

Aspects of Italian Immigration to Philadelphia

“**W**HOLE STREETS formerly occupied by Irish-American families have become populated by Italians,” noted an Irish priest of South Philadelphia in the 1890’s.¹ A housing investigator studied the new community: “The black-eyed children rolling and tumbling together, the gaily colored dresses of the women, and the crowds of street vendors all give this neighborhood a wholly foreign appearance,” she wrote.² Because the newcomers included no historians and because few Philadelphians paid them any heed, the story of the Italian immigration to Philadelphia and the growth of the Italian-American colony from a handful of people in the colonial period to upwards of half a million Italian-Americans today has yet to be told.

Why did the Italians come here? What were they leaving? What did they seek? What skills, attitudes, and contributions did they bring to the city? How were they received? So long have these questions gone unanswered and so complex are they that only a partial answer can be provided. The nineteenth-century histories of Philadelphia did not concern themselves with these immigrants; the immigrants themselves produced few journalists, and, if there were diarists, their diaries have yet to be discovered. Little exists to record what was a great wave of humanity.

In the colonial era only a few Italians trickled into Philadelphia. Most of them, particularly the priests, the sailors, and the intellectuals, were from northern Italy; a few musicians came from southern Italy. By 1850 it is likely that there were about 200 Italians in the city—artists, singers, and political dissidents. In 1870, census records tabulated 300. By 1880, there were 1,656 within the city limits, a

¹ Joseph L. J. Kirlin, *Catholicity in Philadelphia From the Earliest Missionaries Down to the Present Time* (Philadelphia, 1909), 449.

² Emily W. Dinwiddie, *Housing Conditions in Philadelphia: an investigation made by her under the Octavia Hill Association* (Philadelphia, 1904), 2.

number that increased in the next ten years to 6,799. Then began an astonishing influx, with laborers and peasants joining the previously slim list of artists, artisans, and merchants. Philadelphia census records in 1900 report 17,830 Italians, slightly more than there were in Boston or Chicago, although way behind greater New York's 145,433. By 1910, Philadelphia's Italian population had risen to 76,734, most of whom were located in South Philadelphia, with small clusters in Chestnut Hill (notably the north Italian stone workers), Overbrook, and Germantown.

Although it can be argued that the early, pre-1870 Italian immigration of individuals has small relation to the brawny army of workers who later came in such numbers, there are some links between the two that are both curious and interesting. There was, for instance, that tiny band of Protestant Waldenses who arrived at New Castle, Delaware, in 1665, following a frightful massacre and rout in their home area of Piedmont in northern Italy. Their language and records were in French and it is difficult to follow them into the Italian life of later Philadelphia, but the 1880-1910 immigration included a sizable number of Italian Waldenses.³

There are also links between the early Italian priests and the later immigrants. The Catholic church congregations—and Philadelphia boasts the first permanent Roman Catholic Church in the British colonies⁴—were French, Spanish, and German in the eighteenth century, and Irish in the nineteenth. However, since priests were always assigned from Rome, some of the earliest clerics to arrive were Italians.⁵

The musicians show a clear line of descent. Some of the first Italians to come were instrument players, who, because of their lack of easy association with the colonial gentry, opened public "night clubs" in order to perform. The later group, coming in the mid-nineteenth century and early twentieth, struggled to make Italian opera an important part of Philadelphia life.⁶

³ Sophia V. Bompiano, *The Italian Waldenses* (New York, 1899), 79, 103, 110; George B. Watts, *The Waldenses in the New World* (Durham, N. C., 1941), 10-13, 124. Both the Tenth Presbyterian Church and the First Baptist Church today include Italian Waldenses.

⁴ St. Joseph's, Willing's Alley, founded in 1733. Kirlin, 25, 33, 35.

⁵ Giovanni Ermenigildo Schiavo, *Italians in America before the Civil War* (New York, 1924), 206.

⁶ Robert A. Gerson, *Music in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1940), 67, 70-72, 76-77.

