

L'ORCOLÂT: MEMORIES OF THE 1976 FRIULI EARTHQUAKE

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Abstract

Earthquakes are unexpected, destructive, terrifying and traumatic. Albert Chiarandini's painting, *God Abandoned Us for Seven Days*, can be seen as portraying the tragedy caused by the earthquake that destroyed Friuli on May 6, 1976. Now, forty years later, my personal memories of that tragic event are mixed with an overview of how the Friulians reacted to the relentless drama which marked the historical, social, financial and cultural evolution of Friuli.

L'Orcolât: Memorie del terremoto del 1976 in Friuli

I terremoti sono imprevisti, distruttivi, terrificanti e traumatici. Il dipinto di Albert Chiarandini, *Dio ci ha abbandonato per sette giorni* potrebbe raffigurare la tragedia e la disperazione causata dal terremoto che ha distrutto il Friuli il 6 maggio 1976. Ora, quarant'anni dopo, i miei ricordi personali di quel tragico evento si mescolano a una panoramica di come i friulani hanno reagito al dramma implacabile che ha segnato l'evoluzione storica, sociale, culturale e finanziario del Friuli.

Introduction

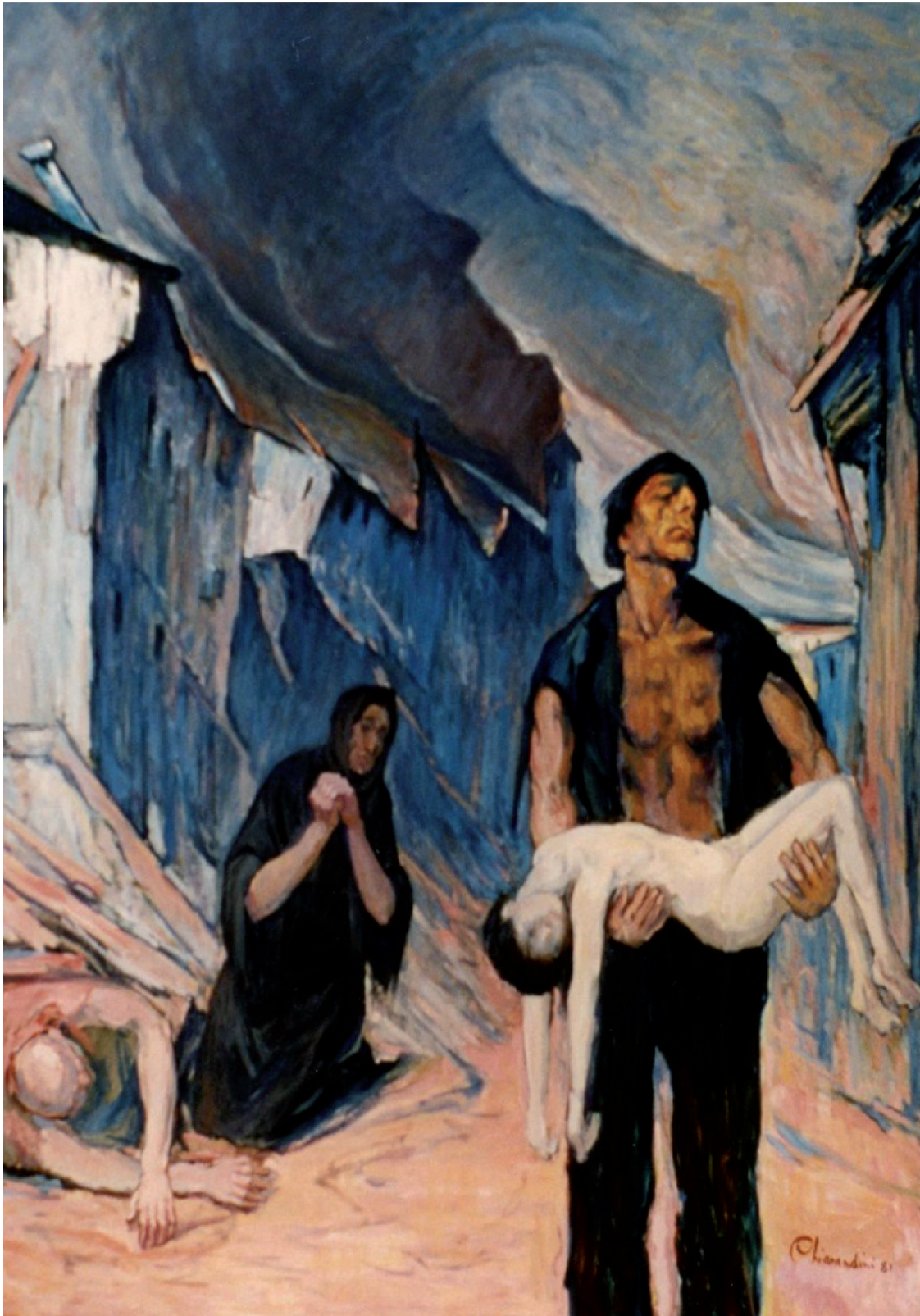
On August 24, 2016, an earthquake destroyed the towns of Amatrice, Accumoli, Arquata and Pescara del Tronto, Norcia in central Italy. Earthquakes are unexpected and can be very destructive; consequently being in one can be terrifying and traumatic, above all when people are overcome with fear and a sense of helplessness as they witness the violence of destruction. Scenes of the disaster area telecast in Italy were devastating, especially where volunteers were hand-digging, in a race against time, to pull out people alive from the masses of rubble caused by the quake. The horrors of seeing severely injured people, or even worse, the death of family members and friends were evident on the faces of surviving victims.

