

## **SCUOLA PENNY WIRTON MUGELLO**

### **FREE SCHOOL OF ITALIAN LANGUAGE FOR FOREIGNERS**

At the beginning of 2016, a period in which many emigrants from Africa and Asia were reaching our area, it seemed to us that for our emergency reception organization were difficult to provide new arrivals with support in learning the Italian language. Furthermore, we noticed the emergence, in our fellow citizens, of feelings of annoyance and intolerance towards the new arrivals. We therefore decided to do something within the reach of our abilities and consistent with our beliefs: organize a small Italian school for foreigners. We took the example of other schools (called Penny Wirton, the first founded in Rome by Eraldo Affinati, a famous Italian writer) which had been formed in Italy and which were inspired by the Barbiana School of don Lorenzo Milani, an extraordinary and revolutionary didactic and social experience developed in our Mugello in the 50s and 60s.

Ours is a completely free school for those who attend it.

Students are people of all ages and educational levels.

There is no requirement for a student to join; only the name, surname and telephone number are registered.

There is no obligation to attend, there are no registers with grades or judgements.

Teachers are volunteers, in no way paid; they are not required to hold specialist degrees.

There is a teacher for each student or, at most, for a group of two or three students with the same characteristics.

The school always welcomes and welcomes everyone, even just once.

Lessons are held all the year, including the summer period.

The school is housed in premises owned by the Municipality of Borgo San Lorenzo and refers to 'Il Giardino delle Ore' Time Bank, of which the volunteer teachers are members.

The first lesson took place on May 17, 2016.

Until now, 300 students (153 females and 147 males), aged 5 to 71, average age 29, from 52 countries have attended our school.

The composition of our students has always been very different (in terms of nationality, gender, age) but until 2018 a good half of our students were young Africans, many of whom were poorly educated or completely illiterate. Then, gradually, the composition changed, first due to the closure of some Extraordinary Reception Centers in the area and then due to the pandemic. From March 2020 to June 2021 the school was closed, and only online lessons were held as far as possible. Then there was a cautious recovery, with a very small number of volunteers and few students, many of them new. We started having lessons only once a week for each student.

Today many volunteers have not returned but there are many requests for participation from students.

There is a large presence of women, many of whom come from Morocco, many with children at school and some with younger children in tow, who wish to speak Italian better, also to keep up with their children

(who go to school) and with husbands (who arrived in Italy before their wives and who work). We are also pleased that older women come to us; women who, in Italy for decades, speak no Italian.

There is also quite a number of young people and children, many of them children of our students or former students, who come to take Italian lessons with us to prepare for attending public school or to strengthen their school career in learning the language. We see the enormous difficulties these young students have in dealing with the avalanches of information that reach them, in a short time, in an unknown language. We try to do something, but we believe that in this sector (the school for foreign minors) our Public Education should do much more. We would like to know better how the Italian law, which provides for the right to education for foreign minors, is applied.

Finally, I would like to say, that in recent months, several workers have shown up who want to come to our school but can only attend our lessons in the late afternoon. So far, we have managed, with difficulty, to satisfy these requests, considering our limited availability of teachers.

A happy episode in our short history was the project, in the context of the *Alternanza Scuola Lavoro*, which was carried out in the spring of 2017, based on the collaboration between the Istituto Giotto Ulivi and the Banca del Tempo in Mugello.

The project involved 22 students from a third class of the Institute.

The students participated for a couple of months in the Time Bank activity, with a reciprocal exchange of hours between students and the world outside the school.

As is perhaps known, in the Time Bank members offer services (for example, lawn mowing) and receive others in return (for example, repairing clothes). Exchanges, extended to all members, are not measured in terms of money, but based on the time spent.

The participants in our 2017 project, after an information phase, were enrolled in the Time Bank. The execution of the Project included the satisfaction of the following exchanges:

On the supply side:

- collaboration with Penny Wirton School volunteers in teaching Italian;
- training in the use of smartphones for impractical people, mostly the elderly.

On the request side:

- training in the care of an organic garden.
- training for small clothes repair and sewing interventions.

The experience was exciting in every part of it (excluding that of the bureaucratic procedures to be carried out).

Limiting to the 'linguistic' sector, we recall that a group of six students met one afternoon a week, for a few months, ladies mainly from Romania employed in Borgo as domestic workers. With their curiosity, the students stimulated the narration of memories and traditions and, on this basis, they also wrote some good stories. There were exchanges of food recipes, tasting of some and even a small laboratory with the production of 'gift' objects under the instruction of women (we remember the white and red Martisor for the feast of March 1st, women's day and spring).

As far as the one-to-one Italian school is concerned, all eight Giotto Ulivi students involved, showed themselves capable, far above our expectations, of creating a positive relationship with each foreigner, young like them or older, whom they met for twice a week for two hours. They prepared themselves with care to face the lessons and some foreign students were encouraged by them to continue with more commitment in learning the Italian language. They were able, with little help from us, to independently carry out their task in the right spirit.

But unfortunately, the experience ended soon. The hypothesis of continuing the collaboration in other form was not taken into consideration, for example that of volunteering, difficult to solicit with such young people, given that it did not manifest itself spontaneously.

And the experience of alternating school and work has not even been revived; now we consider it too heavy, from an organizational and bureaucratic point of view, for an association as small as ours. However, we know that it represents a strong point for many Penny Wirton schools, for which the Alternanza Scuola Lavoro system (today called 'Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e per l'Orientamento, PCTO) is not used for entire classes but for small groups of truly interested students.

The lessons of the Penny Wirton Mugello, free school of Italian for foreigners, take place in Borgo San Lorenzo at the Meeting Center in Piazza Dante, 33.

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