In 1757, John di Palma gave the first public concert in Philadelphia; his second was attended by George Washington.⁷ The Quakers, however, frowned on musical shows and Palma went to New York. One of his orchestra, Gaetano Francheschini, remained, dividing his time between Philadelphia and Charleston, South Carolina, playing the harpsichord, the violin, and the "viol d'amour" at private gatherings.⁸ A more important musician was Giovanni Gualdo, who advertised in 1768 that he brewed spruce and sassafras beer and taught music.⁹ He opened a shop and sold musical instruments and secular music, much of which he composed himself. In 1769 he gave the first concert of composed-in-America music. A subscription series followed in 1770, but, although he was accepted into the English and German circle of music lovers, his concerts did not pay.¹⁰ Another Italian, Vincent Pelosi, somewhat later ran an exchange coffee house where he sold wine and offered "al fresco" concerts. In 1774, a Pietro Sodi gave a concert and ball, and then, reportedly by request, opened a dancing school for young gentlemen in the mornings, young ladies in the afternoons.¹¹

There were also Philadelphia Italians in the eighteenth century who were solely engaged in trade, forerunners of the large Italian market operators who flourished in the late nineteenth century. Giuseppe Mussi imported dry goods by package or piece from Amsterdam until the journalist-botanist Count Luigi Castiglioni came to town, when he closed his store to travel throughout Pennsylvania with his fellow Milanese.¹² As early as 1772, Anthony Vitalli boasted of his fine Italian sausages, fit to eat "boiled, fried, or broiled"—and purchasable opposite the sign of the Indian King. By 1778, he had simplified his name to Vitaly and had added sugar and snuff to his wares.¹³ In 1791, Stephen Ceoni ran a butcher shop; Thomas Allibone was a flour merchant.¹⁴

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ Schiavo, 231.

⁹ Howard R. Marraro, "Italo-Americans in Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century," *Pennsylvania History*, VII (1940), 164.

¹⁰ Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen, Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (New York, 1942), 157-159.

¹¹ Marraro, 164-165.

¹² Luigi Castiglione, *Viaggio Negli Stati Uniti dell' America* (Milan, 1790).

¹³ Marraro, 165.

¹⁴ *Philadelphia Directory*, 1791.

Among Italian intellectuals coming and going in the capital city, probably the most important in sending news to Italy about American freedom and opportunity was Filippo Mazzei, who was encouraged to come to America by Benjamin Franklin and persuaded to stay by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was so impressed by Mazzei's plans for a great vineyard and olive orchard that he arranged for him to have 2,000 acres in Virginia. Mazzei, in due course, was so impressed with American political developments that he assisted Jefferson in his political writings, acted as an agent for Virginia in Italy, and wrote a history of the Revolution.¹⁵ Another Italian thinker of note, Francesco Vigo, financier of the battle of Vincennes, was in intermittent touch with Philadelphia.¹⁶ Through the Sardinian consul in Philadelphia he brought in his nephew, Paola Busti, who as chief agent for the Holland Company became a Philadelphian. He was a pewholder at St. Mary's in 1800 and died in 1824 at Blockley, now Philadelphia General Hospital.¹⁷ The Milanese balloonist Count Paola Andreani stayed in Philadelphia only briefly, yet, like another Italian visitor, Dr. J. B. Scandella, the Venetian friend of architect Benjamin Latrobe, Andreani was made a member of the American Philosophical Society.¹⁸

Much has been said about the ties between the colonies and France during this period, but little about those with Italy. Both Jefferson and Franklin were keenly interested in Italy; Jefferson studied Italian agriculture extensively, once going so far as to smuggle rice out of a Piedmont paddy.¹⁹ Franklin, however, was more renowned there. Although he never set foot in Italy, he represented for the Italians, as he did for the French, the new American type, the "noble savage." His experiments in electricity and his stove were renowned through Italy, his books of practical morality were published and republished there, and statues and portraits of him were frequently made.²⁰ Through him, the aims and dreams of the Revolution gained

¹⁵ Richard C. Garlick, Jr., Angelo Flavio Guidi, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Bruno Roselli, Luigi Russo, *Italy and the Italians in Washington's Time* (New York, 1933), 13, 16-17, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83-109.

¹⁷ Schiavo, 215.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136; *List of the members of the American Philosophical Society from 1769-1838* (Philadelphia, 1838), 13, 15.

¹⁹ Garlick, 64-66.

