

## LIFE PEOPLE PLACES HERITAGE

# Diverse Italy: self-proclaimed Principality of Seborga, the world's smallest 'nation'



Piazza San Martino, the heart of Seborga (Photo: Principato di Seborga)

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**I**taly, for centuries a patchwork of warring city-states, is again showing its colors through a singular little principedom in a tiny enclave on the Italian Riviera near the French border.

I am not alluding to the Principality of Monaco but to the self-proclaimed **Principality of Seborga**, a magical mountaintop village of 300 souls located on Italian territory in **Liguria's** rugged hinterland some 14 miles from Sanremo and 7 miles north of Bordighera.

True to its history and conservative principles, this medieval village nestled amid breathtaking panoramas and olive groves has never forgotten the existence of an early principality it firmly claims is alive even today.

In 954, Count Guido of Ventimiglia ceded Seborga to the Benedictine Monks of Saint Honorat, a small island in the Lérins archipelago off the French Riviera near Cannes. From the 10th century, **Seborga** was run by monks. Beginning in 1079 the monastery's abbot also became the Prince of Seborga, ruling what was considered an independent principality in the Holy Roman Empire.

"The Principality of Seborga has existed since 954. We made it through more than a thousand years," says **Maria Carmela Serra**, a resident of Seborga who last February was appointed a minister in the Consiglio della Corona, or Crown Council. Maria Carmela was elected by direct election.

The Principality of Seborga was reestablished in 1963 by **Giorgio Carbone**,

a former flower-grower and a local historian who produced documents from the Vatican Secret Archives and the Turin State Archives, so he claimed, that prove Seborga was never the property of the House of Savoy and therefore not part of the Kingdom of Italy after 1861. Carbone asserted that the village has been a sovereign state since 954 and a principality from 1079.

In 1963, Carbone was publicly crowned Prince Giorgio I of Seborga, with the official addendum **Sua Tremendità**, or His Tremendousness. He became Seborga's head of state, although without any legal power. "He held the position until his death in 2009 at the age of 73," says Maria Carmela. "Our prince holds office for seven years but he can run again and be re-elected," she explains. "Giorgio I, for instance, kept being re-elected. The Crown

Council named him prince for life."

"Prince Giorgio found historical sources to prove our independent status," insists Maria Carmela. "He used to tell us: 'Let's never forget we are a principality. We have never ceased being a principality.'"

In 1995, under Prince Giorgio's reign, the Seborghini or Seborgans voted for their own general statute with voters supporting independence by a margin of 304 to 4. On August 20 the same year, on the feast of St. Bernard, patron saint of Seborga, Prince Giorgio reaffirmed the territorial sovereignty and jurisdiction of the principality. Soon after, the village adopted its own currency, **the Luigino**, which today has an exchange rate of \$6. "It is the strongest currency in the world," says Maria Carmela. "We mint it in Turin. Everyone uses the

Luigino in our local stores, if we didn't, it would be an oddity, don't you think?"

The Seborgans had already minted the Luigino in the 17th century. Back then it was valued as a quarter of a French Louis and bore the image of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The French saint, who was a major leader in the revitalization of Benedictine monasticism through the nascent order of Cistercians, visited Seborga in 1117.

"The following year, in 1118, the prince abbot of Seborga invested the first nine Knights Templar. Those warrior monks, who had a powerful advocate in St. Bernard of Clairvaux, arrived in Jerusalem in May 1119 and returned to Seborga in 1127 to further support the ecclesiastic state. They established

Continued to page 24



## LIFE PEOPLE PLACES HERITAGE



A panoramic view of the Principality of Seborga (Photo: Principato di Seborga)

Continued from page 20

the Confraria, an assembly of Seborgans, to exercise their right of self-government. "Seborga became the first and the only sovereign Cistercian Templar state in history," explains Maria Carmela's husband, **Carlo Biancheri**, a town councilor of Seborga municipality.

Seborga remained a Cistercian state until 1729 when the principality was sold to Vittorio Amedeo II, a Savoy prince of Piedmont and the King of Sardinia. "However, the sale was never registered by the Kingdom of Sardinia," remarks Maria Carmela. "That is the reason why the annexation of Seborga into the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, and later in 1946 into the Republic of Italy, are illegal acts based on a false logic."

