

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO

MAGAZINE



**Walking the Freedom Trail
from Sulmona to Casoli**

page 5

**The Good Friday
Procession in Chieti**

page 9

**Marano dei Marsi:
The Rock That Held**

page 19

CONTENTS



- 02. EDITOR'S NOTE
- 03. NEWS AND EVENTS
- 05. WALKING THE FREEDOM TRAIL FROM SULMONA TO CASOLI
- 09. THE GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION IN CHIETI
- 15. CAPITAL OF CULTURE OR JUST CAPITALISING ON CULTURE?
- 19. MARANO DEI MARSI: THE ROCK THAT HELD
- 24. THE LAST JUDGEMENT OF SANTA MARIA IN PIANO
- 29. A LONG-EARED ADDICTION IN GORIANO VALLI
- 30. SPEAKING ABRUZZESE: STA 'BBONE ROCCHE, STA 'BBONE TUTTA LA ROCCHE!
- 31. QUICK STOP, EASY TRAILS
- 32. BEST EATS: DOLCI DI PASQUA FROM ABRUZZO
- 33. TRADITIONAL RECIPES: RAVIOLI DOLCI TERAMANI, LA PIGNA FROM CASTEL DI SANGRO



ON THE COVER:

Marano dei Marsi. Photo by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 19.

LEFT:

Marano dei Marsi. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 19.

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Editor's Note

This issue of ABRUZZISSIMO lands on Easter Sunday – by far the most important and most deeply felt celebration in the Abruzzo calendar. The region still preserves the true, solemn spirit of *Pasqua* through ancient rituals, and in this issue, we look at one of the oldest: the *Processione del Venerdì Santo* in **Chieti**. I spoke with Giulio Obletter, governor of the *Arciconfraternita del Sacro Monte dei Morti* – the brotherhood that has organised the procession since its very beginning – and he shared its fascinating history with me.

Every April, hundreds of people from across Italy and beyond gather in **Sulmona (AQ)** to walk the Freedom Trail, retracing the route taken by escaped Allied soldiers during the Second World War as they crossed the Gustav Line to rejoin their regiments. Read our story about *il Sentiero della Libertà* – and if you can, walk it.

Also in this issue, Alessandro Chiappanuvoli takes a clear-eyed look at **L'Aquila** 17 years on from the earthquake. The city has been almost rebuilt in brick and mortar – but has it truly recovered? And as it takes on the title of Italian Capital of Culture 2026, not everyone is convinced that 300 events and 16 million euros are quite the right prescription for what still ails it.

A few weeks ago, I visited **Marano dei Marsi (AQ)**, a small cluster of houses huddled on a mountaintop, one of the very few places to escape the 1915 Marsica earthquake unscathed. Silent, almost deserted, and heartachingly beautiful, it opens its fragile soul to patient explorers. Read my piece, go there, see it – and if it moves you, pass the word on.

Have you tried the *pigna* from **Castel di Sangro (AQ)**? If not, arm yourself with time and patience and give it a go with the recipe at the end of this issue. And if you think sweet ricotta-filled *ravioli* and a robust tomato ragù have no business on the same plate – think again. The *ravioli dolci teramani* recipe in this issue might just change your mind.

Buona Pasqua! Enjoy the April issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



NICKNAMES IN ABRUZZO'S VILLAGES – OUR NEXT WEBINAR

The third free event in our ABRUZZISSIMO webinar series takes place on **April 18**, dedicated to one of Abruzzo's most revealing cultural traditions: the *soprannomi*, the art of naming people the way a community actually sees them. Every village had them – nicknames rooted in a trade, a physical quirk, a long-forgotten blunder, or a feud nobody can quite explain anymore. *Ju Sciancate. Lu Callarare. Ciaccaficur'*. If you have Abruzzese roots, this might unlock memories – a grandfather's nickname you never quite understood, a family joke that finally makes sense. Following the success of our first two webinars, join us to explore what these names tell us about Abruzzese humour, identity, and village life. We will send you the link to join the webinar next week.

THE REGION IS RUNNING OUT OF DOCTORS

Abruzzo has lost one-fifth of its GPs in just five years, placing it third in Italy for the steepest decline in family doctors, according to the *Fondazione Gimbe*. With 237 more set to retire by 2028, the pressure is only going to grow. For now, the shortfall remains small – just 12 vacant posts, partly because Abruzzo has fewer patients per doctor than the national average. Across Italy, the shortage traces back to years of poor planning that simply didn't train enough new doctors to replace those reaching retirement age – and Abruzzo is feeling the consequences.



