

Land Reform in Sardinia

THE WORK OF E.T.F.A.S.

Whilst on a mission for the United Nations, last year, I was able to see an inspiring experiment in agrarian development, which is transforming the lives of countless families in Sardinia; most of these people having lived for generations in dark malarial infested hovels. This is the work of E.T.F.A.S. (*Ente per la trasformazione Fondaria ed Agraria in Sardegna*) which aims at building 9,000 houses in order to develop 250,000 acres of land, hitherto unproductive. The society is firmly convinced that man is at once the end and the means of this venture, and says they are firmly convinced that all their efforts and expense would be useless, unless man could establish his home in the midst of this transformed and naturally beautiful countryside.

How necessary are their efforts was easy to see. With a social worker colleague, I set off in an E.T.F.A.S. car to visit some of the families who were candidates for a grant of land and a farm house. Our travels took us through miles of lovely country, dotted with typical Sardinian villages, more reminiscent of North Africa than Europe. Houses were huddled together, along one straggling street, they were rotting with age, windowless, and dark. Inside they were dank, with earthen floors, man and beast living in close proximity. In one house, I inadvertently moved a sort of beehive looking basket from the floor in order to sit down, and out flew hens, who joined the cluster of children imperturbably gazing at the foreigner. In the background were the grandmother and grandfather, the former dressed in the distinctive and somewhat dirty red costume of the locality, and the latter in the black jerkin and curious black square cap and white breeches, most distinguished figures, and all gave us a warm welcome. In fact one of the party who felt car sick, was immediately offered the hospitality of the dubious looking food cupboard. In another house were a young couple with several children, the wife doing her cooking over a few sticks, watched by a cow poking its head through a hole in the wall. The dust and the dark, and the generally overcrowded and squalid conditions, made one wonder how family life could be possible, but calm and courtesy reigned, and the children's manners were delightful. But how pale they were, and the dreaded trachoma had visited some of them. I recalled my visit to the Professor of Ophthalmology at his clinic in Nuoro, where he lectured me on his research into this disease, showing photographs of houses such as I was visiting. 'If only such houses could be eliminated' he had said, 'all this horror could be avoided'. He showed me records of the summer camps he had started for children afflicted with trachoma, the dramatic results of a few months spent in normal conditions, and the almost immediate relapse on return to darkness and dust. He was, of course, intensely interested in my mission, destined to start medical social services on the island,

and begged me to do all I could to arouse public opinion for the need to re-house a large part of the population.

Having concluded our visits, I set off in high hope to see what was being done by the society to solve the problem, and to learn how it was being dealt with. From many conversations with the Sardinian people, I had learnt to love and admire their courage, and incidentally their Catholicism, without which one sensed they could not endure their conditions.

During the long drive with the social worker, I listened to the aims and methods of E.T.F.A.S. By the law of 21st October 1950, expropriation of land properties which extend over certain limits was permitted, and 550 million dollars was assigned for the transformation of such land, usually uncultivated, in order to have organic farming units settled on it. Depopulation in the island has hitherto prevented development of large and potentially fertile areas. Hence the plan to build some 9,000 farm houses, absolutely necessary for the colonization of more than 250,000 acres of land. These houses were to be assigned to poor farmers, together with a portion of land, tilled and made ready for production by E.T.F.A.S.; thus home and land make an inseparable unit, and the economic basis of new family life. This partial preparation of the land seemed to me so psychologically sound, for people living in conditions such as I had seen would surely have felt overwhelmed by their spacious new surroundings and would hardly have known where to begin.

A typical farming family in Sardinia consists of parents and two to four children; the patriarchal family, common to other regions of Italy, is unknown in the island. It was explained to me that the E.T.F.A.S. farm home consists of a large kitchen living room, and at most four bedrooms, all completely independent. Every house is planned so that should enlargement become necessary, the new rooms would also be independent. My mind went back to England, where our planners plan not only the houses, but in so doing set a rigid limit to families.

In Sardinia all idea of pre-fabricated houses had to be turned down, owing to high transportation costs and difficulties. Having been rattled along many hundreds of miles of island roads, this problem was easily realized, practically only the one road running from north to south would stand heavy lorries. Thus all E.T.F.A.S. houses for the present will be built according to traditional systems, with local materials. The only unified and pre-fabricated parts will be the sanitary installations, wooden fixtures, and the parts constituting the roof structures. All the houses are orientated so that the walls without windows face the cold winds (even in late April I shivered in them), the front faces south, and it is often possible to build stables which are completely open on one side, closed stables are only found in cold mountain sites. But the Sardinian climate is one of extremes, and each house has a loggia and a small porch as protection from the sun. They are all thermo-insulated, wind and fire proof; all have running water, the system being simple, for plumbers are rare in these isolated regions, and certainly the tenants have had little to do with plumbing in their former

abodes. The floors are of levelled concrete.

I endeavoured to digest this, and other information during the fast and bumpy drive, whilst trying not to be too absorbed in the impressive and rocky landscape. It was a curious experience to see only a few shepherds tending their vast flocks, whereas one would have expected at least a few signs of human habitation in this potentially fertile land.

In the midst of our journey we paused at the recently discovered Nuraghic city called Barumini (the coffin of man). It is really an immense fortress, commanding a magnificent view over the plains, but its name could equally well be applied to many present-day Sardinian houses. At long last I was told our journey's end was in sight, and that I would then see the new community of 'Sant' Anna' in the Orestanese, one of the more promising agricultural areas of Sardinia. In the distance I could see the farm houses dotted about over a large area, a contrast to the miles of deserted land we had driven through all the morning. The desert started to blossom, on one side only did one see the usual rocks and cactus, on the other it was a scene of activity. Fields were well tilled, young fruit trees were flowering, and cattle were grazing near the farms. We drew up at one of the houses and down the neat garden path came a stream of children and dogs, followed by parents, who despite rather obvious excitement, retained their dignified and typical Sardinian reserve. The social worker explained my presence, how I had come to help Sardinian sick children, and then nothing was good enough, although I truly believe any passing stranger would have been shown the house, because their pride was so obvious. After examining every animal, and every near-by crop, and having had all the architectural features described in detail, how the stables were so convenient, and how the water ran, we saw all over the house, every family possession was shown us, the lady's festival costume, the family brooches and aprons, and father's tools. Finally cakes and the special 'Pane musica' (a sort of Passover cake) were produced and we had to sample several kinds of liqueurs. It was no good refusing, because no foreigner had ever visited the family, and one felt that nothing must spoil this new experience. I was loaded with 'Pane musica', each cake about a foot in circumference and paper thin. I tried vainly to describe the limited capacity of air luggage, but they would take no refusal.

I paid three visits like this, at each house the same warm welcome, the same displaying of family treasures, more cakes, and unfortunately for me, more liqueurs, each appearing to be stronger than the last.

On the return journey I was quite incapable of assimilating any more information, preferring to meditate quietly on the happiness of all those families, saved from a sordid existence in dark decaying slums, by a scheme so truly realistic, and so beautifully carried out. The E.T.F.A.S. monument at the entrance to their village was, one felt, no mere decorative emblem, but a sign that the Holy Mother and Child were truly inspiring the efforts of the '*Ente per la trasformazione Fondaria ed Agraria in Sardegna*'.

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