

What Will Italy Become Without Its Elders?

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The author's first daughter shares time with her great-grandfather Giuseppe, born in 1925 and recently deceased. Daniela Valsecchi

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The coronavirus has swept away a generation of wisdom-keepers, WWII survivors, storytellers, parents, and grandparents in Bergamo, Italy. An anthropologist mourns with her community—the hardest hit in the country—and asks all of us the most difficult questions of this pandemic.

By Luisa Cortesi (<https://www.sapiens.org/authors/luisa-cortesi/>)

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LUISA CORTESI ([HTTPS://WWW.SAPIENS.ORG/AUTHORS/LUISA-CORTESI/](https://www.sapiens.org/authors/luisa-cortesi/)) is an environmental anthropologist at Cornell University.

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What Will Italy Become Without Its Elders?

Our elders are dying one by one, oak trees struck down by an acceleration of greed and skepticism. The generation that was raised in the angst of World War II is gone.

Coffins, too many to bury. Lined up at the Monumental Cemetery, in churches, in convoys in the streets around Borgo Palazzo—our elders, waiting to be turned back to ashes.

The crematorium fire never ceases burning, smoldering 24 hours a day. Crackling, it consumes bones, lace collars, mustaches, and memories.



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Many rested their hopes on a tube down the throat and died in the painless emptiness of sedation. Many more were never reached by an ambulance and asphyxiated by lung exhaustion, rarefied oxygen, sheer solitude. Some couples, instead, chose to simply surrender life, together, at home and with each other.

To none of those remaining, the comfort of seeing their beloved one last time, of retaining the contour of their hands or the feel of their skin, of remembering. To none of us, the possibility of accompanying and saluting them, of accepting our loss.

Within the coffins is the wisdom of the place I come from, draped in a shroud saturated with disinfectant.

What will we be without our elders? A meadow exposed to every strong wind that blows, a mountain with an amputated peak where the snow cannot settle. How will we put the depth of the field back together? How will we build perspective again?

New bushes and shrubs, we have a shallow memory: Our bones don't hold as yet the winter fog of the plains; we leave the crumbs on the tablecloth, certain of abundance, yet retain what is worth being forgotten; we do not recite the enchanted riddles of the [tombola](https://www.italyheritage.com/traditions/christmas/tombola.htm) (<https://www.italyheritage.com/traditions/christmas/tombola.htm>) nor feel the need to know them. We have looser moorings, historically and ecologically, yet aren't more supple in mind and spirit.

Dear Doctor, encumbered with the most atrocious of choices, I beg you: Do all you can to not remove the ventilator from our elders. In an old man is a grandchild who needs him in order to grow up well and wise. He is our dictionary, the village register, the fount of the stream that runs toward the village square and then out into the fields. In an old woman is a grandchild who needs her in order to grow up compassionate and large-spirited. She is the village school, the warmth of the evening soup, the promise that time will bring not only fragility but also its acceptance.

Our elders, taken away like the air this disease steals. What we will miss the most, once we emerge from this and start all over, is our elders, whose dedication is carved in everything we have to rebuild.

Dear Mayor, I implore you, bring back the ashes of those cremated elsewhere. Find a grassland to bury our loved ones here. Lay them to rest in our countryside, *nella nostra campagna*. We need our elders to return to the land that remains theirs if we want this land to continue to be ours.

When this pandemic ends, we'll call the grassland where they are buried "the old folks' field." We'll plant barley, red poppies, and oak trees. We'll sit with our children in the sun and teach them our dialect, while we remember what happened in the spring of 2020. There, we will make the future grow again.

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I

in my community, in the city and the province of Bergamo, Italy, we are witnessing the decimation of a whole generation by the novel coronavirus. We grieve, between anguish and guilt. And we ask how we can ensure that the significance of this generation will not be completely lost.

