

Celebrating the Elderly With a Nervous Eye on Italy's Future

By [Rachel Donadio](#)

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PERDASDEFOGU, Italy — On a recent Sunday afternoon, hundreds of villagers gathered in this tiny Sardinian town for a Mass to celebrate the 100th birthday of Claudina Melis, one of its esteemed citizens. But she was not the first to reach that milestone. Next to Ms. Melis in the front pew was her 105-year-old sister, Consolata; they both had dark kerchiefs and wore traditional black widows' garb. Nearby sat five other Melis siblings, all older than 85, and their families.

In 2012, the Melis family entered the [Guinness World Records](#) for having the highest combined age of any nine living siblings on earth — today more than 825 years. Sustained by good genes, fresh air, healthy food, physical exercise, quick wit and powerful family bonds, the Melises have become elderly symbols of a Mediterranean way of life that is the envy of the world.

But scroll down through the generations and another pattern emerges. Few of the nine Melis siblings have formal education beyond fifth grade. (Claudina and Consolata stopped at the second.) Many of their children have high school or university degrees and are now retired from public or private sector jobs. And their children, the ones born after 1970, generally have university degrees — and are struggling to find work. With older people in the Mediterranean living longer and longer lives — and with fertility rates low and youth unemployment soaring in Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal — experts warn that Europe's debt crisis is exacerbating a growing demographic crisis. In the coming years, they warn, there will be fewer workers paying into the social security system to support the pensions of older generations.

As he stood outside the Church of St. Peter's after the birthday Mass, wearing a red, green and white tricolor sash, the mayor of Perdasdefogu, Mariano Carta, 44, acknowledged the issue. "Absolutely, we're in big trouble," he said. "We may have good air, but without work, we can't survive."

High up in the mountains of eastern Sardinia, Perdasdefogu, whose economy revolves around an Italian military base now under scrutiny for possible uranium contamination, has lost 500 inhabitants in the past 20 years, its population dropping to 2,000 people. Today it has two pensioners for every worker, an average age of 47 and an unemployment rate of about 25 percent. “If we go on like this, the system won’t hold up for long,” Mr. Carta said.



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Between 2001 and 2011, the number of centenarians in Italy rose 138 percent, and that of nonagenarians, or people in their 90s, rose 78 percent. In 2011, the most recent year in the official statistics, 20 percent of Italians were over the age of 65.

The Melis siblings were all born in Perdasdefogu to Francesco Melis and Eleonora Mameli, who had a general store. Consolata, 105, is the oldest; then Claudina, 100; Maria, 98; Antonino, 94; Concetta, 92; Adolfo, 90; Vitalio, 87; Fida Vitalia, 81; and Mafalda, the baby at 79. Their descendants now account for about a third of the village. The siblings remember when malaria was rampant in Sardinia before it was eradicated with the help of the United States after the Second World War. They remember the time before Perdasdefogu got electricity in the 1950s, and before it had running water. “We used to have to carry a bucket to the well,” said Claudina, sitting at home among family members a day before her birthday.

“Young people today don’t know what it is to work,” she said. She meant that they had not known hard physical labor. But the remark could just as easily apply to Italy’s youth unemployment rate, which is 38 percent. Many qualified Italians leave for better jobs abroad in a brain drain that weighs on the country’s mood and economy.

Stefano Lai, 27, one of Claudina's many grandchildren, grew up in Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia, and is now doing a postdoctoral fellowship in biomedical engineering at the prestigious Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa. He would like to stay in Sardinia, or even in Italy, but does not have his hopes up.

"Leaving Sardinia was hard for me," Mr. Lai said. "To leave Italy would be hard, but maybe it's inescapable," he added. "The opportunities are few, at least in my field."

Standing outside the church after the Mass, Stefano's parents, Italo Lai, 77, who retired from a job in public health, and Marina Caria, 68, were saddened at the prospect. "It's a brain drain," Ms. Caria said. "We hope that maybe they can find something to keep them," she added, referring to the three-month-old coalition government of Prime Minister [Enrico Letta](#), who has said that tackling youth unemployment is a priority. "Living your life near the ones you love is priceless compared to having to leave, even for work," Stefano Lai said. His cousin Alberto, 19, who lives in Perdasdefogu, agreed.



The Melises indeed appear to be a happy family. They credit their longevity to their Catholic faith and their lack of stress. They do not argue much. “If you hit them, they’ll caress you,” said Giacomo Mameli, a cousin. They keep one another company and laugh at one another’s jokes.

At 105, Consolata has worn widow’s black since losing her husband in 1968, but has not lost her sense of humor. When asked to take off her glasses to be photographed, she laughed and said, “Now, I’ll find a boyfriend.”

Consolata lives in a simple two-room apartment filled with religious images and family photos, in the same house as other family members. She had 14 children, of whom nine survive. “Now there’s television. Before there wasn’t,” said one of her nieces, Anna Maria Melis, as the family squeezed into Consolata’s sitting room to share stories.

Consolata still cooks her own vegetable soup, often eating half for lunch and warming the leftovers for dinner. Her sister Claudina does, too. “I can still make soup,” she said a day before her 100th birthday. “I can also still speak ill of people,” she added with a wink. Asked how she passed the time each day, Claudina laughed. “I move from one chair to another,” she said.

Vitalio, a retired postman, and Antonino work almost every day in a vegetable garden they have on the outskirts of the village, overlooking the wooded mountains of eastern Sardinia. As the sun began to set there on a recent evening, they showed off their neat rows of onions, huge bunches of garlic, and fava beans and chickpeas thriving in their little green pods.

The Melis siblings say they eat and drink almost everything, but always in moderation. Most of the nine have lived their entire lives in the same village. Their grandchildren, rooted in Sardinia but branching out around Italy and the world, are in awe. “I’d like to live to be 105, too,” Stefano Lai said. “But in their condition. They’re so lively and ironic. They still like to live.”

Back at the birthday Mass, the parish priest presented Claudina with church records of her baptism and marriage, in 1931, in the same parish and read an apostolic declaration from Pope Francis congratulating her.

One of her five living children, Gianmarco Lai, a missionary priest in Madagascar, co-celebrated the Mass. “Mom this morning was saying, ‘One hundred years, think how many sins!’ ” he said in a homily. Claudina stood in the front row. Buoyed by the love of her family and her village, her bright dark eyes welled up with tears.