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# Life of Italian Nobility for Sale, Complete With Regulations and Taxes

By GAIA PIANIGIANI

PONTASSIEVE, Italy — Nestled on a gentle Tuscan hill near this town just east of Florence, and caressed by the morning fog, sits a medieval castle that was once home to the few prominent noble families who plotted against the Medicis' rule during the Renaissance, some of whom are believed to have taken refuge here.

For centuries after, the descendants of the nobles and the peasants who served them lived sheltered by the fortress's crenelated walls or in the nearby country houses, and went to Mass in a rose stone church.

"I remember a procession of over 25 farmers' families to the Sunday's Mass here up until the late 1960s," said Franco Viliani, 80, a former manager of the estate. "It might sound strange for a pseudo-feudal system, but that was a form of inclusion. Afterwards, we have seen some owners once or twice a year."

Today, the entire estate is deserted and up for sale, castle, church and all. While that might



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIANNI CIPRIANO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Chianti hills are visible from the Torre a Decima castle in Tuscany. The deserted castle and the estate on which it sits are for sale, along with a number of other historic Italian properties.

## A heritage of inherited wealth and property withers.

seem an exceptional circumstance, increasingly for Italy, it is not.

While castles and historic mansions in Italy have long been family inheritances, today dozens of them are for sale, even in one of the most conservative real estate markets in Europe.

In recent years, Italy's well-rooted inherited wealth has withered from a potent combination of factors. They include the increasing costs of living and services, the shaky finances of owners in a time of lingering economic trouble, cuts in government subsidies to maintain historical properties and, not least, mushrooming property taxes.

"The Italian market is mostly historical — mansions pass from generation to generation," said Dimitri Corti, chief executive at Lionard, an exclusive real estate company based in Florence whose portfolio includes about 70 castles in central and northern Italy.

"It is not necessarily true that the owner is a millionaire, like one can assume in countries like the United States or England," he added. "Some do need liquidity."

Moreover, those with the money to buy are frequently not Italians, a worrisome circumstance to some here who bemoan the loss of historical and family patrimony to a newly moneyed



global elite.

The bulk of Lionard's sellers are Italians, Mr. Corti said, while a majority of buyers are foreigners. They predominantly seek villas or mansions in Tuscany, and are ready to spend an average of 6 or 7 million euros (about \$6.75 million to \$7.85 million).

"It is no longer reasonable to think that the owner of a neighboring castle would buy yours," Mr. Corti added. "It's most likely to be a Russian, or a Chinese."

Indeed, more than 50 percent of Lionard's clients come from Russia and the former Soviet Union, while the rest mostly live in North America. Other luxury realtors, like Sotheby's Italian branch, have a more diverse clientele, ranging from the Arab countries to China, plus Russia and North America.

"No historical owners would like to get rid of their properties, but they might be in the condition to do it," Moroello Diaz della Vittoria Pallavicini, president of the Italian Historic Houses Association, said in his vaulted office in a 17th-century complex on the Quirinal hill in central Rome.

"And we fear that foreigners will be less attached and caring of their property," he added. "They didn't grow up there; that mansion doesn't belong to their family's history."

Despite relatively low incomes, Italians have historically inherited properties and benefited from low property taxes, helping them to afford their housing or to invest in more real estate.

In 2011, as the financial crisis deepened and the government came under pressure to balance

its books, the technocratic prime minister, Mario Monti, raised property taxes and started a review of the land register's assessment of home values.

On historic buildings, where owners used to pay little as compensation for the elevated costs of maintaining centuries-old structures, the taxes increased by 20 or 30 times, depending on the property's location.

On some buildings, taxes spiked from 3,000 euros (about \$3,400) in 2011 to 75,000 euros (about \$84,000) by 2013. That might be a small figure for castle dwellers in the United Kingdom, but it is a burden for Italian pockets, especially in regions where the property's market value or tourism interest is low.

The trends, to many here, are indicative of Italy's place as a country caught between its past

glory and its modern difficulty in producing an innovative climate capable of ensuring its future.

Landowners' attempts to navigate the changes have often fallen short.

Some Italian owners who bought properties as an investment transformed them into luxury hotels, hoping to offset the steep costs of maintaining ancient frescoed walls and immense Italian gardens, often including acres of olive groves and vineyards. Yet demand for luxurious holidays has not boomed in recent years, and some resorts have registered few guests.

Once, the 4,600 square feet on five floors of the Tavolese castle, about 19 miles south of Florence, housed the noble Uberti family, mentioned in Dante's "Divine Comedy," and then the Canigiani family, whose daughter Elena

gave birth to the illustrious Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarca.

The 14th-century castle was turned into a lavish bed and breakfast and wedding venue. But today, the fruits of the estate's 5,000 olive trees have not been picked for years, and the newlyweds' bed from last summer remains unmade. Buyers can make it theirs for 18 million euros (just over \$20 million).

But buyer beware: Living a nobleman's life in Italy comes at a cost, even for many tycoons. New owners face the same onerous bureaucracy as Italians to make even minimal changes to many older properties.

Under Italian law, the owner of a historic building is its custodian, bound to maintain it and grant its security and, in some cases, its use to the public. Many buyers give up on properties of great historic value, but in bad condition, for this reason, brokers said.

"This is a problem for possible investors, who want to have modern comforts like a spa, air-conditioning or a lift," said Mr. Pallavicini, of the Italian Historic Houses Association.

