

Eternal City, Eternal Friends: Fiamma (Nirenstein), Zainab (Al-Suweij), Seyran (Ates), Bruce Bawer—and Me

By Phyllis Chesler

Back in the day, when I was still able to travel and speak at conferences, I met the most amazing people. Often, these connections lasted for decades. Whenever we write to each other or actually meet in person, it is as if a long-lost neighbor or even family member has come to call.

At the G8 conference in Rome, which Italian Parliamentarian Fiamma Nirenstein organized, I met, and remained connected to, Turkish-German Seyran Ates, Iraqi Zainab Al-Suwaij, Irwin Cotler (whom I knew before), Bruce Bawer, and many, many others.

Well, Zainab came to call yesterday. That's us, in the photo. She is among the warmest and friendliest and most powerful "hijabi" I know. There is absolutely nothing off-putting about her head gear. Dare I say it? We love each other and seem to "know" each other in some deep way. Did we meet in a former life—or is it our ideas that bond us as family?



I worked with incredibly heroic Muslim women from Saudi Arabia

(who were “guarded” by a male minder), from Afghanistan (who were also accompanied, very closely, by female minders), and by more independent women from Africa, Central Asia, and Europe. Many were living in exile from Iran or from the Arab Middle East. I will never forget anyone. I owe Fiamma Nirenstein an enormous debt of gratitude for having invited me and for having chosen her participants so wisely.

I wrote many articles about this conference.

I was there to present some of my preliminary findings about honor killing (femicide).

I have [conducted](#) and [published](#) four [academic studies](#) about honor killing. Most academic feminists in the West, including our icons, have never acknowledged this work about femicide. I delivered some of my initial findings at a G8 conference in Rome in 2008 (or was it 2009?) and at the New York Supreme Court in 2010. This work also qualified me as an expert witness in cases in which women in flight from the threat of honor killings were applying for political asylum in America.

My strongest supporters, and those who actually read, cite, and use this work are, of course, women and men of color who live in the Arab Middle East and in central Asia (Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, India, etc.).

In Rome, I presented my preliminary findings. I had the honor of bonding with a group of Muslim feminists, both religious and secular, over our many shared concerns. They told me that they had felt “abandoned” by Western feminists who refused to take a stand on issues such as honor killing, forced veiling, and the subordination of women – lest they be considered “racists” or “Islamophobes.” Many of these women were wearing hijab (headscarves), and they were all fearless, energized, and fabulously feminist.

Seyran’s work on behalf of Muslim women has earned her the hatred of Muslim male (and female) Islamists. In 1984, she was

shot three times for providing legal counsel to abused Muslim girls; her client, a 15-year-old, was murdered. Seyran expressed her dismay that, in addition to being preyed upon by Muslim fundamentalists, Western leftists and feminists had discredited her work. "They call me a racist and an Islamophobe, too," she said, "and I am a religious Muslim."

Dr. Elham Manea, a Yemeni-Swiss, challenged the western culturally relativist view that leads to "tolerance" for what are, after all, crimes against women and against humanity. And, she said, what they really represent is "human rights for westerners only," and not for anyone else. "Women and girls are the first to suffer from such 'tolerance.'"

Dr. Manea then spoke eloquently and movingly about her own mother's traumatic female genital mutilation in Egypt. It happened to her mother when her mother was eight years old. Other women: Neighbors and a female midwife, performed the savage, bloody deed and "the memory has followed her mother all her life."

Dr. Manea stated that it is time "we insist on human rights before religious or cultural rights. And we must not apologize for doing so." (I owe Elham an apology of sorts. An editor strongly pushed me to respond to one of her essays on a topic with which we disagreed but ever since I've regretted doing so. Simply as colleagues, I owed her the respect of silence or of a more private dialogue.)

Like everyone else, I love Rome. Here's what I wrote as I left this blessed event. Please enjoy it.

Arrivederci, Roma

Sep 12, 2009

I came to Rome to participate in an international conference on violence against women which was an Initiative of the Italian Presidency of the G8. The participants were smart,

serious, principled, educated, eloquent, practical, courageous, energetic and beautiful; they wore vibrant colors, stunning jewelry, multi-colored headgear and hijab.

I presented my preliminary findings about honor killings in 28 countries and on five continents. Religious Muslim feminists (modern, professional, accomplished woman, not fundamentalists, not jihadists, some in hijab, some bare headed), confirmed that my work was "true" and "very important" and begged me to explain to them why so many western and academic feminists were so willing to betray women in developing, Muslim countries and Muslim immigrant communities by insisting on multi-cultural "relativism."

Sweet vindication. (Yes, 'tis true, three fundamentalists frowned a great deal and one took the mike, as if she were taking an oath, and solemnly declared: "Islam is innocent.")

I will be writing about the Conference women when I return home. But first, I have to say goodbye to Rome, a city that I have been visiting for 49 years.

I am always sad to leave it but have never considered living here, renting or restoring a house in Tuscany, or learning to cook Italian-style. This does not mean I do not love Rome. I do; who doesn't? She's just not in the cards for me this time round.

But here's one small snapshot of this city of ancient ruins 'neath a splendid, 21st century sun.

Atop the well-touristed Spanish Steps, sits a small masterpiece. No, it is not a sculpture, a fountain, a painting, or a drawing. It is an exquisite, many-terraced restaurant named Ciampini.

Below, the crowds surge restlessly, ceaselessly, their cameras and children in tow. The restaurant lives at another pace, exists in another time. No one is hurried, and due to the mid-

afternoon hour, most diners have already left; only a few linger on.

Ciampini has a garden, an indoor fountain filled with lazy turtles (!) sunning themselves, abundant, consoling greenery, lattice work, proper table linen, old-fashioned gas lights, and extraordinary views: One can see St Peters in the distance. And churches, rooftop gardens, a huge expanse of sky.

This little piece of paradise is blessedly silent. No music, not even classical music. No cellphones, no loud or raucous conversations. The waiters speak softly and are gracious, solicitous.

We choose a table on the highest terrace and discover that there are glass doors which the waiter slides shut "in order to provide the air-conditioning."

Other than this unexpected and much appreciated accommodation, sitting here is a bit like sitting here fifty or a hundred years ago. Suddenly, we are caressed, enveloped by beauty, timelessness, seduced, won over by both the elements and civilization. We relax. Nature and Art, Roman-style, show us how much one can learn and feel merely by slowing down, sitting still, paying attention, taking it in.

And so, two very "busy" Americans actually have an unhurried meal.

We are the only diners. Three waiters in green jackets serve us as if we are royalty. It is like a dream. Or a movie with Joan Plowright or Maggie Smith that Americans love so much.

Sitting here is a bit like re-living every expatriate's love affair with nineteenth and early twentieth century Italy. And so I become a character in an Ivory-Merchant film—no, in a novel by Henry James—no, maybe in a novella by Thomas Mann, and I, too, do not see how or why I should ever leave.

Arrivederci, Roma.

First published in [Phyllis' Newsletter](#)