

Forum synergies scholarship 2024

Trainee: Jessica Girardi

Host, tutor: Porto di Terra, Carlotta Ebbreo

Traineeship period: 19.08.2024.-21.09.24.

Final report

The location: Polizzi Generosa

Polizzi Generosa is one of the 15 municipalities of the Madonie Regional Park in the north of Sicily. Its origin is dated back to the Greek period (4th-3rd century BC). The name might derive from *Polis Isidis*. The today's town developed during the Byzantine period, when it received the name of *Basileopolis*. Then, after the Arab domination (800 AC), Polizzi was called *Bulis*. Around 400 years later the town is called in three different names, due to the different simultaneous influences: *Scandali* for Latins, *Thandathi* for Greeks and *Rahalburd* for Arabs. It is with Emperor Frederick II that in 1234 Polizzi received the title of Generosa. Nowadays around 3000 people are living here, mainly in the old town, and majority of the population is over 50 years old. Porto di Terra headquarter is located around 9 km from the village.

Porto di Terra: the association

Porto di Terra's idea started to take body in a few minds and hearts of a group 8 young people almost 10 years ago. The common wish and strong intention from the very beginning has been to build a community and to live and work in the rural mountains area of Sicily. The principles of permaculture, transition, hospitality and the valorization of local products are some of the pillars of the entire project.

The setting and the mission: 8 years ago, and today

The collective started in 2012 around Trapani area, in the north-west side of Sicily. Four couples started the co-living experience in a friend's farm. Four years later, the non-profit organization was founded, and the following year Porto di Terra was established in the Madonie Regional Park, close to Polizzi Generosa, around 90 km south-east from Palermo. Here is the current location: a big old house building surrounded by 7 hectares of land.

From their first settlement on the site, the group started to care for the place by discovering spaces, renovating roof, protecting some areas from wild animal incursion (especially from wild boars), and, last but not least, trying to connect and integrate with the local inhabitants. Up to date, the main building is left as the organization headquartered and the different members have bought and are living in nearby houses, mainly in walking distance from the headquarter.

Need to be considered that the rural and mountain areas of Italian (Sicily included) inland have complex history, and face several challenges, such as aging, depopulation, remoteness, weak communication infrastructures and poor services. A question arises: which are the reasons that called in this context young people? When I ask to Porto di terra members, they first refer to the access to land. Secondly, the different rhythm, the quality of the time spent living, working and interacting with others. More broader speaking, the opportunity to test ideas, and create intergenerational cohesion. All the members agree that the alternative to the current political-economic system lies in experiments, in enacting alternative ways of living and producing from the bottom up. For the members, Porto di Terra was and is a place for playing with ideas and putting into practice ways of co-existing with each other and with the landscape. The aims are several: from taking care of the land, the soil health – through experiment with agroecology and permaculture technique, to the the community health - with non-formal education and learning-by-doing methods, from reaching a small-scale food production, to be an art space and develop sustainable ecotourism initiatives that protect the environment and benefit local communities. Networking is a first key word of Porto di Terra mission, and my Traineeship is an example of this, thanks the built-up collaboration with Forum Synergies. Cooperations are created non only with-in European scale, but also with other organizations in the region and country. Act local is a second key word. A special focus is given in strengthening the community: after settling in the area, learn how to live in the place, how to take

care of water, how to cultivate the land and integration with other inhabitants with daily relations with local people, asking to share their knowledge, becoming part of this rural area community, with a new role. Porto di Terra is one living example that rural areas can be dynamic, progressive and experimental. In relation to the activities organized through Porto di Terra, board members are meetings and discussing adopting non-violent communication principles, and their decisional methods are approved according to a commonly agreed Statuto.

Porto di Terra: protagonists

Carlotta explained me that board members have changed over time, but the spirit has remained the same. People with very different background, skills and qualities continue to come together, all of them with a common vision and a green care approach, combining simultaneously caring for people and caring for land.

Up to date, on the management board there are 9 people in the age range between 33 and 42, and gender balance distribution: Carlotta Ebbreo, Laura Maniscalco, Teo Caronia and Federico Coppola (all members from day one), Maria Vittoria Battisti (joined in 2018), Elena D'Anna and Franca Marsh (both joined in 2020), Dario Dispenza and Renato Greco (arrived in 2023) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Current management board members (children included: Nilo and Ada).

