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# 'They were scattered everywhere, all drowning.' How a Lampedusa optician became a hero of the migrant crisis



A group of 300 refugees cramped into a small boat off the coast of Lampedusa, the first port of call between North Africa and Europe CREDIT: REUTERS



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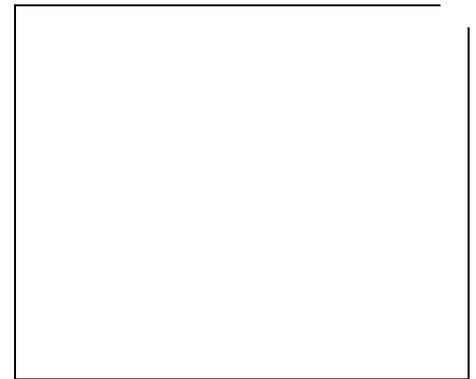
25 SEPTEMBER 2016 • 6:00AM

By **Emma Jane Kirby**

“I promised I would never tell this story,” said the optician, rubbing his hands up and down the thighs of his jeans. He stared into my eyes for a long moment, as if trying to judge whether I could take what he’s about to say.

“Because, it’s not a fairy tale.”

**I**t was May 2015 when I first met Carmine Menna, the optician of Lampedusa, and we met in his shop on the little island’s main high street. He was serving a customer who had broken her glasses and although he knew very well why I had come to see him – he could see the microphone in my bag and he recognised my Italian fixer Alessandra – he did not mention the word “interview” until his client had left the shop and closed the door firmly behind her.



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Carmine Menna, the optician of Lampedusa

You see, Carmine doesn't give interviews. He is an extremely private and discreet man and what happened to him on October 3rd 2013 made him into something of a local hero; a role he rejects emphatically. He's also however an extremely courteous man and he was visibly embarrassed that we had come such a long way to meet him.

I explained that our listeners and viewers were becoming numbed by the migration crisis, that, saturated with images of over laden boats, and by the testimonies of desperate survivors, all the stories had begun to sound the same to them and they were just switching off. He winced. I told him I was trying to refocus the public's attention on the tragedy by making a series of radio programmes talking to ordinary Italians who had been affected by it. He was quiet for a while and then invited us to sit down.

This year is already on track to be the deadliest on record in the Mediterranean Sea. 3,211 people have been reported dead or missing attempting to cross the strip between Libya and Lampedusa that has become a watery graveyard. Carmine cannot understand why there have been even worse tragedies than the one he witnessed. Why, every time he switches on the TV, there seems to be another shipwreck with an even greater loss of life. That, he says, is when the memories and nightmares come flooding back.



The coffins of migrants killed offshore from the Italian island are held in a hangar at Lampedusa's

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Almost exactly three years ago, Carmine, now pushing 60, his wife Rosaria and six of their friends rewarded themselves with a little weekend boat trip to mark the end of summer. He remembers the weather was wonderful; clear blue skies and a warm sun. He remembers the laughter. And then he remembers waking in his bunk the first morning on board to hear the seagulls squawking over a lucky catch.

‘Birds,’ he says in his flat voice. ‘Just birds. It had to be birds. We were in open sea after all. It couldn’t be anything else.’

### “My first thought was how do I save them all?”

Carmine Menna

As the screaming became more piercing and persistent the optician and his friends raised anchor and made their way with their little boat to the source of the terrible noise. At first they saw what they thought were large fish in the water but as they got closer they began to distinguish that those fish had arms and legs and faces.

“I had never seen so many people in the water,” Carmine continued. “There were scores of them, hundreds and they were scattered everywhere, all drowning. Everywhere we looked there were more hands.”

Rescue of migrants caught on camera  
00:49

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On the optician’s small boat, which had a maximum capacity of ten, there was already eight crew. And they had just one rubber ring.

Carmine twisted the elastic top of his sock around his finger and lets it snap back.

“My first thought was how do I save them all?”

He stared at the floor, knowing that I know he couldn’t save them all. They pulled 47 people onto their boat that day, but 368 others died.

Carmine leant forward in his chair: “You have to understand that I wanted to go back. I wanted to go back for them.”

I’m sure Carmine could see I was crying but he was watching his wife who was standing by the door, her face beetroot red, an arm pressed against her ear to block out our conversation.

“You can’t feel well after something like that,” he told me. “The nightmares...you



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know...my wife had to be hospitalised.”

## EU migrant crisis

### Where are the refugees from? UK ASYLUM SEEKERS 2014

3,233 Eritrea 2,726 Pakistan 2,025 Syria  
2,000 Iran 15,049 Other

Data: [Home Office](#)

### Global view

ASYLUM APPLICATIONS PER MILLION  
POPULATION 2014

4,118

3,284

1,203

401

78

Sweden Austria Germany UK Spain

Data: [Eurostat/BFA/World Bank](#)

### How many refugees does the UK accept? UK ASYLUM RECOGNITION 2014

10,050 Accepted on first instance  
4,015 Accepted on appeal 11,805 Rejected

Data: [Eurostat](#)

### Asylum in the UK

117,161  
refugees

36,383  
pending asylum cases

16

stateless people

Data: [UNHCR 2014](#)

I was haunted by the optician's story and so were our BBC Radio 4 PM listeners, many of whom told us it was the first time the migration crisis had become real for them. They could imagine themselves in that boat making the same decisions the optician had had to make; whose hand to reach out to, whose hand to pass by. Carmine was after all just an ordinary man like us – not a do-gooder or a selfless volunteer, but a man who had had nothing to do with the migrants prior to the shipwreck. He saw the migrants on the island every day but he didn't see them as his problem. He was an ordinary man who had not wanted to see.

When the BBC report won the Prix Bayeux last October, I returned to Lampedusa to have dinner with the optician and his wife and to ask their permission to write a book about their story. I remember the optician re-enacting for me how he dragged those people from the water, his fist white and shaking and the muscles in his neck swelling with the force of the imagined pull.



Emma Jane Kirby, author of *The Optician of Lampedusa*, at home in Ealing, West London

“It was so intense to hold a stranger’s hand in mine,” he explained. “I have never felt anything more intimate. When I pulled that first young man from the water it felt like...”

Rosaria, who had been nervously fiddling with the strands of her silver necklace, finished his sentence for him.

“It felt something like love,” she said simply and I held her hand under the table.

Carmine spent a long time then folding and unfolding his paper napkin, concentrating intently on making the edges match.

I needed to write Carmine’s story. For me, it is not just about a dramatic rescue at sea but it is also very much a parable about the awakening of one man’s humanitarian conscience. There’s no moral at the end of the tale and the optician does not suddenly renounce his life to join an NGO; he simply returns to work, albeit with his eyes wide open.



CREDIT: REUTERS

It does not matter, he seems to be saying, whether you are pro- or anti-immigration, whether you vote Left or Right; but it does matter that thousands of people are drowning on Europe’s doorstep. An optician’s job, after all, is to

make people see clearly. I think that's exactly why Carmine agreed to my writing this book through his eyes.

"It was me in that boat that day," he said. "But tomorrow? We must look into our consciences and think. Because it's still happening."

*The Optician of Lampedusa by Emma-Jane Kirby is published by Penguin Books Ltd (£9.99). To order your copy plus p&p call 0844 871 1514 or [visitbooks.telegraph.co.uk](http://visitbooks.telegraph.co.uk)*



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