




Giacche Verdi Bronte

Final Report

My experience of a volunteering year











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Arrival and first weeks

My arrival in Sicily was a long way full of trouble and a shock therapy regarding the Italian infrastructure, which I would have a lot of fun within the following year. But before this, I met the other volunteers at the translation of Munich. We came in a group of four. We all were German and were very excited for our time in Sicily. But who are we? In Munich I met Tom, Emy and Friedemann three other Volunteers in my age. After 33 hours full of train delays and the sad try to communicate with our non-existent Italian skills, we arrived in Bronte. This arrival felt like coming home after a long journey. In the house we met the others. Those were Nicole (an older volunteer), Justus (a volunteer from the generation before us) and Nico and Louisa (two Erasmus+) students. Since the students have shorter service periods, they change during the year, so there were also Judith, Anna, Marie, Corinna and Lennart, and three other students who came later during my year in Bronte to do their Erasmus+ internship here. We were given a very warm welcome by the others and spent our first evening together on the rooftop, which is a really nice feature of the volunteer's house. But I'll write more about the house later.






Then, the first weeks together started. In my opinion, those weeks are the most important if you start an experience like this. You learn to live together with others to grow together as a group and community. You get used to sharing your rooms and all the stuff in the house and taking your personal time if you need it. During my first weeks in Bronte and in the house with the others, we developed a good group dynamic, so that our time together was nice and relaxed. We did a lot of trips together and experienced life in this small (the description of the others; for me, coming from the countryside, Bronte seems big) but beautiful town on Mount Etna. Nicole and Justus showed us the best bars (just Tartufo and the bar next to it, because Tartufo is closed on Mondays) and the best places to eat pizza (just Bona Bonè: it is the best place to eat pizza in the world) and we did a lot of activities like sports or music together in our free time. Also, during the field work, we became a good team. I think this great dynamic we had is a result of our

first weeks, when we were all willing to learn how to deal with each other. Also, some conflicts or unhealthy dynamics between single persons were part of the first weeks, and sadly they kept during the whole time together, even when we learned how to deal with it, but they were never really gone. So, during this time I have learned that you can't be friends with everybody, and how to accept and deal with all of the people. I think that the first weeks were very important, especially for that character-building experience.

Furthermore, those first weeks were necessary for my work at Giacche Verdi Bronte. I experienced that the Italian language is much more important than I expected. Of course, they said during the application phase, that it would be useful to able to speak or learn Italian, but that it is not necessary to speak Italian fluently when you arrive. That is not completely true. During our first two days, everybody at Giacche Verdi spoke English, so it was easy to communicate. But then one day we had to go to the fields for the first day. At this point English wasn't existing anymore, and that was completely fine. Bronte is a small town in Sicily; if I would try to speak English with the most people in my hometown in Germany, they would also constantly be trying to speak with us in a language we didn't understand. Of course we started to learn Italian, me at home and the rest of the group in the office, but that was not the vocabulary we needed at the field. So, during our first weeks we communicated with our hands and feet and very little Italian. With time we learned Italian and were able to understand and speak with the others on the field.

We improved this important language skill mostly in the office. We used different websites for learning and received support from Andrea and Lidia, who are working in the office of Giacche Verdi. We did some worksheets and Italian conversations together with them. Combined with the self-learning process, we were able to learn the most important basics in Italian during our first weeks. And to be honest, that's very important for survival in Bronte, because nearly nobody can speak English in this town. But more about Bronte later.



Work with Giacche Verdi

During my time in Sicily with Giacche Verdi we experienced a lot of different work fields, full of random side quests and tasks where we often questioned how all this fits together. In the end, what and how we have done it makes sense.





To understand the work with Giacche Verdi, it makes sense to structure it in three different work fields, even if they overlap. First there is fieldwork, which is every time and everywhere.

Because there is always something to do in the field. But there are also days in Sicily where you'll have bad weather. Those were the days where we were in the office of Giacche Verdie and worked at our individual tasks. And finally, there was a big part of environmental education in the second half of my year at Sicily. In this time, we visited a lot of schools, to explain our projects to the children around Etna.

All in all, you can say that the work of Giacche Verdi is really varied and you can experience and learn new things in really different ways and areas.

