

THE FEARLESS KNIGHT

"It was like receiving a caress from the eyes and words of the President, aimed at me personally and at my dreams. That morning I left home full of fears, and I left that meeting filled with desire to face them."

Telos: You arrived in Italy at the age of two... This could be the first line in your biography. Could you tell us your story?

Fatima Zahra El Maliani: I often begin when I was two, from Italy, even though I actually have history, albeit brief, even before my arrival here. I spent the first two years of my life between my mom and her sister, my aunt Amina.

When my mom went to Italy, in the month before we joined them, my sister stayed back with our grandmother and I stayed with my aunt Amina. I have mental images, memories, of me tied to her back with a cloth she knotted tightly around her chest, while I promised her, each time we walked past a shop window, that when I got big, I would buy her a cup, two plates, a watch and a bag. I spent a month with her. A month when I would cry for my mother, while my aunt would hug me tightly and sigh, telling me between kisses: "She's coming, Fatima, she's coming." Then she really did come, even though actually it was I who came to her.

My mom was already waiting for me here. At that point, I was two years old and there was Italy, but I didn't begin with it. I started over again without even realising it when I was two, in our new house in Turin, with, always in my heart, my grandmother, my aunt Amina and that cloth that kept me from falling.

Morocco was my first safe, soft cradle. Instead, Italy was the cradle of my imagination, where first, I made drawings for my mother, then plans for my life. I like *thinking* of myself as a coincidence. A coincidence of events, of encounters, of choices, even though they weren't always mine. It's wonderful when I realise, in the most absurd moments, that actually I'm a little bit of everything I've experienced.

In a recent interview, you said that all your choices have been conditioned by the fact that you are not an Italian citizen, that they have all been the result of a "process of elimination." What did this actually mean?

Very often, what I *wanted* to do was not what I *could* do.

Very often, my reasoning was based on the possibilities that were open to me, increasingly undermining the things I actually wanted to do.

When I was 14, in my first year of secondary school, I decided that I wanted to be a carabinieri (T.N. an officer of the Italian police, serving also military duties) when I grew up. I was excited by the idea of protecting people and conveying a sense of safety to the people around me. I wanted to make people feel the same way I felt when I was with a carabinieri.

So, I started trying to figure out how you become a carabinieri, and I found out that there is a public competition and that one of the first requirements is that you must be an Italian citizen. I didn't understand the need to link the people who make you feel protected with their nationality, and it was even harder for me to understand why I couldn't take part in the competition. Did this bother me? Yes. It bothered me because I didn't think it was right that, at 14 years old, I had to discover something that, not only did I not understand, it prevented me from becoming the person I wanted to become in the way that I wanted. What made me even angrier was having to say that I couldn't because I wasn't someone else. At 14, I didn't want to be someone else, I just wanted to be a carabinieri called Fatima.

But I think I've always been very lucky. I've had some opportunities that are so special and amazing that I wouldn't have had them even with a hundred different citizenships!

But I confess, even today I still wouldn't know how to respond to that 14-year-old's feeling of inadequacy.

At just 22 years old you can boast a long series of academic successes. Everybody can understand the value of your studies at the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa, but few people know about the United World College of the Adriatic, where you got your high school diploma. What is it?

There are 18 schools scattered all over the world that offer kids from all countries, when they are 16, the opportunity to live for two years in one of those colleges. The colleges, by means of the International Baccalaureate programme, create a perfect, wonderful simulation of how the world could potentially be 'if only...'. If only what? If we would only give ourselves the unique opportunity to listen to someone who, courageously, decides to share their life story with us.

For me the college was an important path of awareness. It was more than just an academic experience; it was a life experience, a self-assessment process. I went there convinced that I knew what I wanted from the world and from myself, focussed on my certainties and unwilling to negotiate.

I went there, yielded to my 17-year-old littleness and, certain that, once again, I would find an environment where the adults were in control and the students obeyed. Instead, I found an environment where the adults listened and the students proposed things. I found a place where all differences were valued and celebrated, where space and time were dedicated to history, to joy, to fortune and to each person's suffering, people from all different walks of life, who had come there. I came into contact

with some global realities and great examples of liberation, which made me want to turn that big opportunity I'd been given into powerful motivation.

I wasn't escaping a war, I still had family there and I knew I had a degree of certainty and security for my future. However, I was sure that I would never go home the same person as when I left. I learned that in my fortunate life, it would be my responsibility not to forget all the things I had experienced and everything I had encountered in those two years.

It's difficult to put it into words, but it was a reality that perfectly balanced formal and informal learning. And all of us students, active protagonists in this system, had a thirst for knowledge that I still find fascinating today.

Knight in the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, an honorific given to you *motu proprio* by President Sergio Mattarella. I'd say that makes you an "everyday hero". What was the *official* motivation behind this award? Can you tell us about that day?

What a strange world. For grownups, heroes save adults and old people from thieves and get cats out of trees. For kids, heroes are people who give them space and time.

I had the honour of being nominated by President Mattarella because of a project started by UNICEF in 2019 to help kids in the Porta Palazzo neighbourhood in Turin, my neighbourhood. I am the product of an after-school programme myself. For years I received an unconditional benefit, and I felt the need to give back.

I've always cared a lot about children and I've always thought that caring for them was essential to building the "tomorrow" we want. However, I soon realized that there are realities, some not too far from ours, where nothing can be taken for granted, especially when you're dealing with a kid who sniffs glue like I saw in Baia Mare, Romania, where I spent a week. The one that Sermig calls *Project week*. From then on, I chased away the idea that it was permissible that a child might not live as a child. And I wanted to begin in my small neighbourhood.