Their profile is very diverse, due both to the individual education/passion (botanic, permaculture design, non-formal education, conflict management, agroecology, sustainable development, cooking) and the peculiar personality. I met other members of Porto di Terra that are actively involved and live in the valley, and I would like to mention here: Caterina Strafalaci, Elisa Galbusera (co-founder of Porto di Terra, but currently not in the board members group), Kengi Costagliola, Elisa Maran and Emanuele Calderone.

Main activities

In my one month staying in Porto di Terra, I have seen, learnt and took part in different and various activities. They are listed below.

1) **“TransPorto” festival** – 5th edition

Three days of activities designed for everyone, with the aim of knowledge exchange and intergenerational convivial moments space: concerts - workshops – wild camping - cooked food – access to several hike trails - areas for free expression: music, poetry, juggling, etc. (Figure 2). I have taken part in the camping area preparation, kitchen support and general cleaning and organization.



Figure 2. “TransPorto” festival brochure.

2) Private and shared veggie garden

Several members are growing their own veggie in private and shared garden (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Shared veggie garden. Harvest.

In between others, typical variety – registered as Slow Food presidium – are present in their plots: the white/black bean [fagiolo badda](#) and the paprika [pipiddu](#) (peperone) di Polizzi. Some of other veggie variety seeds are part of seed savers collection, or anyway exchanged with other local farmers. Something special I have seen them using is a Sicilian tools, called [Runcigghiu](#) (“roncola”, in italian) used to make the tip of the bamboo cane (Figure 4 and 5).



Figures 4 and 5. Dario using the Runcigghiu and Runcigghiu in detail.

Bamboo canes are then utilized as a bean's plantlets support structure (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Me adjusting the bamboo cane in the bean's field.

As a boundary hedge species, I have seen several soil structures enhancing, dry resistant and pollinator plants specimens, such as *Pyracantha* sp., *Teucrium* sp., *Eremophila nivea* (called curry plant for the peculiar aroma), *Lavanda angustifolia*, *Elaeagnus* sp. (N-fixing), *Myrtus communis*, *Rosmarinus officinalis* and *Salvia ananas*. I have taken part in the consolidation of the bamboo cane structure for beans climbing, veggie harvesting and starting to remove summer crops for winter garden planning.

3) Water system cleaning and maintaining

The underground hydrogeology of the territory depends on geo-lithological types of substrates and their permeability conditions (clay vs. calcareous and gypsum succession).

In addition to the superficial hydrography network (Figure 7), in the valley where Porto di Terra is located there are numerous springs. In 1950, more than 50 springs were counted in the Polizzi Generosa municipality (Figure 8) with a total flow rate of about 384 l/s used for 70% for irrigation and the rest for drinking. Irrigation was carried out by surface flow, with shifts, an exclusive practice in the hazelnut cultivation landscape of Polizzi. During the hazelnut cultivation active period, producers built “canali”, water streams, in narrow stone ducts just off the ground, or using “gammitte” to simulate the free flow of the stream. Water springs are still evident and there is still a self-organized sub-irrigation method and drinkable water access directly from springs. The traditional agricultural hydraulic systems with terracing and the use of techniques with low environmental impact is kept, and Porto di Terra members are actively taking care of it, with the goal to preserve the system structure and the water not privatized access.

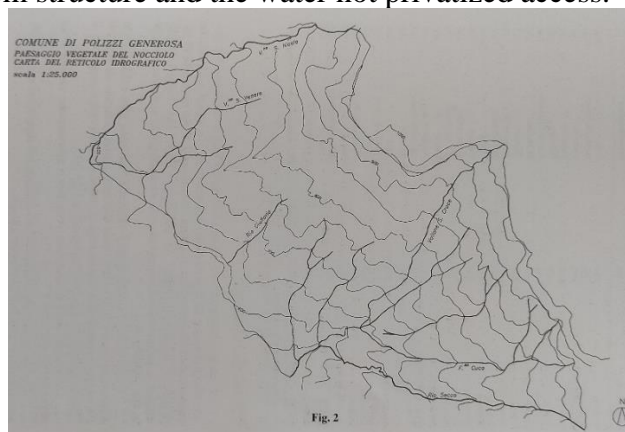


Figure 7. Superficial hydrography network. Taken from *Tudisca Salvatore (1994). Il Nocciolo in Sicilia. Problemi e prospettive della corilicoltura madonita. Universita' degli Studi di Palermo.*