Fieldwork





The fieldwork was a task I really enjoyed. Giacche Verdi has different fields where they cultivate olives, almonds and most importantly pistachios, all in a sustainable way. In this case the volunteers are helping with every task on the field. For me it started with the almond harvest, followed by the pistachio harvest, which is done every second year. After this the longest and most exhausting harvest started: the olive harvest. It took more or less two months, from October until December. I was lucky not having to help every day, because in this time I also had another task in the office, but I helped enough days to get a bit crazy. Some days we worked from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. After days like this I saw olives falling into my face every time I closed my eyes. I want to be honest, it was a really hard and exhausting work, but in the end I'm happy that I could experience this, and through this work I have gained a completely different appreciation for the fruits we harvested. But the harvest was just a small part of the fieldwork we had done.

But first, it's time to name the most important people from the field. At the one hand side there is Gino Montagno, who is the president of Giacche Verdi Bronte and who helped especially during the harvest. He manages the volunteers' tasks, together with the president of the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung, Stefanie Hermsen, who mainly works in the office, when she is in Sicily, and manages the work and tasks there. And then there is Alessio Montagno, he is the good soul of fieldwork. His task at Giacche Verdi Bronte is to care about the fields and everything what has to be fixed by hand. I think he was the reason why especially Tom and I enjoyed the work on the field that much. During the new year, in January and February we had a lot of nice talks and lunch breaks on the field, where we had our own small BBQ. Often Alessio took some of his own Pecorino and wine and on some days, we bought some meat at our favorite salumeria and for me, so we created the best way to work on the field and prune the pistachio trees. I won't forget the "grande BBQ" too, which were with all the members of Giacche Verid Bronte and were placed after we finished a hard work like the different harvests or when somebody went home. These are beautiful memories from the field.

So obviously the fieldwork is hard, and you need more than just physical power to stand it. You have to deal with the language barrier every day, but it will get better, you need the mental stability to stand trough the long and exhausting olive harvest (maybe it was like this only this year) and you need to be willing to do this hard physical work every day under every weather condition. For me it was especially hard in the last month, when we had around 30 °C constantly. Of course, we started earlier and finished the work around midday, but still the "cold" morning hours were hot enough to sweat only from standing still. In this period, it was very important for Alessio to take breaks during work, to cool down a bit so not to collapse. So, the members of Giacche Verdi always took good care about us, but the work on the field had to be done, also under these hard conditions. It was quite clear, however, that both Alessio and all the other members of 'Giacche Verdi Bronte' were always keen to ensure that we were all doing well, even outside of work. They always tried to find a solution to our problems as quickly as possible and to help us.



Environmental Education

Another really nice part of the work was the environmental education, which I would split into two parts. During the winter months we visited the schools for the first time and held some presentations about our project with Terra Preta, and functions of trees, and we talked about the



impacts city trees can have for a community and the city climate. During this time, we volunteers hadn't such a big task. Mostly we took photos and did our presentation about ourselves. Our Italian was probably not good enough for more at this point. During this time, we all improved our Italian the most. We listened to the conversation with the children and Lidia and Andrea every day and also spoke about the slides of the main presentation, which gave me a confidence boost for my Italian.

The time in the schools was not that stressful for us volunteers, it rather created some nice memories. For example, one day Tom and me were in a school in Bronte, and after all our presentations, one child came to us and gave us a hug.

The time that created many more memories than this was the last month before the children went on summer holidays. We visited every school for a second time and did some outdoor lessons with the children. In these lessons we repeated the most important parts from the indoor lessons and additionally showed the functions that we explained with some experiments.



This time, I had my own station for the children, where I had my own station and conducted an experiment with them on my own. I showed them the filter function of biochar and terra preta, and I spoke with them about the biodiversity inside of the compost. At the beginning it was pretty overwhelming to give a lesson in a language I don't speak fluently, but it helped to 'jump into the cold water'. So, I had to do it, and I didn't have time to think about it.



I'll never forget the first day when I started the lesson and tried to repeat exactly the sentences I studied, just to realize that that is not the way it works. If you are leading a lesson, you cannot study the exact text, you must improvise,

otherwise nobody will understand you. So, the first lessons maybe weren't perfect, but with the time I improved my Italian enough to be able to just talk to the children, include some jokes during the lesson and answer their questions. In my opinion it is the biggest step, because first you must understand what they are asking, which is really complicated when they talk dialect with you, and then you have to find the correct words to answer it. In the end, I managed it, this interaction with the children created the most beautiful memories.