I originally wrote my lament on March 17 as a letter to Bergamo's Mayor Giorgio Gori, recognizing the unfortunate and time-sensitive decisions his role is imposing on him, and offering a reflection on the loss of our community's elders as well as a possible preparation for mourning and remembering.

Bergamo, in Lombardia, is the epicenter of the outbreak in Italy followed closely by the neighboring province (equivalent to counties in the U.S.) of Brescia and Milan. The number of victims is impossible to calculate, with the only realistic estimate obtained by comparing the number of deceased in March 2020 with the same data from previous years. Bergamo, as a province, lost as many people as it would in six months (5,400 against 900 in 2019 (https://www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/bergamo-citta/coronavirus-the-real-death-tool-4500-victims-in-one-month-in-the-province-of_1347414_11/)). A similar tragedy happened in the small communities around the city of Bergamo: San Pellegrino, 42 deceased in March 2020, and two in March 2019; San Giovanni Bianco, 41 this March, two last March.



(https://www.sapiens.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/02_angelas_parents.jpg)
Giuseppina "Pina" and Armando "Mano" were a close-knit couple who lived on a farm at the outskirts of Bergamo, Italy. Angela Colnaghi Guaitani

administrators say, as many as half of their residents.

Medically speaking, it is certainly more difficult to save people of an older age. Also, the scarcity of resources—primarily ventilators—has forced medical personnel to the dreadful decision of prioritizing the patients who have the highest odds of survival. While the doctors I spoke with described collective and painful decisions that torment them, the questions for an anthropologist are: What cultural values intervene in such decisions? Would societies that treasure elders as the prime holders of knowledge, wisdom, cultural identity, and history make the same choices? Would certain people be able to gather necessary resources for themselves because of their political or economic power, regardless of their age and medical condition?

Medical personnel are the sacrificial victims. Not only have they behaved heroically, working in conditions of extreme danger and stress, often separated from their families for extended periods of time, but many of them (<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/927753>), and their families, have paid the highest possible price of this pandemic. But doctors have also spoken out, even if under conditions of anonymity, about the capitalist principles that, over the last 20 years, have ruined the public health system in Lombardia: They explained how savings on public spending were converted into corporate bonuses, a legalized profiting of public resources that is nothing short of bribery masked by the rhetoric of meritocracy.

In the town where the outbreak started, the community blames the local factories that have units in Wuhan, China, and, it seems, had repatriated and reinstated personnel from there. That was before it was known that the asymptomatic and the recently recovered remain highly contagious. But even when cases were exponentially increasing, local and national authorities, under the influence of the same industry leaders, prevented the containment measures that the Italian *Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (<https://www.iss.it/>) (the technical scientific body of the National Health System) had recommended.

There will be time for a more careful analysis of what happened in Bergamo, an affluent mountainous community that prides itself on its incomprehensible dialect and principles of hard work. For now, it is its pain and devastation that tear my heart. Local cemeteries, funeral homes, and the crematorium have been unable to keep up with the burials. Coffins have piled up in churches—not for funerals, now prohibited, but awaiting burial or cremation. When even churches became too crowded with caskets, the mayor summoned the army to [transport the corpses](#)

In the city and in the province, both testing facilities and emergency transportation have been overwhelmed for a full month. The large majority of those who died, possibly 90 percent (https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/coronavirus-in-lombardia-9-morti-su-10-mai-giunti-in-terapia-intensiva_16362350-202002a.shtml), passed away at home, slowly suffocating while waiting for an ambulance. Others, in particular couples who have been together for a long time, decided not to be separated: They did not even call an ambulance, resigned to wait for the end at home, hand in hand.

