ENCCMembersPortrait#2 – Let’s travel back a few months in time. Timisoara, last November, under the sunny but cold Romanian sky. The ENCC Travelling Academy just ended, and before packing our bags, we find time with Vittorio to sit on the stairs of the hotel and engage in an informal discussion on his views on Europe and his work within Rete delle Case del Quartiere (meaning Network of Neighborhood Houses for the ones who don’t master the language of Dante yet).

“Rete delle Case del Quartiere is the first Italian network of this kind!”, underlines Vittorio Bianco, member of the Board of Directors of this very active network of eight independent multi-functional community hubs located in different areas of Turin. “The Houses host cultural, artistic and social activities; courses, workshops, family services... They can be very different in their structure, but they rely on the same principles: they are based on the active participation of local organisations and neighbors who propose activities each year, and they are open to everybody regardless of age, culture or geographical origin... As it is written in our manifesto, we don’t focus...”
on any particular group. Sometimes it is hard to respect, but each House puts a lot of energy in reaching everybody of its own district.”

“Art and culture are ways for people to express themselves”, he claims. “The role of my organisation is not so much about producing culture, but about providing people with spaces where they can do anything they want, including cultural and artistic expression.” With almost 900,000 inhabitants, the northern city of Turin is becoming more and more intercultural, with newcomers from Romania, Morocco, Albania, China and Moldavia. “Art and culture are always a way for people of diverse origins and backgrounds to exchange about their experiences. It’s also a way to maintain links with their culture of origin, to express their differences and to introduce their traditions to the local community. In the Case del Quartiere, for instance, quite a few Chinese and Moroccan associations organise activities about their traditional music.”

Vittorio is one of the enthusiasts still very convinced by the value of European cooperation. With the current rise of populism and strong doubts about the European project, it is always nice to confirm that this rare species still exists, and may actually not be that rare... “Europe gives a lot of opportunities”, he says. Vittorio himself participated in many European projects. His first experience of European cooperation was just after finishing his studies: during his civilian service as a conscientious objector in Turin, he worked for an environmental organisation that hosted European Volunteers. Later on, he then worked as a mentor and then as a project manager of European Voluntary Service projects for several organisations. “With my organisation, we try to make people understand what Europe really is: it’s not just about getting funds, doing bigger projects; it’s not just regulations; it’s not just the Euro. It’s also people and organisations who try to make their countries - and the whole of Europe - better. In my opinion, the best way to build a European identity is to have Europeans working together. And European projects are a chance to do so.” Rete delle Case del Quartiere and its Houses individually take part in a lot of different European projects, such as the CO-CITY project about urban commons; the Horizon 2020 CO3 project, which looks at the positive and negative effects of new technologies, and how citizens can use them to take back ownership of public services; the Horizon 2020 proGreg about the regeneration of post-industrial sites through regreening; Erasmus+ youth exchanges and the European Voluntary Service (Editor Note: don’t hesitate to read more about these projects here!).

When we ask Vittorio if he has concerns that he would like to share with his European peers, his big smile fades a little bit. “One of the biggest challenges today in Europe is building open communities”, he states with vigour. “A community that has a strong identity, strong connections within it, but that stays open to people coming from other communities. That lets the individual have the freedom to be what he chooses to be, and not what the community wants him to be.” Vittorio is worried about the current situation in Europe. “There are many political parties across Europe that try to make Europeans feel like they should defend their nations from people coming from other countries. You can like or not like Europe, what Europe has done..., but you have to admit that since the European Union has existed, Europeans have much more peace than before. One condition for resisting this nationalist wave and for safeguarding peace is that people express stronger feelings about what they share than about their differences.”
According to Vittorio, the cultural sector has, in this situation more than ever, a fundamental role to play. “Whoever works in the cultural sector and produces culture, is also responsible for the ideas that spread in Europe and in their own community. I don’t mean that we - as cultural workers - should say "racism is bad and Europe is good" (he laughs). But since all bad politics are based on touching feelings like hate and fear, cultural workers have to work on positive feelings, and to make room for people to know each other. That’s why I like Erasmus+, for instance. If more European young people spent six months, one year in another country in Europe and make friends there - and maybe even find a boyfriend or girlfriend there (we both laugh) - they would think of this other country as the country of their friend. They would be able to develop an image of Europe based on their experience and their knowledge of other people rather than on newspapers or social media posts. An image that has more reality. His big smile and hopes are back.

Read more about Rete delle Case del Quartiere.

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Second portrait from our new ENCC Members Portrait Series by Clémence Garnier. Read them all on our Resource page under the tag #enccmembersportraitseries.