TABELLA 1 - Sorgenti presenti nel territorio del comune di Polizzi Generosa

Denominazione	l/s	Denominazione	l/s
Madonna	1,70	Fatta	0,40
Mastro Michele	2,50	Donna Giovanna	3,00
Acqua Nuova	9,38	Conceria	1,00
Pietà*	45,00	Zafarana	0,96
Urta*	2,78	Pecoraro	0,92
Capiceddi	11,60	Barone Gagliardo	1,85
Chiesa 1°	0,63	Di Martino	2,00
Chiesa 2°	3,48	Priatorio	4,17
Portello S. Croce	13,80	Cantamatino	5,67
Sorgitore*	22,25	Noce di Masi	15,60
Dominici	1,10	Cirillo	46,00
Pietra e Ardica	17,15	Carcara	3,20
Rampolla	0,33	S. Cono Alta	11,90
Mammara	4,75	S. Cono Bassa	5,50
Chiacchitedda	1,87	Ceraro	0,50
Gorgo S. Domenico	1,19	Pazza e Ponte	6,00
S. Domenico	3,78	Orto della Menta*	4,00
Portello Mantonica	5,25	Bevaio*	2,00
Mastroiacinto	9,80	Cilio*	12,20
Cannola	3,70	Vanella S. Croce	2,50
Gagliardo G.	0,88	Fico	3,50
Dolce G.	0,10	Dominici S. Nicola	2,10
Don Gioacchino	19,20	Elvira	14,52
Baiocco Alta e Bassa	16,80	Gorgo Borghesano	2,54
Padrona	5,15	Faracia	6,73
Dolce	1,25	grotticelli*	21,20
Porcari	4,20		

* Sorgenti per totale o parziale uso potabile
Fonte: Servizio Idrografico della sezione autonoma del Genio Civile di Palermo, 1950

Figure 8. Springs listed in 1950 in the area of the Polizzi Generosa municipality. Taken from *Tudisca Salvatore (1994). Il Nocciolo in Sicilia. Problemi e prospettive della corilicoltura madonita. Università degli Studi di Palermo.*

I have been in a water springs excursion around Porto di Terra, where the four springs that allowed to receive the water are visible and accessible: Noce di Masi, Scippatesta, Cirillo, Cantamatino. One of the members (Teo) is working on a file mymaps of them. Other members (Dario and Renato) have well explained me the system concept and we have been working on cleaning the old canals passage, to bring water back in an area of their properties not supplied (Figure 9 and 10).



Figures 9 and 10. Dario and Renato working on cleaning the old canals passage to bring water back in their properties.

4) Madonie Regional Park

The Park was founded in 1989. It covers 40000 hectares, and it touches 15 municipalities, including Polizzi Generosa. The highest pick is Pizzo Carbonara (1979 a.s.l.). The park retains a rich diversity of flora and some rare endemic species in danger of extinction. One of the most magnificent is the Nebrodi fir tree, or Sicilian fir (*Abies nebrodensis*), native to the Madonie mountains in this area of Sicily and a protected species. In fact, as a result of deforestation (and wildfires) it is now extremely rare, with only 29 mature trees and a few seedlings surviving in situ. Replanting programme is active. With some members of Porto di Terra (Teo, Laura and Maria Vittoria) I have been in few hikes to explore the Madonie, including the *Abies nebrodensis* trail (Figure 11 and 12).



Figures 11 and 12. *Abies nebrodensis*, mature (left) and young (right) individuals.

5) “Mutuo aiuto”

The concept of “mutuo aiuto” has been recently defined, and up to date it is a common practice in Porto di Terra interconnected community. Briefly, it consists of people gathering in one property and helping with needed activities in a very relaxed and family atmosphere feeling. I have taken part in one “mutuo aiuto” happened in a friend property located in Cefalu’, 50 km north from Polizzi Generosa. Around 20 people took part, and the activities proposed included: grape harvest and placement in wooden structure for drying, chicken house renovation and eco building roofing arrangement with bamboo cane (Figure 13 and 14).



Figures 13 and 14. Harvested grapes placement for drying (left) and eco building roofing arrangement (right).

Other activities that Porto di Terra members are taking part in:

- 1) **Olive harvesting** – the most valuable element of the association income is the extra virgin olive oil, which is produced from olives harvested in an olive grove under their management, and then sold through various direct sales networks.
- 2) **Private garden caring** – few members are working as gardener in private garden, and sometimes maintaining hazelnut crops of historic origin ([Nocciola di Polizzi Slow Food](#)), that in the active production years used to cover a good part of Polizzi Generosa municipality fields (Figure 15). As a side note: the hazelnuts cultivation itself is not economically sustainable and it has been abandoned.