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From a psychological point of view, in the aftermath of violent earthquakes, many survivors may continue to encounter sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and feelings that bring to mind – even years after – memories of their traumatic experiences of the earthquake. Common reminders include aftershocks, rumbling noises, smells of sulfur and dust, visions of the site where the earthquake was experienced or anniversaries and media news about these disastrous events. The television and newspaper coverage of this most recent Italian earthquake, in particular, brought to mind the 1976 earthquake of Friuli, which also had a strong impact on public opinion because, for the first time, live images of pain and destruction from a natural catastrophe had entered the households of Italians at large.

God Abandoned Us for Seven Days is the title of a large and impressive canvas by Albert Chiarandini, an Italian-Canadian painter, who at the age of seventeen in 1932 left Udine, with his mother and brother, to join a waiting father in Canada. He only returned to Italy four times between 1973 and 1985 when he was already a mature and accomplished painter. For the immigrant, the return journey to a long lost homeland can be as traumatic as the initial departure because the imagined homeland is surprisingly different at each return. He revisited Friuli, in particular to paint landscapes of the hillside surrounding San Daniele and Borgo Sacco, where his mother was born and which he undoubtedly remembered from his youth. This land must have seemed transformed and unrecognizable after the earthquake of 1976 but he wanted to capture the essence of remembered picturesque spaces and hilltop towns which, in his Italian landscape paintings, arise in symbolic defiance of Friuli's drive for modernization and urbanization.

Chiarandini's painting, *God Abandoned Us for Seven Days*, can be open to diverse interpretations. In her numerous publications on Chiarandini, Olga Zorzi Pugliese (University of Toronto), affirms that the setting and content of this work, in reality, «was inspired by the 1980 earthquake in isolated villages of Campania, where help was slow to arrive» (149). The provinces that were most affected were those of Avellino, Salerno and Potenza, but this earthquake has passed into public memory as the earthquake in Irpinia. The actual proportion of the earthquake was not immediately perceived by the media; in fact the first television news broadcast spoke of a minor earthquake, situating the epicenter either at Eboli or at Rionero in Vulture, several kilometers away from the real epicenter. The underestimation of the actual disastrous situation contributed to the delay of rescue assistance and directing help to less damaged areas. About 2,914 people died while over 400 thousand were left homeless, making this earthquake the most serious catastrophic event in Italy after the Second World War (Gelodi. *Protezione Civile.it*). The painting, in fact, repro-



Albert Chiarandini, *God Abandoned Us for Seven Days*, 1981.

duces a scene of tragic suffering and helplessness in the face of natural disaster. In the foreground a tenebrous and grief-stricken father is heroically carrying a lifeless child from the rubble of destroyed buildings. His eyes are shut while his face is slanted upwards with resignation and silent sorrow. Hovering above the destroyed buildings swirls of harrowing dark blue and black clouds give an atmosphere of fear and gloom and could represent the obscure and uncontrollable forces of nature. In our imaginations, clouds often take on human forms, and in this particular painting the dark swirls parody the sharp nose and strong jaw of the despondent father. In contrast, the stark white coloring of the dead child seems to undermine the innocence and vulnerability of young children in the face of relentless danger. In Irpinia more than half of the earthquake victims were children. On the left side of the canvas, a bereft elderly woman kneels in prayer, mourning a dead man, perhaps her husband, crouched in a corner beneath collapsed wooden beams. The woman's face depicts anguish and despair.