For example, one day I had the third group alone with a round 40 students, like in the two groups before. I was really exhausted and tired, because the first two groups were really loud and the teachers didn't care about helping me with the children. So, I was not really motivated to do the third group, but then I started and explained to the children something about the microorganisms in the compost. They listened to me really interested. When I explained how small those animals are, the boy next to me - he was between 6 and 10 years old - started tugging at the sleeves of my T-shirts. I turned to him and asked him what's up and he looked at me with his big eyes and asked, "Are they as small as me?". It was so cute and it fitted really well, because he actually was quite small and I answered yes to this question and then he looked at the group and said to the others, "Small like us!" and all of the group smiled. This taught me that what I'm doing has an impact on them and on the world. It showed me that I can reach them and that they might change something. On this day, it gave me the motivation to put as much effort as I could in the lesson for this group. This is just one example of such a nice memory. It often happened that some children came to me and thanked me for the lesson or asked some questions afterwards. It also happened that the teachers got really involved and asked some questions, too, and then helped me to reach the children, or they asked how they could use the methods to become more sustainable in daily life.





All in all, I really liked the work at the schools, it was a nice experience to speak with the children, to improve my Italian and to show them how to change something for a more sustainable world.

Office

Finally, there is one last part of the work that volunteers have at Giacche Verdi Bronte: the work in the office. Every time we couldn't go to the fields because of the weather, and we did not have any visits to schools, we went to the office. As I mentioned before, we studied our Italian or had our own tasks. Especially I had a lot of tasks in the office, so I also "chilled" at the office when the others worked on the field. Those personal tasks for me mostly were in a creative context. I drew the comic for the presentation that we showed at the schools during our winter lessons. It was a presentation with about 50 slides, and all of those were hand drawn by me. I also designed some educational information panels, which will be installed at an educational trail on the fields of Giacche Verdi Bronte. Finally, I had to cut some videos and create some posts for the social media of Giacche Verdi Bronte. In the end it sounds like really nice tasks for a person who likes to be creative like me and it was, but during these tasks I also learned that I don't want to work in a creative job in my future life. But let me explain this: Also, if this may be some critic, I would like to write about it for transparency and also, because it influenced my experience and my feelings here.

At some point those tasks got really stressful and hard to manage. This is connected to one of the biggest critic points of Giacche Verdi Bronte. Sometimes the work seems unstructured and senior management sometimes doesn't really know just how much work goes into certain tasks, particularly in the creative sector. So, with nearly every creative task, we came to the point that they sent me to the field for weeks and then they called me to ask whether I could finish my office task in the next few days. I told them earlier that it would take some weeks to finish a task. So, they sometimes gave some unrealistic deadlines for my tasks in the office. In the end, with the help from Andrea I managed to finish all the tasks despite the unrealistic deadlines, but to be honest, it got stressful every time and often I stayed longer in the office just to finish the work. The senior management was thankful and appreciated my overtime in the office. They gave me some extra days off or free afternoons to recover from the stress. In the end, I must say that it would be much more comfortable if they would ask and listen to the volunteers and give enough time and realistic deadlines, so to avoid this unnecessary stress for the volunteers which badly influences the overall experience of the voluntary year.

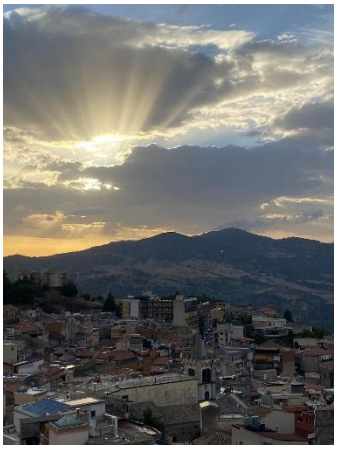
In the end I also liked my tasks at the office, and it did not influence my experience in a significant bad way, but of course I would have liked these tasks – which were actually quite enjoyable – not to have ended up being so chaotic and stressful.

Life in Bronte



Life in Bronte is really special. Yeah, I think that's what it describes the best. As I mentioned, for me Bronte is like a big city, but the mentality here is different. You know your neighbours and the people in the street. All are friendly and like to do some small-talk and are interested in what the "tedeschi" are doing in their town. So, from this point of view, Bronte is more like a village or a small town, I would say. From this warm social side to the overall living conditions in Bronte: Especially during the winter months, we experienced the cold side of living here.
It's a good point to talk about the living conditions of the Giacche Verdi Bronte volunteers.

The house



The house is a combination of, I think, three old apartments in the old part of the town. It has a lot of nice features like a rooftop with a beautiful view over the town and parts of the Nebrodi Mountains. In the early and late summer months we often ate on this rooftop and enjoyed the "dolce vita". Especially when we arrived, it was the perfect place to come together, get in contact with the others, and to develop the group dynamic I mentioned before. In the early summer months, it was really nice to enjoy the first warm days after the cold winter, I will write about this in a second.



