europe’s borders.

In summer 2017, Matteo Renzi, the former prime minister who had been so proud of his life-saving military in 2015, presented a book, *Avanti* (Forward), in which the issue of migration played a major role. Renzi called for Italy to rid itself of guilt in its migration policy. Italy could not take in all the people who were in a bad way. Migrants should be helped locally, at home – „in casa loro“. It was a phrase Italians knew. The argument that unlimited immigration would lead to a social catastrophe had been used by opposition politicians for a long time. Renzi’s arguments reflected the radical new policies of the government which his party dominated.⁴ Italy’s interior minister, Marco Minniti, negotiated intensively with Libyan tribal leaders and militias from early 2017. He wanted migrants to stop setting sail from Libya - and for those rescued, if they did dare and were apprehended, to be returned to Africa. Old agreements with Libya from the time of Silvio Berlusconi were revived. The Italian secret service used its contacts in the country. In summer 2017, the number of arrivals in Italy dropped dramatically.

As recently as 2013, when it came to sea rescues, Italian policy was to ‘wait and see.’ In 2014, Italian policy was to proactively save. This was met with widespread approval at the time, and Matteo Renzi’s party, which had campaigned for it, celebrated a triumph in the 2014 European elections. But in 2017 it again became Italian policy to withdraw from sea rescue. In 2018 polls, a majority of Italians favoured stopping migration across the Mediterranean altogether, if possible. And in June 2018, the politician who had been most outspoken against sea rescue for years, Matteo Salvini, became Minister of the Interior. He was immensely popular mainly because of his tough policies. What had happened? What explained such strong shifts? Had Italian society lost its capacity for empathy in just a few years?

In autumn 2013, Enrico Letta, the Italian Prime Minister at the time, declared that it was unacceptable for the Mediterranean to become a „sea of death“. Sea rescue operations up to the coast of Libya as part of Operation *Mare Nostrum* were supposed to prevent deaths in the Mediterranean. The mission began in October 2013 and lasted twelve months. To this day, „Mare Nostrum“ is praised by many as a great moment of empathetic European politics. Some even want to take European politicians to court because they allegedly lobbied Italy not to extend the operation in autumn 2014. However, in the second half of this operation, from May to October 2014, when Catia Pellegrino and her men were accompanied by a camera crew, 3029 people died at sea between North Africa and Italy, according to the International Organisation for Migrants (IOM). This made these six months the deadliest in peacetime in the history of the central Mediterranean. Never before had in six months so many people died here.

In October 2014, „Mare Nostrum“ was replaced by a smaller EU Mission that no longer defined sea rescue as its main task. In the six months that followed, people continued to die - 1704 in total, almost half of them in a single accident in April 2015. Immediately after the disaster, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Said Raad al-Hussein, declared that these deaths were the result of „a monumental lack of compassion“. ⁵

The EU convened a special summit. The Commission drafted a strategy. In the German media, the end of „Mare Nostrum“ in 2014 was described in retrospect as the cause of the accident. Bild quoted the German association Pro Asyl: „The Italian feat is now followed by Europe’s disgrace!“⁶ and denounced the coldness of officials in Brussels who had written in November 2013 that there could be a „counterproductive pull factor“. Bild wrote: „The ice-cold EU diplomat gibberish in plain language: if we rescue refugees from distress at sea, it will only lead to more setting sail.“ Der Spiegel wrote in April 2015 about a „chronicle of an announced catastrophe“. And further: „The question of who is to blame for the deaths of so many people and who bears what part of the responsibility is not easy to answer. But in every case, it leads in some part to the capitals of Europe.“⁷ In April 2015, Interior Minister de Maizière spoke in the Bundestag of images that had „burned themselves into our hearts“. He emphasised: „Sea rescue is the first, most important and most urgent thing which must begin immediately.“

More sea rescue was now demanded everywhere. A new EU mission - later called Sophia - was launched for this purpose. Thus, in April 2015, a coalition of European states returned to the „Mare Nostrum“ approach. In the following two years, the most sea rescuers in the history of the Mediterranean sailed just off the Libyan coast, coordinated by the sea rescue coordination centre in Rome, an armada of Italian and European, state and private boats. The number of boats between Libya and Italy grew rapidly. Never before have there been so many rescue ships and so many rescue operations coordinated by the Italian coast guard; in 2016 alone, more than 181,000 people were brought to Italy. And once again, the strategy to prevent deaths failed.

Deaths in the central Mediterranean per month 2014 -2019 ⁸

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
January	0	67	90	225	215	152
February	9	336	7	217	121	6
March	1	53	258	300	23	56
April	50	1480	611	279	20	52
May	329	95	1130	621	11	65
June	314	5	388	529	564	27
July	839	206	208	68	157	301
August	616	652	40	143	19	167
September	813	76	341	102	130	19
October	118	163	431	167	7	91
November	18	8	703	193	24	279
December	58	8	374	9	23	47
Total	3165	3149	4581	2853	1314	1262

The second half of Mare Nostrum was from May to October 2014. The policies of the new Interior Minister of the Grand Coalition in Rome reduced departures from Libya and deaths from July 2017. Matteo Salvini became Interior Minister in June 2018.

The number of drownings reached a tragic peak, with the deadliest six months from May to October 2014 being joined by the deadliest year in 2016, with 4581 deaths, and the deadliest two years from May 2015 to April 2017.