Without doubt, Chiarandini was also portraying the tragedy caused by the earthquake that damaged or completely destroyed 137 municipalities and killed almost 1,000 people in Friuli on May 6, 1976. The towns closest to the epicenter of the quake, such as Venzone, Gemona, Trasaghis, Bordano, Osoppo, Montenars, Artegna and Buia were completely razed to the ground. Nearly 3,000 Friulians were injured while 100,000 were left homeless; 75,000 homes were damaged, while over 18,000 were completely destroyed. Many schools, town halls, churches, and factories were ruined, along with medieval castles, other historical landmarks, and important art treasures. An estimated 15,000 workers lost their jobs because of destroyed or damaged factories. These are the shocking numbers recorded in the *Messaggero Veneto* in a series of articles written from March to May 2016 by Giacomina Pellizzari and Paolo Medeossi, not only to celebrate the rebirth of Friuli forty years after the earthquake but to give voice to the many survivors whose stories should not be lost. Today, after that tragic event, through films and documents on television or testimonies of victims from Gemona or Buia narrated on the *Messaggero Veneto*, my personal memories resurface with amazing clarity.

Memories

I remember that for an indeterminable time my body is swept into the air, my movements uncontrollable while I desperately hold on tightly to my baby girl. We are dragged and hurled through a space that heaves and crashes around us. I can hear the rumble and roar of our surrounding mountains come alive and

demand attention. The walls and roof of our house crack as I slide under a desk, trying to protect my daughter from the masses of rock that fly from the ceiling. Finally it is over and I am able to get back on my feet and grapple my way down the flight of stairs. Night has fallen like a silent and impenetrable fog filled with the stench of debris. All lights are out and a sense of panic sweeps over me as I frantically try to locate familiar landmarks now virtually razed to the ground. As I stagger out into the courtyard I can hear my mother calling to me from Canada, *anin a cjase frute*¹, telling me that it's all right now. I can come out of the dark gorge that has enveloped me. Later I realize that we had physically survived an earthquake. For the following few days after, those who had survived the quake moved about like zombies, dazed and bewildered as they tried to dig up the little that remained under the rubble. The school playground had become a morgue where rows upon rows of coffins of every size lay in view of those mountains which, in their brightness, now seemed to mock any pretense of grief. The earthquake had devastated everything I was attached to in Friuli, and even today any slight vibration still haunts my dreams (revised, De Luca 303-304).

I had arrived in Buia just four years before the earthquake, and today I can still consider myself a victim of this disaster, with all its terrible consequences and side effects. My life completely changed with the arrival of the *Orcolât* – a derogatory Friulian term for Ogre – a monstrous man-eating creature that popular tradition indicates as the cause of earthquakes in Friuli. He is a recurring figure, especially in folktales, who lives locked up in the Carnic mountains but when fidgety and restless can rock and destroy any landmark in his trail.

There is a picture of me that was posted in the *Toronto Star* on September 12, 1976, with the caption:

Former Torontonians, [...] and her husband [...] and daughter [...], stand in front of what's left of huge furniture store they owned in town of Buia. It and their hilltop house were destroyed in last week's earthquake, but (she) was in good spirits: «We're alive and well. We're young and can start all over again».

Now, in retrospect, I must have seemed quite naïve about what had happened, but then again newspapers have a way of telling only half the truth. They didn't add that many of my friends from Buia, Gemona and Osoppo had tragically lost their children or their parents in their efforts to escape and many older people sat in despair, like the figures in Chiarandini's painting. The chronicles of the time were fragmentary. They spoke of great destruction, collapsed old towns,

¹ Come home child.

caved in roofs, protruding beams and piles of rubble, under which there were still hundreds or thousands of injured people, and many already deceased. But those who escaped were disoriented, and many were not yet aware of the family members they may have lost in the catastrophe. I had removed all these memories and had refused to speak about my own experiences. It has taken me almost forty years to reconsider and retell the social and psychological effects on my family and on the many victims who survived. I had to be shocked and jolted by the visions of Amatrice before my own memories surfaced.