²⁰ Antonio Pace, *Benjamin Franklin and Italy* (Philadelphia, 1958), 55-70.

a large audience.²¹ When a small town in Calabria was destroyed by an earthquake, the new one was named Filadelphia (probably by Freemasons) in honor of the American capital and was laid out on a similar plan, complete with an Avenue of Independence.²² Others in Philadelphia had ties with Italy: young artists went there, encouraged by the success in Rome of Benjamin West; doctors studied there; and fashionable young men who had made the Grand Tour of Rome, Paris, and London were called "Macaroni."²³ As early as 1765 we find the Italian doctor Joseph Battachi advertising his Roman surgical training to Philadelphians and offering to treat the poor free at his home in Southwark or visit the rich for a fee.²⁴ By 1791 another Italian doctor had arrived, George Alberti, whose offices were at 59 Mulberry Street.²⁵ Of the eighteenth-century Italian artists who came, the best known was Giuseppe Ceracchi, an eccentric sculptor. It was his dream to immortalize in stone the spirit of the American Revolution, but he found that Americans were not yet ready to put their money into statuary. Nevertheless, during his two stays in Philadelphia in 1790 and 1793, he persuaded such notables as Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and Madison to sit for him.²⁶

Few Italian laborers came to the colonies before the late nineteenth century. Italy was still in the grip of feudalism and workmen were rooted to the soil. Sailors were the chief exception. A saw of the time was "Crack an egg anywhere in the world and out will jump a Genoese." It is probable that a number of early Italian arrivals were once sailors out of Genoa who had jumped ship upon arriving at the port of Philadelphia.

The city was changing rapidly. In the eighteenth century non-English immigrants tended to live on its fringes. Washington Square on the southern edge, for instance, was a burial ground in part for Catholics, in part for Revolutionary soldiers, and in part for paupers. South of it lived the Germans who were not part of the Germantown

²¹ *Ibid.*, 170-173, 209-212.

²² *Ibid.*, 157-165.

²³ Bridenbaugh, 170-175, 284.

²⁴ Marraro, 160-161.

²⁵ *Philadelphia Directory*, 1791.

²⁶ *National Encyclopedia of American Biography*, VIII, 289.

group, some Finns, Swedes, Irish, and a few Italians. In the early nineteenth century, some French came and more Irish. This area was known as Southwark. South of its main street, Passyunk, was Moyamensing, which was not taken into the city until 1812 when it had a population of 3,000 inhabitants. It included farms and grazing lands along South Broad Street, a prison, and two famous gardens, Lebanon at Tenth and South and Moyamensing Botanic on Love Lane, soon to be renamed Washington Street. On Sunday, it was customary to promenade in the gardens or go by horse for a picnic at Point Breeze. In the 1840's a large number of Irish began to crowd the area. It is doubtful that there was an Italian colony in South Philadelphia as such in this period, but the number of Italians living there increased steadily from 1800 to 1850; the best known of them were still musicians.

It has been said that it was an accident that Mozart's one-time lyricist Lorenzo da Ponte arrived first in Philadelphia, rather than in New York where his wife awaited him. His name is written large in his own hand in the port's register of June 5, 1805. It was prefaced with Mister, although it is now known he was fleeing both his London creditors and his Italian training as a priest.²⁷ Although da Ponte did not reside permanently in Philadelphia, he was in and out of the city from 1805 until his death in New York in 1838. He wrote an opera in Philadelphia, produced at least fifteen, and his best friend, the Marquis Santangelo, was a Philadelphian, although a singularly obscure one. It was Santangelo who helped back da Ponte in his building of the New York Opera House and who aided him in importing Italian books.²⁸

It was doubtless through da Ponte that Maria Garcia, known professionally as Signorina Malibran, first sang for the Musical Fund Society in 1827.²⁹ She was the daughter of Manuel Garcia, the director of the first troupe of Italian opera singers to perform in the United States, and Garcia, a Spaniard, was da Ponte's friend.³⁰

²⁷ Garlick, 127-131; Ships Manifests, Philadelphia Arrivals, 1800-1838, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

²⁸ Elizabeth Abbott, tr., *Memoirs of Lorenzo da Ponte* (Philadelphia, 1929).

²⁹ William L. Mactier, *A Sketch of the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1885), 13.