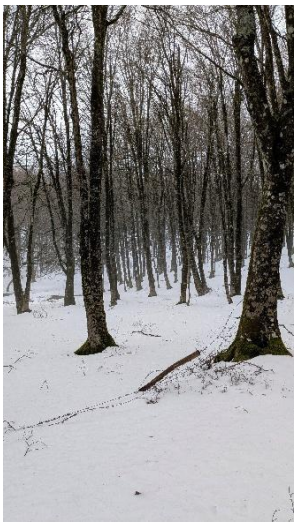
Another nice feature of the house is the basement with its own pizza oven and a little old cave. During our first days we had to clean it up and from then on, we sometimes baked some pizza in it. It is connected to the garden, which is also a beautiful feature of the house. During our time some cats got babies there and lived in the garden.

It also has a lemon tree and a mandarin tree. The fruits of these are really tasty and you can make strong, but good limoncello out of the lemons. We asked Andrea for a recipe and started a big production of some litters of limoncello.

The rest of the house includes five shared bedrooms, a small kitchen that sometimes reaches its limits when cooking for nine people, two living rooms, and also two bathrooms. One of those has a little community add on, because it is just split up from a little storage room, which includes the second fridge, by a shelf that you can see over from both sides. All in all, the house is quite old and some stuff might be broken or not as functional as new bought, but this was to be expected. Every year there are around fifteen new people living in this house, treating it like they want, so obviously, it's not like a new luxury apartment.

I must say that I had to lower my standard of living a bit in this house, but that is not just negative. I also learned what is really important and how to appreciate the small things.





The biggest downgrade of the house is that there is no good heating or air conditioning system. The real winter and summer months are hard in the house. There is one air conditioning system in one living room that can heat up or cool down the room, but that is not a solution for the bedrooms. So, during the winter the bedrooms get really cold. I think they were constantly under 10 °C, sometimes even colder when the night temperatures in Bronte dropped to negative. We managed to sleep with up to four blankets per person and chilled most of the time in the one room we could heat up. In the end, it was a hard time. We also had some gas heaters to heat up our rooms a bit, but the side effect of those was your room was starting to smell like gas, so you had to open the window for fresh air. All in all, we could stand this time, but we had a lot of colds during this period. And in the summer, it's exactly the other way around. In the bedrooms there are constant temperatures of over 30 °C. This way, it's more or less impossible to sleep in these rooms, also because you shouldn't open the

door if you want to avoid being eaten alive by sand flies. Some nights I tried to sleep with two ventilators next to me, but from one point on, also this is not a perfect solution. It felt like sleeping in a desert storm. A better solution was to sleep on the rooftop, as long as the night temperatures were under 25 °C. When they got higher, I was lucky to be alone at the house, so I could sleep in the air-conditioned living room. I recommend using an insect repellent against the sand flies every evening on your whole body, before finally going to sleep. So, I was able to stand through these special times of the year. That is possible in any case, but you have to learn how to deal with it. I don't know of a functional solution for this problem, because the electricity probably can't stand an air conditioner in every room. It reaches its limits when you decide to cook something in the oven, use the washing machine and one air conditioner at the same time. But this is a general problem with the Sicilian infrastructure, as well as the fact that you shouldn't drink the tab water at the house. So, either you have to buy your water at the supermarket, or you go to one of the fountains in the city and refill your bottles every morning - that's how we did it.

All in all, the house is pretty nice and if you learn how to deal with the different problems it has, you will have a really good time there. I had. I think, for what it is supposed to be - a place to host some teenagers and young adults who decide to do a volunteering year at Sicily, it is pretty ok. It confronts you with the real living conditions you have here, when you are not a tourist. You learn to understand the culture and mentality much faster. In the end, you are living here like a Sicilian and not like a tourist and that is what it is supposed to be, isn't it? During conversations with Lidia and Andrea from GV, we experienced that the named problems often are typical for the life here and not just particularly for the volunteer's house.





Bronte - The small town on Mount Etna

After all my time here, Bronte feels like a second home. To be honest, the best feature of Bronte for me is Mount Etna. I love hiking and going to nature, and it was really special for me to live on an active volcano. We often went up to "Piano dei Grilli", which is a parking area for hiking, and did some hikes there. Sometimes we also took our tents and slept

at a Refugio. Those hikes I will never forget. One time we also took some beer and tiramisu with us and had a really good time there. We played beer pong on the Etna, and during the night a fox ate the rest of our tiramisu. All in all, we had some funny stories with the foxes on the Etna. At another hike a fox stole one of Emy's shoes, so she had to walk down 13,5 km just in flipflops.