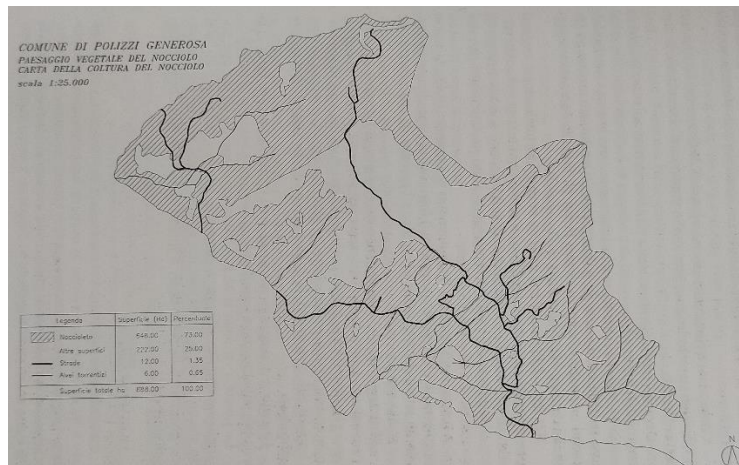


Figure 15. Hazelnuts cultivation in Polizzi Generosa municipality (1950). Taken from *Tudisca Salvatore (1994). Il Nocciolo in Sicilia. Problemi e prospettive della corilicoltura madonita. Universita' degli Studi di Palermo.*

Fire hazard

It is sadly well known that Sicily is subject to the Sirocco wind and extreme events such as heat waves, conditions that, together with the presence of non-native (and highly flammable) forest species, trigger fuel wildfires. It is also quite clear that most of the wildfires (between 70-80%) are started by humans, either intentionally or unintentionally. The consequences of the wildfire are several: air and water pollution, nature, rural and urban sites damages, risk of reaching landfill and burning trash (and thus releasing harmful dioxin emissions), etc.

With so many fires breaking out all over the island, and all the derived environmental and health related risks, civilians are taking action to hold back the flames. Some of Porto di Terra members are also part of self-sustained firefighting groups. They bought protective equipment, they are training and getting other tools to fight the wildfires effectively.

In June 2016 hundreds of wildfires have started at the same time in different places of the island, even very far from each other. Palermo, Trapani and Agrigento have been the worst-hit provinces, together with a big area of Madonie National Park. Related to this topic, I have participated in Collesano (a village nearby Polizzi Genorosa) to the screening of the documentary “Terra Nera, voci dalle fiamme” (Figure 16). Moreover, I have been invited by Carlotta to participate at the event “Buon fuoco arriva in città”, discussion over how to cooperate between the city and the countryside, that she co-organized in Palermo (Figure 17).



Figures 16 and 17. Fire hazard events brochures.

Other experiences and projects connected with my staying in Porto di Terra

Many other very interesting and deeply interconnected reality are present all around the organization. One example is “RADICI piccolo museo della Natura” ([project](#)), of which Caterina Strafalaci is co-founder and with whom Porto di Terra has done (e.g. Officine Organiche) and much more is planned to do together, in the context of children education.

Moreover, thanks to Carlotta, through Urgenci, I have taken part to the “EU Food Security HUB. European Exchange and Peer-Learning Workshop” (Figures 18, 19 and 20). A perfect chance to meet few more different realities on the territory – in the urban side - that are actively involved in social welfare/ health and land care:

- 1) Cooperativa Ciauli - [project](#);
- 2) Cuoche combattenti - [project](#);
- 3) Terra Franca - [project](#);
- 4) Moltivolti - [project](#).



Figures 18, 19 and 20. From the first picture on the top left: ongoing training, collaborative outcomes, and group photo of the participants taken in Terra Franca (Palermo).

Other projects I haven't had time to explore during my staying in Porto di Terra

I have a long list of places, people and projects that have been mentioned to me during the Porto di Terra experience, but I had not enough time to explore! Here following some of them:

- 1) Scienza Radicata - [project](#);
- 2) Contadinazioni → Fuori Mercato in Sicily - [project](#);
- 3) Social farm Orti del Mediterraneo - [project](#);
- 4) Frutta dal Mondo - [project](#);
- 5) Settevoci - [project](#);
- 6) Alive - [project](#);
- 7) Il giardino delle belle / Mario Carbone, regional referent WWOOF Sicily - [project](#).