³⁰ Garlick, 129.

Certainly it was da Ponte who brought Garcia's troupe to Philadelphia in 1832, the Montresor troupe, and the Riva-Finoli troupe in 1833, when the audience that was expected to throng da Ponte's opera house in New York failed to materialize.³¹ The officers of the Musical Fund Society and the Philharmonic Society relied heavily on Italian performers. Although the first troupes were not financial successes,³² by 1847 Italian musicians had attracted enough opera buffs to have a remunerative season, and the Italian Opera Company, financed by a German slave trader from Havana, was formed. It lasted five years and was particularly notable because the daughter of two of the singers was Adelina Patti, who in 1852 at the age of eight made her debut as an opera singer at the Musical Fund Society and from there went on to world fame.³³

How many Italians constituted the Philadelphia community between 1800 and 1850 is difficult to estimate. Ships' manifests disclose that approximately 150 Italians arrived in the port of Philadelphia between 1800 and 1838. Some moved on to New York or proceeded to Rio de Janeiro or Buenos Aires, the destination of the first waves of Italian immigration to the New World. Until 1818 national origin is suggested by patronym. After 1818 immigration law demanded "origin" be listed and Italians can be identified more accurately.

Following these Italian arrivals through church, business, and art directories, it is possible to obtain some data about their activities. In the 1855 city directory there are twenty-six Italians, eleven of whom are also recorded in other local records. For instance, Antonio Antelo, merchant, arrived on the schooner *Stephanie* from Havana in 1814; in 1855 A. J. Antelo was listed in the city directory and reported at St. John's as a pillar of the church.³⁴ In 1807, Nicholas Guilberti arrived with two trunks of wearing apparel and bedding; by 1855 he was listed as Nicholas Guilbert, printer. There is no record of Nicholas Monachesi's arrival, but between 1832 and 1851 he painted the fresco at the Merchant's Exchange and a mural at St. Joseph's church. He lived with F. Monachesi, another fresco painter, who may have been his son. In 1855 an Ellen Monachesi

³¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

³² Mactier, 15, 29, 31-43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁴ *St. John's Sodality Records* [Philadelphia, 1870], 24.

lived at 156 Pine and she too was listed as a fresco painter. The Citti brothers were also Italian artists, well known at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; in the city directory of 1855 John Citti listed himself as an image maker—Orelus and Louis were lithographers.³⁵

Other Italians can be found in the business community. There were the Perrets, two watch-making brothers who arrived from Cuba as Perretti, and Viti, the merchant, who clung firmly to the family name but not the occupation. Described in the ships' manifest as "artist," he was noted in the city directory as being in "alabaster imports." Probably he made some of the religious images hawked through the streets. He may even have employed some of the image peddlers who were so famous—or infamous—in this period, for it is possible this peddling of religious objects began as a sideline of struggling artists whose products were quickly exploited by large scale producers both here and in France. It is strange, however, that in the directories of the 1850's there were no grocers or wine merchants with Italian names.

In the late 1840's, the first congregation of Italian Catholics began gathering in the chapel of St. Joseph's. In 1852 they secured their own church, St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi. Unfortunately no records were kept of attendance and the marriage and birth records of these early years are difficult to decipher. The only Italian name recorded in the fund raising committee formed to build the church is John Raggio; the rest are of Irish descent or, as is the case of John Questa, probably Spanish.³⁶ Dr. Bartholomew Fair, church historian of St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, assumes that there were at least fifty in the congregation, and that most were Florentines or Genoese since St. Mary Magdalen was a patron saint of Florence and Raggio is a Florentine name. The pastor, Carlo Mariano, was of course Italian; he is recorded in the ships' manifest as first coming to Philadelphia in September, 1818, with a group of fourteen Italian priests. Each had his own books, habits, bed, bedding, and some "mechanical tools." Not all Italians left their old church for St. Mary

³⁵ George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, *Dictionary of Artists in America 1564-1860* (New Haven, 1957), 450.

³⁶ Kirlin, 363.