Even Mussolini waved off Seborga as "not Italian" during a speech. "Actually, Mussolini sent his son-in-law **Galeazzo Ciano** as head of Italy's foreign ministry to Seborga," says Maria Carmela. "Then the Duce wrote on his own that Seborga was not Italian. But the document in the custody of Prince George vanished. And how come?" Carlo believes that it was stolen soon after Prince George's death by his own collaborators.

Prince George's successor, Marcello Menegatto, who took the name of Marcello I, ruled an initial period from 2010 to 2017. "Later, Prince

Marcello was reconfirmed for a second mandate that was scheduled to expire in 2024 but last year he resigned due to personal and family reasons," says Maria Carmela. A scion of an industrialist family from Monza, Prince Marcello now resides in Dubai.

Today, Seborga has a princess as the head of state, not a prince, the first in the history of the tiny principality. **Princess Nina**, whose full name is **Nina Dobler**

**Menegatto**, was elected in a general election last November where she prevailed over rival Laura Di Bisceglie. "Di Bisceglie is the daughter of Prince Giorgio, while Princess Nina is the former wife of Prince Marcello," Maria Carmela comments. "Prince Marcello abdicated from his position because the pair divorced and he changed residence," Maria Carmela points out. "That was the reason," she laughs with good humor.

Maria Carmela portrays the 41-year-old Princess Nina as a classy, elegant and modern princess. "German-born, she is tall and blonde and also brilliant and learned. Besides her native German, she speaks fluent Italian, French, and English and she has the qualities of an excellent leader and manager," she says. "Of course, Princess Nina won the election. In the past years, she accomplished so much as minister for foreign affairs during her husband's reign."

"By the way, do you know that we also have a 6-month-old royal baby named Maya?" Maria Carmela says, her voice filled with lively and cheerful joy. "Princess Nina was pregnant when she divorced Prince Marcello."

The self-proclaimed micro-nation looks like it belongs to a mysterious fairytale. Residents live in a cultural, social and political double dimension. They proudly believe they are an independent country but they are aware they have to respond to Italian institutions that have de facto fiscal, legal and political authority over the village. "Luckily there is a degree of synergy between the local municipality and the crown government, between the mayor and the princess," says Carlo. "It is a dynamic twin-track policy that establishes agreements for the common good of the Seborghini."

The Crown Council of Seborga is a nine-member consultative body that meets

twice a month to advise the princess on various domestic and international affairs.

Princess Nina appointed four ministers: Secretary of State Mauro Carassale, the Minister for Sport Gianni Fiore, Sabina Tomasoni Boon, a minister without portfolio who might be the future minister for foreign affairs, and Luca Pagani, Minister of Communications. "The other 5 ministers were elected by the people and I am among them," she says. "I still don't know what my assignment will be. Under the reign of Marcello I, I was the minister for education and youth."

"A United Nations delegation visited us a couple of years ago and told us that we are right," says Maria Carmela. "If only we could get recognition from at least one legitimate country, even the most obscure and remote! That would solve the problem. We could obtain our membership in the UN. Prince Marcello tried to negotiate with some micro South African nations but they asked for money that we don't have."

The economy of the place is based on floriculture, horticulture, and apiculture. "Seborga made its fortune through the pretty gold-colored flowers of the mimosa and the Seborga broom," Carlo says.

Tourism is another important economic force in the locale. "The principality is a magnet for tourists as the Templars and the Cistercian monks created a sacred and esoteric aura lingering in our land and it does feel unique," says Carlo. "However, nowadays there are positive and negative energies trapped together."

Carlo adds that today they struggle with internal battles. "I am referring to strange characters who try to sneak in by presenting themselves as the legitimate prince of Seborga. They horn in on our land, they pry, throwing our principality into turmoil and confusion." Carlo alludes to a French citizen named **Nicolas Mutte**, who introduced himself as "Nicolas I, true Prince of Seborga." He attempted a coup to seize power in a nation that is not on the United Nations maps. "He is a braggart. We have reported him to the Italian and French police," concludes Maria Carmela, who also runs the colorful principality souvenir shop.



The principality has its very own guards... and princes: pictured is Prince Giorgio (Photo: Principato di Seborga)