Bronte has plenty to offer even aside from Mount Etna. During our second month here, there was the big "Sagra del Pistacchio". At two weekends they built up little tents on the main street where you could buy everything with pistachios. I think my favourite was fried pistachio-icecream.

It was a beautiful chance to experience the culture of this specific town, which is built up on the pistachios. Every evening there were live bands or music groups which walked through the streets. It was a really nice atmosphere, and we chilled down in the city very often on those two weekends.

At other times, we often went to bars to meet up new friends and take an aperitivo, or we went to our favourite pizza place at Bona Bonè. Bronte is not a town with much action, apart from fireworks that spawn randomly at least once a week, but for me as a guy from the countryside, it has exactly the right amount of a city. I really enjoyed getting in contact with the locals and doing some smalltalk everywhere. It was really funny to go to the same supermarket all the time and the staff there started to get to know you. All the friendly interactions I had throughout Bronte made me feel very welcome, and I settled in quickly.

We also did some sports here. Bronte has a nice area to play basketball and a small football place near the house, where we played sometimes with some kids from the town. We also went to Parco Urbano, which actually is a playground, but we used it more as a calisthenics area. In winter months, we also went to one of the three gyms in Bronte. Those activities also helped to make new friends.

Free time in whole Sicily

Aside from Bronte, we used the possibility to see all of Sicily. We often went to Catania by bus, or we rented a car to visit cities like Agrigento, Palermo, or other places like natural reserves. I enjoyed traveling around in tents and exploring the island.

One time I also took several buses to explore the west coast of Sicily as well as the Egadi Islands. This trip was complicated in planning, because of the strange bus connections, but it was possible and more than worth it. So, I could





really recommend taking your weekends and just starting a trip and explore more of this beautiful island. I think the trips I liked the most were those where we also visited places that weren't so public and recommended. We found beautiful beaches and places that I will never forget. But you should really take care that you do not enter private property by night, when you are searching for a beach.

The times when we made trips and stuff always were a big adventure, and it was also supported by Giacche Verdi. They sometimes gave us an extra free day to stay longer, or to make a trip that would need more than a weekend. They also recommended locations we should visit and found solutions when we got stuck in Catania, because no buses were going to Bronte due to summer break.

Conclusion

All in all, I do not regret spending a year in Sicily with Giacche Verdi Bronte. This year created so many nice memories, gave me experiences I couldn't get in Germany, and helped me develop my character as well. Of course, it wasn't all perfect and there were some situations and moments when I questioned why I am doing this to me. Going away from my home and family and living in a place where everything is different than I know from home. A place where you have to learn how to interact and communicate, because it works differently here. But in the end, every time I questioned this decision, I saw the children in the school, or the fieldwork, or the new friends I found, and I realized that my work here has an impact. Not just for the people here, but more for me. I learned a new language and got used to a different culture. I learned how to deal with problems and to find a solution every time. In the end I take a lot of experience from this adventure and I'm really thankful, that Giacche Verdi Bronte and the Manfred Hermsen Stiftung gave me the possibility to make this experience.

All in all, I'm really glad to have had this experience. I'm glad to have met all these lovely new people. It's been wonderful to experience a new culture and its language first-hand. I'll miss life here in Bronte, Sicily, and I'll come back.





For the next generation

If you want to come here for a voluntary year or just an internship, you really should be motivated to work and show this to Giacche Verdi. You shouldn't have a problem with hard work in the field. Be prepared for a spontaneous lifestyle. As I heard, it's a part of the culture and not a "problem" of Giacche Verdi. You will hear what to do the next day just the evening before, and even then, be prepared for changes. It might feel a bit chaotic and strange for you, but if you get used to it, it's really nice to just live in the moment and don't have a final plan for everything. Sometimes there are big surprises in this spontaneous life, for example spontaneous BBQs. And to be honest, it is not even that bad. Through this way of life, you experience so much more and gain experience you would never get in a normal overstructured life. If you are motivated to have a good time here in Bronte, I'm really sure you'll have a good time. It may be different from home, but all the 'problems' – which aren't really problems at all – are more than made up for by the incredible hospitality, not just at work but throughout Bronte. You just have to embrace this new and different culture. Be open and friendly, and everyone else will be too.

And finally bring warm clothes! The winter is much colder than you would expect for Sicily.