One of the people I could met few days before departing, is Sara Cuscuna', co-founder of permaculture network Sicily (Tutta giù per Terra - Permacultura Sicilia) and one of the pioneers of the “mutuo aiuto” concept. She explained me that the idea of “you help me – we help you” started when she actively was involved in a collective food forest permaculture-based project (SAJA), together with Salvatore Giaccone and other friends - [project](#).

Moreover, she owns the B&B L'uva e il vento, that is her personal permaculture-based project. Here there is a beautiful vineyard in recovery process after the last wildfire, where typical grape varieties are growing: nerello mascalese, nerello cappuccino, inzolia, mascalese e carricante. Every year family and friends are gathering for the harvesting party. I missed this year one for few days! For the wine production, the grapes are still foot-pressed and fermented according to the tradition in the "palmento" (Figure 21).



Figure 21. One part of the recovering vineyard. Before the harvest.

Conclusion

The organization just re-set the conditions that allows Porto di Terra to access the land that is hosting it. Their renting agreement has been reconfirmed for 8 more years. I had the opportunity to listen, exchange and debate different approaches and outline possible future scenarios for the organization, in term of governance and activities for boosting the intergenerational cooperation (with a special focus on children education and experience - outdoor kindergarten).

Porto di Terra is a hub of creativity and sustainable living, and I feel confident to say that it is a model for rural repopulation. Their presence breathes life into Polizzi Generosa, inspiring hope and fostering knowledge exchange. By example, in the period I have spent in Porto di Terra, I have taken part in one women's circle. Quite frequently some of the women of the community around Porto di Terra meet up for a moment to connect with one another, share experiences, and support each other. The circle provides a safe and sacred space to share thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or criticism.

I would like to conclude sharing an extract taken from the book "Terra di rapina" by Giuliana Saladino (borrow from Dario and read during my staying). Commenting the text below, I believe Porto di Terra represent an attempt to take revenge on the past, proposing a new, more complete and human approach to the way of being and doing in a rural area.

La millenarian esperienza del contadino siciliano si rivela una somma millenaria di errori, la sua competenza un bluff, la sua saggezza solo fatalismo, affidato com'è a forze maggiori e scatenate, la siccità, il gelo improvviso, lo scirocco, il padrone generalmente assente e strafottente che insegna la rapina della terra.

Fino agli anni '50 e oltre il grano si coltiva come insegnarono gli arabi, le vigne come insegnarono i romani, l'olivo come i greci, i pendii si arano dall'alto in basso e il dilavare diventa disastro, le rotazioni sprecano e spremono la terra, la trebbiatura è affidata al mulo bendato e al vento, la vendemmia è una somma di fatiche inutile ed evitabili che chiunque si guarda bene dal mutare, la raccolta delle olive, così come è fatta, danneggia irreparabilmente l'albero, i sestri tra le colture non hanno criterio, l'esperienza non si accumula, non salta mai da quantità a qualità, la falsa scienza agraria passa di bocca in bocca, dai vecchi ai giovani, immutabile, e immutata rimane la Sicilia.

The millenarian experience of the Sicilian farmer reveals a thousand-year sum of errors, his competence a bluff, his wisdom only fatalism, entrusted as he is to greater and unleashed forces, drought, sudden frost, the Sirocco, the generally absent and boastful lord who teaches the robbery of the land.

Till the Fifties and beyond, wheat is cultivated as the Arabs taught, vines as the Romans taught, olive trees like the Greeks, slopes are plowed from top to bottom and the soil runoff becomes a disaster, rotations waste and squander the land, the plowing is entrusted to the mule blindfolded and the wind, the harvest is a sum of unnecessary and avoidable labor that anyone change, the olive harvesting, as it is done, irreparably damages

the tree, the crops spacing have no criterion, experience does not develop, never switch from quantity to quality, the false agricultural science passes from mouth to mouth, from elder to young, unchanging, and unchanged remains the Sicily.

From Saladino Giuliana (1972). Terra di rapina. [Self-translation](#)

Thanks to all the people I met in Porto di Terra, for their time gifted to me.

Place and date
Cēsis, 03/10/2024

Signature
