

Gas – or no Gas

We were new to Italy and living in a tiny village near the sea. My daughter went to dinner across the piazza to the house of her young friend, both of them 11 years old. A few hours later, she came home.

Mom, wake up. Their stove exploded. Anyone hurt? I said through sleep. No, but the stove went up in the air. Go to bed, Anna.”

The next day, I went to visit my friends and on the way I saw a ruined stove of twisted metal being dragged down the mountain by a tractor. I saw the crack in their downstairs kitchen wall rising through the fireplace as far as the upstairs floor. It was that fireplace with the airspace it offered that saved everyone from disaster. The elderly father had connected the gas tank improperly, so a leak occurred at the valve, creating the fire in the stove, which then exploded.

Such explosions are not infrequent in Italy. Almost every day the Italian news reports an accident caused by methane or gpl. In 2019 there were 270 accidents, with 35 deaths. (Source: *Comitato Italiano Gas (CIG), Statistica incidenti da gas combustibile in Italia*). For ducted gas, there were 157 accidents in 2019, more than in 2018 (138). The number of deaths in 2019 were 16 (up from 2018). According to the *Gazzetta del Sud* (13 April 2022), each year Italy uses 76 billion cubic meters of gas and imports from Russia nearly 40% of the gas it consumes.

In rural areas, many people depend on *bombole* (gas tanks). In towns and cities, gas connections are more secure; still it is always prudent to turn off the central valve when leaving home for more than 24 hours. There is no obligation to install devices that would automatically interrupt the flow of gas into your home or to give an alarm in case of leakage. (In my home we have a timer connected to our elective stove and oven, so if we forget to turn them off, they shut off automatically.)

Nowadays, there are more urgent reasons for not using gas. Russia is using gas as a lever against Europe. On 25 April we learned that Poland and Bulgaria will not have Russian gas unless they make payment in rubles. The dependence on external sources of energy makes our country vulnerable to political pressures.

After the Chernobyl disaster, Italy decided to go no-nuke. Much of its energy comes from France, which has 18 nuclear plants. In the USA, many years ago, I affixed a sticker to my Volkswagen: Nuclear: No Way. Pro or contra nuclear, that's a personal choice. I notice that in nearby towns such as Pontedera, we are provided with wind power. Why not? Solar power is another option.

How can we live without gas? It's simple, we must make a choice, or if not ready to make a definitive choice, a partial choice. Here's what my family has done:

For a time, my adult children and I had three cars. We lived in the countryside and it was a necessity. First, my daughter moved to the center of Lucca, and since then her car has been used only for transporting her harp. Then, my son moved to San Concordio, where he was content to ride his bike or walk to work. Silvano and



I later moved to an old mill near Pescaglia, where we have parking only for one car. When necessary, I can travel by bus and train into town. Italy is very well served with trains running almost everywhere.

So in terms of our cars, gas (refer to it as you wish) has been reduced. If we had more money, we would probably buy an electric car. My aunt in Palm Desert, California, uses an electric golf cart to get around.

As for heating our home, Silvano and I were fortunate to purchase a house from the 1800s with an excellent system of pellet stove and radiators. This is supplemented by a woodstove for the kitchen (the coldest room) and a fireplace for the living room, where we spend most of our time. In the kitchen, we have installed an induction stove and electric oven for cooking, which led us to contract 4.5 kw of electricity instead of 3 kw. After a one-time installation charge, our consumption remained more or less the same as before, but we no longer experienced power outages when someone decided to dry their hair at the same time as dinner was cooking.

Firewood, they say, heats twice: once while gathering it, and again while burning it. While not an efficient solution in town, in the hills it is a quite reasonable and pleasurable way to live. An added benefit is the reduction in humidity. A dry home is a warm home.

If you live in town, perhaps as a renter, the elimination of gas is a more deliberate decision. First of all, you don't have to pay into the system if you never turn on the gas. If you do sign a contract, though, a fixed fee is required even if you never consume. Ask your owner whether you can install air conditioners that also heat (commonly called “splits”). These are modern and efficient because each room can have its own on-off command system, so you don't heat rooms when they aren't being used. There are also portable heaters/air conditioners on wheels that can be moved from room to room. I once rented an unheated home and installed my own system. The initial cost was about €3000 but in the long run, over several years, it was less expensive than paying for gas heat (the bathroom and kitchen each had its own electric water heater).

If you want to be truly “simple” you might choose to cook on a wood-burner. That's not for everyone (not for me for example), especially since urban areas have laws about when fires are permitted. However, many sophisticated stoves have been designed to function with firewood.

In northern Italy, Austria, and Germany, there are marvelous, gorgeous majolica stoves known as *stube*. These double as cozy places to relax and they can warm an entire home. One day I would love to have one of these!

– by *Norma Jean Bishop*

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