Considerations

Carlo Sgorlon, a well-known Friulian author who, before his death in 2009, had won more than forty literary prizes with his novels on the legends, myths, religiosity, turbulent war-time events and emigration in rural Friuli, underlines how the Friulians reacted to their relentless drama. Quoted in an article written by Paolo Medeossi for the *Messaggero Veneto* on May 6, 2016, Sgorlon calls attention to the fact that Friulians, on reasonable grounds, characteristically had a chronic distrust of the state, which they considered abusive, unfair, weak, cowardly and always ready to reward the rhetoricians, the demagogues, the cunning and the angry. For atavistic reasons the Friulians knew that nothing good could come from power and against it they exercised a secret protest. Friuli, however, had never reacted violently since their anarchism was private, ordered, laborious and constructive. The Friulian is a *homo faber* who expresses his personality in the art of building (Medeossi. *Gruppo*: 5). In his introduction to an anthology of collected newspaper articles written during the first years after the earthquake, in fact, Sgorlon records how, with financial aid from national communities, but also from immigrants from foreign countries and associations, the Friulians were able to overcome this moment of tragedy by rebuilding, in order of priority, first their factories (there is no future without work), then their damaged infrastructures (roads, bridges, aqueducts), then their homes, and finally their churches and castles (8).

The Italian Government had nominated Chamber of Deputies member Giuseppe Zamberletti as coordinator of aid efforts on behalf of the regional administration. Zamberletti assigned national funds for the reconstruction of the damaged buildings to the regional council of Friuli Venezia Giulia and to the local administrations. From September to December 1976 all earthquake victims were either accommodated in prefabricated buildings, in order to better cope with the winter, or relocated in apartments in the lagoon cities of Lignano, Grado, Bibione and Jesolo. Even after Zamberletti's mandate, the

regional government of Friuli Venezia Giulia was able to completely rebuild many towns, thanks to an accurate resource management, and world-wide international assistance, including many bordering European countries.

Nowadays, many years after the tragedy, the State's intervention in Friuli, now called *Modello Friuli*, is seen as a great example of efficiency and reliability. From this tragic event, which marked the history and evolution of my Friulian homeland, a great social awareness developed, including an awareness of the need for preventative environmental protection and the capacity to react and take action in the case of local and national emergency. This event spurred the foundation of the *Protezione Civile* (Civil Defense body), which deals with nationwide prevention and management of emergencies and catastrophic events. Today, the Department for Civil Protection has, over time, consolidated a level of excellence that is well known and treasured throughout Italy. We need only think of assistance to victims of other Italian catastrophic regions, or the millions of immigrants who have entered Italian borders, assisted by volunteers of the *Protezione Civile*. Their activities, such as forecasting and risk prevention, rescue of affected populations or overcoming emergency and mitigating risks, are directed towards the protection of the integrity of life and of the environment from any harm arising from disasters. In this light, the National Corps of Firemen, the Armed Forces, the Police, the State Forestry Corps, the scientific community, the Italian Red Cross, the National Health Service, voluntary organizations, and the national body of mountain rescuers and speleologists are the fundamental operational structures. An extraordinary example of solidarity also came from young people from all over Italy who spontaneously raced to Friuli to lend a hand in the recovery of disaster areas.

The earthquake had also damaged much of the historical and artistic heritage of Friuli. Numerous churches and monuments were razed to the ground and frescoes, stone and wooden statues, paintings, altars, organs and gold furnishings would have ended up under the rubble had it not been for the hundreds of volunteers mobilized to recover and collect the many works of art. These were brought to collection sites like the newly formed Centre for Cataloguing and Restoration at Villa Manin in Passariano, where experts restored and reassembled the recovered fragments. Busy behind the rescue operations of these masterpieces was Luciana Marioni Bros, who also laid the foundations for this important school (Meloni. *Dopo*: 3). The majority of art works have now returned to their communities of origin. On the other hand, architects like Francesco Doglioni, professor of restoration construction at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Venice, together with others, planned the reconstruction of Venzone Cathedral by applying the concept of anastylosis, a method that required the recovery and census of all original stones, a recognition of their initial

position and the capacity to recompose these stones on the ground. Despite the initial opposition of the Superintendent and of many academics who would have preferred to build a new church alongside the old ruins, for the simple reason that the exact relocation of nine thousand square stones recovered from the collapse seemed impossible, Francesco Doglioni met the challenge and was able to complete his project (Pellizzari. *Venezia*: II). Even the recovery of the altarpiece of the church of San Daniele in Cavazzo, a work attributed to Tintoretto originally located in the Sestiere Castello district in Venice during the Napoleonic era, would have been lost forever without the efforts of Gilberto Ganzer, Giancarlo Menis and Aldo Rizzi, then director of the Civic Museums of Udine, who were able to find sufficient financial support and artistic expertise for the restoration of many art works (Pellizzari. *Tintoretto*: IV).