The obituaries in the local newspaper, generally spanning one to two pages, now take up to 13, even though not all the dead have the privilege of being included. Those pages bear witness to the proportional relationship between the number of victims and their ages, almost defying the demographic distribution: a few youngsters, some in their 50s, a few more in their 60s, and countless in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. Nursing care facilities have lost, some

(https://www.ecodibergamo.it/videos/video/la-berga-mo-che-lotta-in-silenzio_1045235_44/) occupies its elegant squares, *le sue piazze*. Death notices cannot be posted, for they would compel people to gather. Death knells cannot be rung, for they would further sadden. Behind each closed door, undiluted agony: Each and every one of us has lost mothers, fathers, grandparents, close friends, neighbors. And the tormenting guilt: What should we have done differently? (<https://www.ilgiorno.it/bergamo/cronaca/coronavirus-bare-1.5081611>)” from Bergamo.

Contrary to the many images of music and humor from other regions (<https://www.sapiens.org/culture/coronavirus-sardinia-music/>) in Italy, Bergamo is deserted, stripped of its vivacity by the cold solitude of the countless coffins.

Nothing but strident silence

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Collectively, we have lost the generation of our elders, and with them, our history, tradition, language, taste, knowledge, wisdom, commonsense, and perhaps our strength. Now that we need to imagine how to trust one another behind a mask, reconsider what we most value, express affection and care while foregoing touch, un-globalize ourselves yet recognize our interdependence, prioritize equality and competence over tendencies toward autocracy—we have lost most of the expertise we could count on to confront these challenges. In honoring our elders, we will find the courage and the patience to rebuild.

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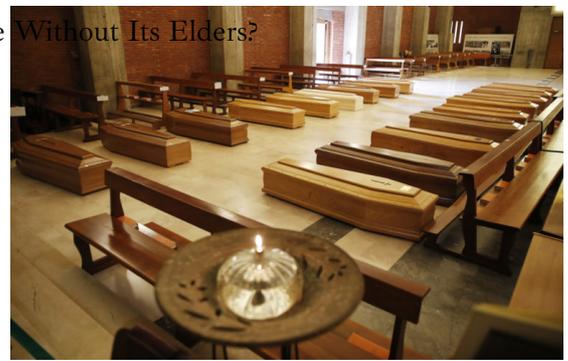
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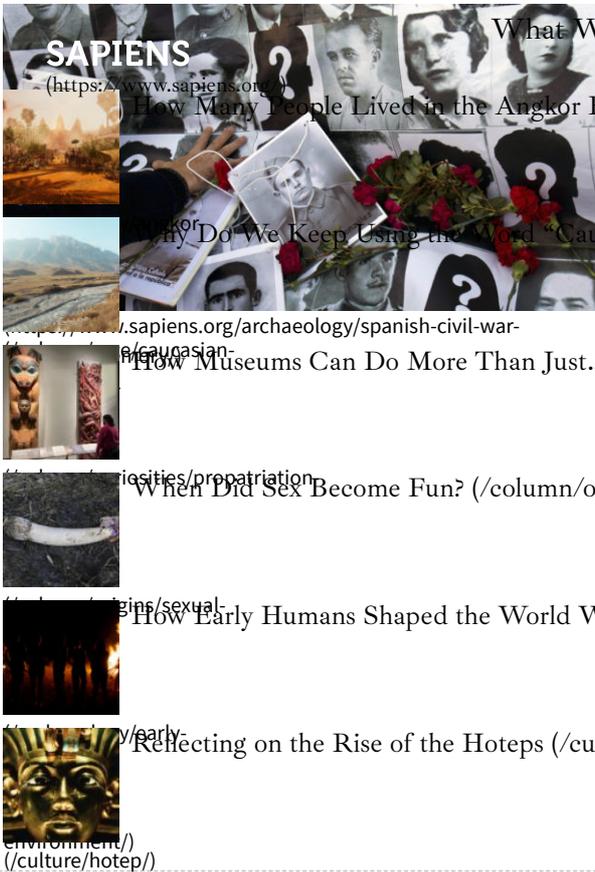
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In March, an overwhelming death toll in Bergamo and other hard-hit cities in northern Italy brought rows of coffins to churches and cemeteries. Antonio Calanni/AP Photo



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