From these figures comes an obvious finding: the more people sat down in rickety wooden and inflatable boats, the more people died. Some feared that this insight would turn into a justification for letting people drown. So the arguments became more and more complicated, replacing absolute numbers of deaths with percentages. If they were taken to their logical conclusion, it would be better if 100 out of 1000 people drowned in the Mediterranean than 2

out of 4, because in the first case only 10, in the second 50 per cent of those who set out would have died. But these arguments convinced fewer and fewer people in the country that for years had championed sea rescue like no other: Italy. Now many politicians fell silent. Salvini, who for years had fought any form of rescue, state or private, outside Italy's rescue zone, rose to become the country's most influential politician. In the May 2014 European elections, Salvini's Lega had won only 6 percent of the vote. In the March 2018 parliamentary elections, it reached 17 per cent. In June, Salvini became deputy prime minister and interior minister in coalition with the Five Star Movement. On 10 June, he declared on Twitter Italy's ports closed to all sea rescuers. A day later, in the Senate in Rome, he praised his predecessor as interior minister, Marco Minniti, who had renewed cooperation with Libya in 2017, and he expressed sympathy for young Africans abused by human traffickers. NGOs involved in sea rescue, he said in interviews, had exacerbated the problem in the Mediterranean: „I would like to calmly explain this concept to people who are not necessarily involved in this field with bad intentions. But if you go to pick them up, you provoke further departures. When you provoke more departures, you increase the profits of the traffickers. If the smugglers have more money, they can get more weapons and drugs. And mainly, there will be more deaths at sea. On the other hand, since the oh-so-bad Salvini has been sitting in the Ministry of the Interior, the deaths in the Mediterranean have meanwhile drastically decreased.“⁹

More and more Italians agreed with him. In July 2018, Salvini was already the most popular minister in Italy, according to a poll published in the Italian daily *Il Giorno*. That same month, Salvini highlighted nationalist anti-immigration parties across Europe at his party's annual rally in Pontida, northern Italy. He praised France's Marine Le Pen and Hungary's Viktor Orbán, as well as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, and announced European ambitions: „An international alliance of populists. I will travel the capitals, and not only the European ones, to create an alternative to this Europe based on exploitation ... and mass immigration.“ Salvini's Lega overtook both Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party and the protest-party Five Star to become Italy's strongest party in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, with 34 percent. And even when Salvini lost office again in August 2019, his party remained the most popular in the country.¹⁰

How did this radical turn in the Italian debate on sea rescue come about? In fact, since 2013, there had been a discussion across Europe with two seemingly irreconcilable positions. One: there is no pull factor. Rescue boats reduce the number of deaths because each saves castaways from certain death. As a result, fewer people drown. The other: Rescue creates a pull factor. One should reduce the number of rescue boats, so that fewer people would get on boats that are not in any condition to reach Italy or Malta. As a result, fewer people would drown. But both positions are misleading.

The idea that it was the sea rescue that led to deaths was obviously wrong. There had already been too many deaths long before „Mare Nostrum“. But the opposite idea, that it was above all necessary to send out more sea rescuers to save lives, was now also discredited. In fact, the Italian government, which came into office after the resignation of Matteo Salvini, also stuck to the cooperation with Libya and the negative policy towards sea rescue.

What other policy could Italy's and Europe's politicians have adopted in response to the 2013 and 2015 accidents so that fewer people would actually drown? Carmine Menna, the optician, also asked himself this question in view of the deaths that haunted his dreams: „He knew that Europe could not welcome every single person who wanted a better life, but there had to be an alternative to this mess. From his internet research, he knew that most Eritreans arriving in Europe were automatically granted asylum ... So why were they forced to make this treacherous

journey? It was like a diabolical selection process: Master this deadly obstacle course and - bang! - you've earned a place in paradise.¹¹ An inhumane border is one where people are denied sea rescue. It is one where thousands drown every year. And it is one that forces refugees into a deadly obstacle course.

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- 1 Emma Jane Kirby, *The Optician of Lampedusa: The Story of a Rescue* (Berlin Verlag, 2017).
 - 2 Marina Militare, Video su operazione Mare Nostrum, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7LWma67WAA>.
 - 3 Fabrizio Gatti, „Naufragio dei bambini: 'Ecco perché quegli ufficiali vanno indagati per omicidio'“, *L'Espresso*, 23 May 2017, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2017/05/23/news/naufragio-dei-bambini-ecco-perche-quegli-ufficiali-vanno-indagati-per-omicidio-1.302452>. The trial has started in December 2019. The outcome of this trial is still open, even six years after the accident.
 - 4 Sky TG24, „Migranti, Renzi: 'È buon senso aiutarli a casa loro'“, accessed 13 July 2020, <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/2017/07/09/migranti-renzi-berlusconi-ius-soli>.
 - 5 Michael Richter, *Fluchtpunkt Europa: Unsere humanitäre Verantwortung* (edition Körber-Stiftung, 2015), 112.
 - 6 Das Protokoll der Schande - BILD erklärt, warum das Rettungsprogramm für Bootsflüchtlinge gestoppt wurde, *Bild* (23 April 2015), <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/mare-nostrum/eigestellt-das-dokument-der-schande-40650362.bild.html>.
 - 7 „Europe: Catastrophe Announced“, *Der Spiegel*, No. 18 (25 April 2015), <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-134660856.html>.
 - 8 „Missing Migrants Project“, International Organization for Migration, accessed 9 July 2020, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.
 - 9 Chiara Giannini and Matteo Salvini, *I am Matteo Salvini: The Italian Statesman in Conversation* (MSC Publishers Bookshop, 2019), 71.
 - 10 „Italy's Salvini Wants 'League of Leagues' to Unite EU Govts Aiming to 'Defend Their Borders'“, *RT International*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/431522-salvini-eu-parliament-immigration/>.
 - 11 Kirby, *The Optician of Lampedusa*.