

Avenal, California, but not the one in the movies

The incredible nightmare of our fellow countryman Carlo Parlanti has been consumed for longer than tree years in a terrible concentration camp in the middle of a California desert with 8,000 prisoners in cells for 400 people. More about the case in the web site: <http://www.carloparlanti.com>

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There are many places where the lord perhaps, at the time of creation, didn't really know what to put and therefore has left forgotten an empty space, desolate. The men then invented there a prison and around it as grown a village. This is how has born Avenal, California, but it is not the one in the movies.

I really don't know if the 15,060 inhabitants indicated by the green sign that jumps up from nowhere, at a certain point of the never ending state road, is correct and, above all, if it includes in the number the around 8,000 prisoners of the state prison, at least 50% over the number of available beds. Avenal lives for its prison, but even the omnipresent black birds that every once in a while flies around in circles keeps carefully away from it.

The Americans did things really well here, technically perfect. Three barriers of thick wire netting and barb wire (the internal one is electrified), the towers that mark the perimeter and remind a lot the style of those in Poland, when the far sun was setting on Auschwitz. Instead, here the light is blinding, torrid and shines on the perimeter of the big pentagon where thousands of people live at 110 degrees in the shadow, with guards around that, judging from their face, have already seen everything and have put up with even more.

People quick, hard, with a series of tools hanging from their belt, that spells so much Yankee but also discipline.

To you coming for a visit, they ask to take everything off: watch, keys, passport, shoes, every garment whit a blue color, photographic cameras (obviously), but also pens and paper sheets. Also the Italian consul in San Francisco that is accompanying me, Roberto Falaschi, is carefully searched.

The congressman's ID and the stamped paperwork with the permission to visit are looked at with poorly hidden contempt "what are you coming here to lose your time for?" silent eyes are telling you. Only then you raise your sight toward the cells, big concrete boxes practically without windows.

Nowadays the prisoners are around 8,000, almost twice the expected, and each cell contains 400 (four hundreds!)

people. Believe me, I have visited maximum security prisons in Italy and I have seen the deterioration of cells in Rwanda, in Egypt, in Belarus, but somehow – they almost look humane – also if tragically so – because here it is the sheer number and the crowd of prisoners that brings distress. And yet we are in a level "two" prison, an intermediate level, for sure not in a death row (not yet).

Checks, pictures, verifications, x rays and we enter the perimeter, but to do it we step through many electric gates controlled from a distance and that open in sequence, while somebody scans you from higher up. At the end, there is a large parlatory: a large room full of couples, half of them fairy tale princes. The prisoners are all dressed in blue, with their number written in yellow on the left leg of their pants. This is why the visitors are not allowed to wear anything blue: mistakes are not allowed, misunderstandings neither.

In the beehive of one of the rooms (there are at least seven) many lines of short tables (they have been shorten – they say – because somebody before was committing "impure acts" hidden by them). Each table whit two chairs, one number – like in a bar for orders – and anyhow everything strictly facing toward the raised podium of the guards. In the background distributors for coffee, a pops and all that assortment of fries and snacks that constitute the joy of those who eat them at the rhythm of a fattening calf, but are also the damnation of American Dieticians.

Now you understand why they let you take whit you up to thirty dollars – only if visible in a transparent baggy – but all in quarters and one dollar bills: they are useful to work the machines at the end of the room. Who is locked up waits for Saturday even only to eat some of this junk food, since visits are, for prisoners, the big event of the week, booked sometimes even months in advance.

"Our" prisoner does not arrive therefore we look around: some elder with white hair, a couple of prisoners in a wheelchair, lots of robust guys, few coloured prisoners and even less pretty girls visiting. It is the triumph of middle age. Some kid runs between the tables, but is abruptly recalled from a guard, then he stops and cries.

More than half an hour goes by and finally "our" prisoner shows up. Here is Carlo Parlanti, 43 year old from Montecatini, information technology expert and employee of a multinational firm, locked up already for more than

three years for rape.

He proclaims is innocence and if one reads the trial transcripts one cannot avoid thinking that in Italy any new law graduate would have probably obtained his acquittal and that any "appeal panel" would have sent him home in a flash.

We are not judges, it is not our duty to decide, but we are obliged to tell.

July 2002 : Parlanti leaves his friend and, after a few years in America, he goes back to Europe, from where he travels around the world doing hit job. Things are going very well for him, but after two years – while in transit through the airport of Dusseldorf coming from Ireland – a German customs officer must have told him "warten sie bitte". Arrested, he discovers that there has been for 20 months an international arrest warrant, issued for him on a report from his ex girlfriend that allegedly has been raped and therefore the Germans lock him up. Thrown in jail, end of story: no possibility to make a phone call, ask for the Italian consulate, alert his family, around him everybody only speak German. His rights? And who knows about such a thing? In Italy people is going crazy because they cannot find him anymore, then – after finding out where he is – it's the beginning of a long harm wrestling to extradite him, but the DA's office in Milan raises his shoulder: "here he doesn't have any previous conviction and he has not committed any crime. Let Americans and Germans deal with him" . Do you remember the movie starring Alberto Sordi "prisoner waiting for a trial"? But this is not a movie and having a common European citizenship is useless: eleven months and then boarding for the USA, in hand cuffs. He gets there and goes toward the first step, the Ventura Jail, then the terrible prison of Wasco, were prisoners are "softened" no yard hour, flashlights in the face at any time during the night and at the end a very simple proposal: "plead guilty to even only one of the crimes, a couple months more and you're out; by Christmas you're already in Italy, Ok?" This is the method used with almost everyone, so much that it seems that 96% of the trials in California end up like this. Judge and DA (that are elected by the people) can therefore cite their stats full of pride "we caught 96% of confessing criminals, the system does work".

"Absolutely not, I didn't rape anybody" Parlanti tries to maintain. The trial is long, controversial, the evidence seem to fail, the alleged victim is often in loud contradiction but at the end the popular jury believes her. It seems that the DA has even said that Carlo in Italy had already been sentenced for sex crimes. At least this is a huge lie, his criminal record is intact. "Guilty" is the verdict of the jury and here comes a sentence to nine years in prison, throwing away the keys.

For three year Carlo has been therefore



in the Avenal prison and defending oneself is hard. It has been discovered that some of the evidences really loos fake, that there are no direct confirmations, that the report for rape has been done 21 days after the alleged facts and that there are no medical test, but in the meanwhile Carlo is stuck inside and the appeal costs rivers of money, that are simply not there.

He is sick and you can read it in his eyes, he tries to explain what it means to live in a cell with 400 people without restrains, what happens at night when the light goes out, what is his diet that at best can be supplemented with 90 dollars per month.

Parlanti is also not in luck with the logistics. Avenal depends from our San Francisco consul and to visit him once in a while in the middle of the desert he spends more than a day. In the meanwhile, judges, lawyers and the consul responsible for his case are in Los Angeles, a hundred and fifty miles further south. Also for the bureaucracy Parlanti is some kind of stateless person. He is not a "political" prisoner and nobody cares for him with the exception of a group of friends and ex colleagues from work, for sure nobody from the government loses his sleep over him. Hours fly by, and the loud speaker announces the end of the visit while the couples at the tables hug strongly. Kids start crying, prisoners go away while the doors open letting in the hot air of the middle afternoon.

Finally outside the fence I try to take a photograph of the entire complex but after a second a car with flashing lights arrives: "you are photographing a forbidden site!"

Like nothing said: nobody should see AVENAL, CALIFORNIA, the one different from the movies.