That 31 March 2023 was unexpected, and I couldn't even believe it until that very morning.

What was that day like? Magical.

It was a whirlwind of emotions that came from being there with my mom and aunt, from having come for the kids and having met real heroes, in terms of how children see them.

It was like reliving my brief path, remembering the faces of all those who, in some way, had led me there, to the Quirinale. It was like receiving a caress from the eyes and words of the President, aimed at me personally and at my dreams. That morning I left home full of fears, and I left that meeting filled with desire to face them.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

You can meet like-minded people anytime and anywhere. You might just happen to start up a conversation with someone who goes to your same pool and immediately find you are on the same wavelength. This is what happened to me with my pool mate, Valentina Bagozzi, stubbornly pursued at the close of the workday, thus practically nighttime.

Valentina is an energy expert, but she is also bursting with energy. She is a young woman intent on trying *to save the world*. Thanks to her, I managed to reach and interview our June guest for PRIMOPIANOSCALA^c, Fatima Zahra El Maliani. A young woman who is very unique, a true *everyday hero*, even though she doesn't see or describe herself that way.

In March Fatima was awarded the honorific Knight of the Republic by President Mattarella for her work with after-school programmes for non-Italian children. On that day another 29 people were awarded this honour along with Fatima, yet she is the one whose name was all over the news. Why?

Fatima, an Italian student, who isn't officially Italian, received this award as a poignant example of civic engagement, of dedication to the common good and a symbol of the values of the *republic*. Yet, due to a sad *paradox*, she received this honorific as a citizen of Morocco.

How come Fatima, despite everything she is and has proven to be in her life, is not an Italian citizen? Because of a depressing issue of red-tape. When her mother became an Italian citizen in 2019, Fatima was no longer a minor, so now she will have to start her own personal procedure and demonstrate she meets all the requirements to obtain citizenship.

The most complex issue is economic: she needs to prove that in the three years prior to her request she had a stable income of more than 8,000 euros. In Fatima's words: "*My growth and my identity, the part of me that is actively engaged in the social fabric, isn't enough.*"

Fatima's interview is unique, weaving together powerful life experiences and feelings. At just 23 years of age, she has a very long story to tell, of her experiences and her concrete engagement in Italy, and I would challenge any 70-year-old to prove they have even come close to it.

In our interview, Fatima tells us about her life, her studies, her dreams, but she also stresses the issue of limits, of how she had to give up on a lot of things she wanted to do because they were impossible since she is not an Italian citizen, like taking part in public competitions for jobs and getting scholarships to study abroad.

She couldn't vote. Fatima tells us that: "*At 14, I didn't want to be someone else, I just wanted to be a carabinieri called Fatima. Even today I still wouldn't know how to respond to that 14-year-old's feeling of inadequacy.*"

But her optimism and joy are what shine through in her interview. From Fatima, we learn about an extraordinary reality: the **United World Colleges** (which brings us back to Valentina's mysterious role in all this, because she is a fervent ambassador of these Colleges and a former student). There is a total of 18 Colleges on four continents, where kids between 16 and 19 can study and get their International Baccalaureate degree. However, the main thing they learn is what responsibility, long-term commitment and community service mean.

Students are selected nationally from 155 countries by a network of national committees. The Italian committee was founded in 1970 and one of its founders was Donna Marella Agnelli. The application procedure for 2024-2026 may be found [here](#), the [link](#) to submit an application has been active since 31 May and candidates have until 1 November to submit it.

On the 2023 covers of PRIMOPIANOSCALA^c, we use the faces of our guests to create something similar to museum merchandise. Every month we personalise an item with the black and white face of our guest. This way, a t-shirt, magnet or

shopper becomes a memory, an experience, a symbol. Our guests become icons, just like museum pieces such as Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. And they are *so* iconic, we have decided to treat them like pop stars, singing on social media. For Fatima, we've chosen a small vase with a mint plant, a symbol of *care*, something that perfectly embodies the meaning Fatima gives to life: sowing seeds, caring for and helping something grow with love. The song we've chosen for the *musical* version of our cover, another important element of our 2023 graphics, is also the musical version of her life: a sweet dream!

Mariella Palazzolo



Fatima Zahra El Maliani is a research assistant at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa, in *State and Society in West Africa*. She is also attending a Master in International Security Studies organised by the same Scuola Superiore and by the University of Trento.

Last March Italian President Mattarella awarded her with the honorific **Knight of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic** “for her willingness to give back the benefits she has received through her dedication to the UNICEF after-school programmes in Turin.”

Originally from Morocco, she came to Italy when she was just two years old. She grew up in Turin, in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Porta Palazzo, and as a child began spending time at **SERMIG** (youth missionary service), where volunteers in the after-school programme offered her study support.

This encounter “*totally changed (her) life*” and inspired her to want to help people *in turn* and embark on a path of civic engagement: “*I decided to give all the love I had received as a child back to other children by becoming a volunteer in an after-school programme.*” Study and volunteering have always gone hand in hand in Fatima's life.

She attended the United World College of the Adriatic in Trieste and graduated in Global Law and Transnational Legal Studies from the University of Turin. From 2014 to 2020 she returned to the Arsenal of Peace at SERMIG, where she provided study

support to elementary-school children by teaching Italian to immigrants and many other things.

This experience paved the way for her joining UNICEF and in 2019 creating the Youniced after-school programme that provides support to over 30 children.

Fatima is 23 years old and lives in Turin.

Marco Sonsini