"We no longer live like in 1800," he added. "But 99 percent of those changes are either impossible or extremely bureaucratic and complicated in an Italian historic building."

At the same time, many of the association's 5,500 members would prefer never to sell their property, he said. "They have an umbilical cord to that building," he said. "They were maybe raised there. Selling is not an option, as long as they can resist."

But while selling may be hard to swallow, too often the only other option is abandonment, especially for castles and monuments not located in tourist regions.

"If a Tuscan owner who sells his mansion can hope in a Russian, British or American buyer to restore his family's finances, we can't," said Francesco Scardaccione, the owner of a historic palazzo and two country estates, and president of the Italian Historic Houses Association branch in the southern region of Basilicata.

"What is going to happen," he asked, "the day we will no longer be able to afford it?"

## World Briefing

### ASIA

#### Indonesia: Armed Forces End Jet Search

Indonesia's armed forces officially halted their search Tuesday for passengers on the AirAsia plane that crashed into the Java Sea last month, killing all 162 people aboard. A civilian agency will continue searching, but the military has been the mainstay of the operation. Seventy bodies have been recovered, and data from Flight 8501's black boxes is still being analyzed. The plane, heading to Singapore from Surabaya, Indonesia, climbed unusually fast in its last moments before plunging and vanishing from the radar screen, Transportation Minister Ignasius Jonan said last week.

JOE COCHRANE

#### India: Kashmir Firefight Kills Four

A colonel in India's Army, a police officer and two militants died Tuesday in a gun battle in Kashmir, the police said. Indian forces had surrounded a house where militants were thought to be visiting, in the Pulwama district of Indian-administered Kashmir, when the troops were attacked with grenades and Kalashnikov fire. Col. Munindra Nath Rai, a highly decorated officer and commander of the local Indian Army unit, led the operation and was killed. He had been awarded a gallantry medal the day before, the Indian news media reported.

HARI KUMAR

### EUROPE

#### Ukraine: E.U. Sends Aid to East

The European Union delivered three planeloads of aid to eastern Ukraine on Tuesday, including blankets, tents, heaters and warm clothing, as part of a stepped-up effort to help the nearly one million people who have fled their homes in the war-torn region. The planes landed in Dnipropetrovsk, outside the area where pro-Russian separatists are battling the Ukrainian military. The assistance is being delivered by a coalition including Unicef, Save the Children, the World Food Program and People in Need, and is part of more than \$53 million in aid pledged by European Union countries. The effort contrasted sharply with Russia's unilateral dispatch of convoys to eastern Ukraine in recent months, which drew criticism from the Ukrainian government and the Red Cross over a lack of inspections and participation of international groups. "We have not forgotten the population of Ukraine," said Christos Stylianides, the European commissioner for humanitarian assistance, who oversaw the planes' arrival. "We're in there big time," he added. "It is our job to minimize the pain."

DAVID M. HERSZENHORN

### THE AMERICAS

#### Mexico: Monarch Levels Rebound

The number of Monarch butterflies that reached wintering grounds in Mexico rebounded 69 percent this year from last year's disastrous levels, the World Wildlife Fund said, but remained extremely low. Last year, the Monarchs covered only 1.65 acres, the smallest area since record-keeping began in 1993. At their peak in 1996, they covered more than 44.5 acres. This year, the butterflies rebounded to 2.79 acres, according to a formal census by Mexican environmental authorities and scientists released Tuesday. The Monarchs are suffering from the loss of milkweed habitat in the United States, illegal logging in Mexico and climate change. Each year, the butterflies migrate from Canada to Mexico and spend the winter in the same forests.

(AP)

### AFRICA

#### Uganda: Agency Cuts Refugees' Rations

Faced with a funding shortfall, the World Food Program, the lead United Nations relief agency for fighting hunger, halved rations on Tuesday to nearly 150,000 South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. The cuts, announced by the agency's Uganda director, Alice Martin-Daihirou, come as the program struggles to raise \$30 million to fund the Uganda operation for the next six months. Ms. Martin-Daihirou called the step "a last resort to ensure we can continue providing lifesaving support." The agency's recurrent funding problems have forced it to cut or halt food-aid distribution. Last month, it suspended a voucher program that had helped nearly 1.7 million Syrian refugees, but resumed it after an emergency fund-raising appeal.

RICK GLADSTONE

### MIDDLE EAST

#### Israel: Rockets From Syria Hit Golan

At least two rockets fired from Syria struck the Israeli-controlled portion of the Golan Heights on Tuesday, and Israel responded with artillery toward the suspected launching sites, according to Israel's military. The exchange added to tensions along a once-quiet frontier that has been destabilized by Syria's civil war. No casualties were reported on the Israeli side, where sirens warned of the incoming rockets, which fell on open ground. The military ordered the evacuation and closing of ski slopes at the Mount Hermon resort, and the police closed some roads. There was no immediate word on casualties on the Syrian side.

ISABEL KERSHNER

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*Left:* Patek Philippe Platinum Tonneau-shaped Perpetual Calendar Watch with original case and certificate. #30-1298

*Center:* Patek Philippe ultra thin Grand Complication 5139G watch has a perpetual calendar and is self-winding. Hobnail bezel and 18K white gold. #30-2445

*Right:* Patek Philippe platinum and 22K gold World Time 5110P watch is self-winding with the time of 24 time zones. Blue guilloché silver dial. #30-1989

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