An important result of the earthquake also involves the founding of the University of Udine in 1978. Shortly after the event, Don Francesco Placereani from Montenars had stated: «Intant dal taramot, i muarz si ju tirave fûr des maseriis pai pis e i vis pal cjâf. Nô o volin saltâ fûr dal taramot pal cjâf e no pai pis e duncje o vin di pratindi l'universitât»². In the midst of initial political ostracism and opposition from the regional University of Trieste that feared possible competition, the earthquake brought together students, teachers, clergymen, professionals, laymen and local institutions within the Friulian community who were mobilized to collect the necessary signatures (at least 50,000) for a proposed law of popular initiative directed toward the creation of a university in Friuli (Pellizzari. *Placereani*: I). Tarcisio Petracco, promoter for the collection of signatures, had also requested the support of the *Fogolars Furlans* around the world. Over 125,000 people, some still living in tents, signed the petition, highlighting their legitimate demands for a university that would contribute to the civil, social and economic progress and rebirth of Friuli, in particular in recovering and developing the original strands of culture, language, traditions and history of Friuli. The university, considered the missing link for the reconstruction of Friuli, was created only after a long and hard political struggle, which had initiated in 1965 after doctors of the Hospital of Udine asked for a medical faculty. Thanks to this large mobilization Friuli finally gained its university through a provision contained in the first organic law dated August 8, 1977 for financial assistance in the reconstruction of Friuli (Pellizzari. *Ateneo*: 12) and implemented by decree of the President of the Republic on March 6, 1978.

² During the earthquake the dead were pulled out by their feet while those alive were pulled out by their head. We want to come out of the earthquake with our heads therefore we must demand a university.

As underlined by Paolo Medeossi, the *Modello Friuli* can be considered something truly unique, perhaps utopian and inimitable, because every disaster, despite the similarity of the scenario, in the end represents a specific story, since it is conditioned by the place where it occurs, by the people it affects, by variables linked to roads, epoch, kinds of aid offered and communications systems. To build 'where it was' and 'how it was' requires endless sacrifices and a stronger spirit of initiative in everything. The Friulians, more than 40 years ago, were able to do this because the operating front was represented not only by technicians, businesses, bricklayers but especially by 90,000 affected families, who, cohesive and supportive, immediately rolled up their sleeves and began to rebuild. It was their strong spirit that ensured the success of innovative and effective laws enacted by politicians (Medeossi. *Modello*: 7)

Il Friul al ringrazie e nol dimentee³

In less than one minute, Friuli was devastated and brought to its knees, yet despite this immense tragedy the Friulians found, within their roots, the necessary strength to stand up, come together in solidarity, and recommence again. However, this would not have been possible without the unprecedented mobilization of the members of the *Fogolârs Furlans* that gathered streams of solidarity from around the world to make them converge in a Friuli shaken by the earthquake. The shocking news of the earthquake had created a climate of anguish and trepidation in the Friulian communities abroad, which immediately responded with love and support. As pointed out by Paolo Urbani, Mayor of Gemona on May 6, during the 40th anniversary memorial celebrations of the earthquake, in the presence of 55 representatives of the *Fogolârs* from Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Canada, the United States, France, Switzerland, Luxemburg, Belgium, Austria, Great Britain and Australia, the Friulians from these numerous *Fogolârs* were the true ambassadors for the reconstruction of their homeland. They became spokespersons of that tragedy, involving first of all the Italian communities that had emigrated in the various countries and later rallying their governments to support and back their Friuli relief initiatives. Canada, the United States (with Vice-President Rockefeller) and Australia, are perfect examples, where Friulian immigrants had earned the reputation of being trust-worthy, hard-working and honest people. These *Fogolârs Furlans* acted as a sounding board to stir the consciences of many nations

³ Friuli is grateful and does not forget.

which organized fund raising operations to finance the construction of many community schools, homes and residences for the elderly in villages north of Gemona that had been completely destroyed.

In the end, the period of reconstruction experienced by the Friulians, and all those who helped them, was admirable, and the *Modello Friuli* is still cited and imitated in its operational methods in many parts of the world. Those who came to work with the Friulians learned to appreciate their seriousness, their love of work, their caliber and their ability to react with dignity to misfortune. The earthquake was tragic but in its wake it opened up social, financial and cultural possibilities that would have been inconceivable for Friulians in the immediate post-war years.

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