SANTA MARIA IN PIANO REOPENS AFTER A DECADE

The church of Santa Maria in Piano in **Loreto Aprutino (PE)** will reopen on 24 April, after almost three years of restoration work funded by the Ministry of Culture at a cost of €1 million. The church had been closed since the 2016–2017 central Italy earthquakes that caused some structural damage of the building. The church has been reinforced against future seismic risk and some frescoes has been restored. First documented in 864, Santa Maria in Piano is among the oldest and most significant religious monuments in the region. Read more about its magnificent Last Judgement fresco on page 24.

WOMEN MEAN BUSINESS IN ABRUZZO

Abruzzo ranks third in Italy for female entrepreneurship. In 2025, the region had nearly 36,000 women-led businesses, according to the latest Infocamere report processed by the *Centro Studi of the Agenzia per lo Sviluppo L'Aquila* – making it Italy's third region by incidence of female enterprise. **Chieti** leads within the region, with a strong focus on agriculture, while **Teramo** stands out for manufacturing and **Pescara** for commerce. Women in Abruzzo are significantly more likely to be running a farm than their counterparts elsewhere in Italy.



L'AQUILA'S TEATRO SAN FILIPPO RETURNS AFTER 17 YEARS

One of **L'Aquila's** finest baroque interiors is set to welcome audiences again on 17 April, when the Teatro San Filippo throws open its doors after a long post-earthquake restoration. The deconsecrated church of San Filippo Neri – rough-faced outside, breathtakingly ornate within – has been restored with part-funding from over €1.1 million raised through [Domani 21/04.09](#), a charity single recorded by 56 leading Italian artists, alongside national reconstruction funds and €500,000 from the municipality. The 206-seat theatre, managed by the Comune di L'Aquila, will host drama, concerts, and cultural events.

PESCARA'S POPULATION IS SHRINKING

According to the recently published statistics (2024) just 640 babies were born in the Adriatic city, against 1,430 deaths – a natural balance of -790. That means roughly 45 births for every 100 deaths. With a current population of 118,313, **Pescara** has recorded more deaths than births for several consecutive years, reflecting a trend seen across Italy but particularly pronounced here. The figures are all the more striking given that Pescara is one of Abruzzo's busiest and most dynamic cities with a university, busy beaches, and a thriving food and nightlife scene.

DID YOU KNOW?



LET'S GET BACK TO BOMBA

Have you ever lost track of a conversation, only to drag it back to the original subject? In Italian, there's a wonderfully specific expression for exactly that moment: *Torniamo a Bomba* – literally, "let's return to Bomba." According to the Zingarelli dictionary, it means to resume an interrupted discussion or return to the main point. And yes, Bomba is that pretty town perched above the Bomba lake in the province of Chieti.

The most popular explanation credits a 19th-century parliamentarian from the town, Silvio Spaventa, who later became a government minister. The story goes that during a Chamber of Deputies debate about road construction, Spaventa kept steering the conversation back to works needed in Bomba's territory – only to be repeatedly interrupted by colleagues and forced off-topic. Undeterred, he would patiently repeat: *Torniamo a Bomba*. Abruzzesi are proud of the story to this day and hold onto it firmly – much as Spaventa himself refused to be derailed. Historians, though, note there's no written record linking him to the phrase. The episode survives only through oral tradition passed between parliamentarians.

French has its equivalent – *Revenons à nos moutons* – and English speakers simply say "let's get back on track." But only Italian has Abruzzo and the picturesque town of Bomba to thank for it.



WALKING THE FREEDOM TRAIL FROM SULMONA TO CASOLI

By Anna Lebedeva

Every spring, hundreds of people lace up their boots in Sulmona and set off into the mountains of the Maiella. They are retracing one of the most dramatic – and least told – stories of the Second World War.

In the autumn of 1943, Italy was cut in two. The Germans had constructed a formidable defensive barrier – the Gustav Line – running from the Tyrrhenian coast to the Adriatic, with the massif of the Maiella forming a brutal natural wall along its length. To the south were the Allied forces advancing northward; to the north, German-occupied territory and the remnants of the Fascist regime. For thousands of men, the mountains between represented the difference between captivity and freedom.

Just outside Sulmona, in a locality called Fonte d'Amore, stood Campo 78 – a prisoner-of-war camp that had its origins in the First World War and had been repurposed to hold Allied soldiers captured in the North African campaigns. At its peak it held around 3,000 men: British, American, South African, New Zealander, Australian.

Photo: Walkers on the Sentiero della Libertà

THE DAY THE GATES OPENED

The announcement of the Italian armistice on 8 September 1943 threw Campo 78 into instant chaos. The Italian guards, suddenly without orders or purpose, abandoned their posts. Before the Germans could move in and re-establish control, the prisoners found themselves, improbably, free.

What followed was disorganised, desperate, and dangerous. The men scattered into the fields of the Valle Peligna, up the slopes of Monte Morrone, through the surrounding villages. When the German forces arrived and retook the camp, many prisoners had already escaped. Ahead of them lay the Maiella, and beyond it, the Allied lines. In distance, barely a few kilometres as the crow flies. In reality, weeks of mountain crossing without maps, in enemy-held territory. "To the south were the British, the Americans, the Australians, the New Zealanders and to the north, the Germans, and the Italians under the Fascist regime," explains Adelaide Strizzi, former teacher at the Liceo Scientifico who for many years coordinated the

organisational work as vice president of the Associazione Culturale Il Sentiero della Libertà. "They wanted to get over the mountains to reach freedom, reunite with their regiments coming up from the south to liberate Italy."

THE PEOPLE WHO HELPED

What made the difference was the population of the Valle Peligna. Peasants, shepherds, ordinary families – people with almost nothing – opened their doors to strangers who didn't speak their language and whose presence put every household at risk of German reprisals. "The people of Sulmona put themselves at the prisoners' disposal, hiding them in cellars, in stables, in attics – everywhere they could – and then at night they would organise groups with a local guide who led them through the mountains. Led through extremely rough terrain in the winter of 1943-44 – the dead of winter – the escapees crossed the Maiella with a guide, because otherwise they had no idea where to go," says Strizzi. This spontaneous, uncoordinated wave of solidarity acquired its name only many years later: *Resistenza Umanitaria* – Humanitarian Resistance.

Campo 78 near Sulmona; archive photo



Among those who crossed the Maiella in those months, guided by the people of Abruzzo, was a young Italian officer named Carlo Azeglio Ciampi – who would later serve as Prime Minister from 1993 to 1994 and President of the Italian Republic from 1999 to 2006.

A SCHOOL PROJECT

Many years later, those same escape routes through the Maiella would become the foundation of a remarkable cultural and historical project. The story of the Sentiero della Libertà begins, perhaps surprisingly, in a classroom. In the 1990s, the Liceo Scientifico Fermi in Sulmona was approached by a British association with two memoirs – *Spaghetti and Barbed Wire* by John E. Fox and *Escape from Sulmona* by Donald I. Jones – written by former POWs recounting their escapes through the Maiella. The contact had been initiated by J. Keith Killby, a former prisoner who had established the Monte San Martino Trust in England to repay, in some small measure, the debt owed to the Italian families who had sheltered Allied soldiers during the war. The Trust offered placements and cultural

exchanges to young Italians, particularly the descendants of those who had given help.

The school began translating the memoirs and conducting its own historical research led by Professor Mario Setta and the school's headmaster, Ezio Perino. In the course of that work, they discovered Ciampi

When the then-President learned of the project, he made contact with the school and donated his personal diary from that wartime crossing. It was, says Strizzi, a turning point.

On 17 May 2001, the project took on physical form. From Piazza Garibaldi in Sulmona, a group set off on foot – former prisoners and their families, students from the Fermi, and President Ciampi himself, who came to inaugurate the route. It was the first official walk of what would become an annual event. “This group walk that we created has grown stronger over the years,” says Strizzi. “On average, between 350 and 400 people take part every year: schools, families with children from across Italy, and some people come from England, New Zealand, Australia, and United States, often the descendants of the men who once fled through mountains, returning now to walk them in daylight, in peace, in gratitude.”

Photos: (below) Walkers on the Sentiero della Libertà; (right) the Sacrario della Brigata Maiella in Taranta Peligna, one of the stops along the trail



THE TRAIL TODAY

The route covers roughly 60 kilometres, from Campo 78 at Fonte d'Amore in Sulmona to Casoli – the town where, on 5 December 1943, the partisan Brigata Maiella was formed, and where today a long memorial wall in the Piazza della Memoria bears witness to what happened here.

Along the way the path runs through Campo di Giove, climbs to the Guado di Coccia at 1,674 metres, and descends into the Valle del Sangro, following the line the escaped prisoners walked in darkness and silence 80 years ago.

The trail is waymarked and included among the *Cammini d'Abruzzo* recognised by the Abruzzo Regional Tourism Department.

The annual group walk takes place each spring. This year's edition falls on 25 April – Liberation Day–

A group of walkers on the trail near Campo di Giove

marking the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Italian Republic, but it will only include one leg of the trail, from Sulmona to Campo di Giove.

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IF YOU GO

To take part in the group walk on 25 April, [register online](#) attaching a medical fitness certificate.

You will also have to pay a €10 registration fee. For more details see the *Associazione Culturale IL Sentiero della Libertà* Facebook [page](#).

The trail can also be walked independently at any time of year – roughly 56 kilometres over three days, with each leg gaining between 730 and 800 metres in elevation. Full information on stages, elevation profiles, GPX tracks and places to stay overnight is available on the official [website](#).

Photos courtesy of Associazione Culturale "il Sentiero della Libertà - Freedom Trail"



TRADITION

THE GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION IN CHIETI

Text and photos by Anna Lebedeva



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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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