Magdalen; neither Antelo nor J. de Angeli, his fellow pewholder at fashionable St. John's, joined the new parish.³⁷

During this mid-century period, a number of Italian contract laborers arrived, recruited often by steamship agents and brought into Philadelphia by way of New York in gangs of twenty or thirty to do road or construction work. Although a few became settlers, many of them returned home.³⁸ Among other arrivals were north Italian artisans, notably John Casani who came from Venice in 1850 and in 1877 was employed by the sculptor Alexander Calder. Casani was the caster of the great statues for City Hall, including that of William Penn.³⁹

In 1852 Lorenzo Nardi, a machinist from north of Florence, arrived and reportedly searched the city for seven days before he found another Italian; subsequently he set up a hat block factory at Sixth and Girard streets.⁴⁰ In 1871 Augustina Marcolina and his brother-in-law, Emilio Roman, emigrated from Poffabria, north of Venice, in search of stone work and discovered a stone quarry at Cheltenham and Waverly Streets in Chestnut Hill.⁴¹ From Basilicata, musicians continued to come. Half of the operas produced at the new Academy of Music and at the Walnut Street Theater in mid-century were Italian.⁴²

Other southern Italians, Sicilian farmers, began to trickle in during the eighteen-sixties and seventies. Because there was no steamship line running directly between Italy and Philadelphia at this time, most of these farmers drifted down from New York or Boston. In 1870 an Italian farming colony was formed at Vineland, New Jersey, when the illustrious Count Chevalier Secchi de Casale, New York publisher of the first Italian newspaper in America, persuaded the landowner Charles Landis to put large tracts of sandy New Jersey soil at his disposal to lease or sell to Italian farmers. Within a few years the new Vineland colony was self-supporting through the production of grapes, wine, and sweet potatoes, and in nearby

³⁷ *St. John's Sodality Records*, 24.

³⁸ Robert F. Foerster, *The Italian Immigration of Our Times* (Cambridge, 1924), 65-71.

³⁹ Obituary of Casani in *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Jan. 24, 1898.

⁴⁰ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 24, 1952.

⁴¹ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, May 15, 1927.

⁴² Gerson, 78-80.

Hammonton and Landisville, other plots were being rented out to Sicilians for berry raising.⁴³ Prior to this, some Sicilians apparently had been farming south of Philadelphia and peddling their products through the city in push wagons. As the New Jersey area prospered, it attracted more and more Italians, some of them recruited in Italy by Landis himself, and some of these preferred peddling to farm labor.⁴⁴ Socially distant from these south Italy newcomers though the older north Italian immigrants were—factionalism between the industrial north and the rural south of Italy is of long tradition—Philadelphia's Italians welcomed the Sicilian peddler. The street market at Ninth and Christian, where the peddlers gathered, soon became the nucleus of South Philadelphia's fast growing Little Italy, a position it continues to hold today.

By 1880, unskilled laborers were appearing in noticeable numbers. Lured by the promise of work, they were "birds of passage"—when the job was completed they were expected to go home. Usually, all arrangements were made for passage here and back through a *padrone* or patron, who served the laborers not only as "boss," but also as landlord, banker, interpreter, and employment agent. It is estimated that about one-fifth of all Italian immigration between 1870-1910 were "birds of passage" organized by *padroni*. Some laborers were married men, hirelings on Italian estates, owners of one-room houses crowded with children, but many were teenagers, middle sons whose services were needed neither in family endeavors or as helpmates to their aging parents, but whose "dollaro" were welcome indeed.⁴⁵

The abuses perpetrated by the *padroni* upon these migratory workers were many; the record is full of vanishing payrolls, empty banks, slummy rooming houses.⁴⁶ The first *padroni* apparently learned their skills through contract labor gangs; after these were banned, the *padroni* began to work with American industry directly. The Pennsylvania Railroad needed men in gangs for track laying, roadway

⁴³ Eliot Lord, John J. D. Trenor, Samuel J. Barrows, *The Italian in America* (New York, 1906), 129-131.

⁴⁴ Foerster, 367.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-43, 390-392.

⁴⁶ Sister M. Agnes Gertrude, "Italian Immigration into Philadelphia," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, LVIII (1947), 140.

maintenance, land-clearing; the coal mines of western Pennsylvania wanted Italians for rock blasting; construction agents sought laborers (as well as stone workers and masons) for help in the building of massive structures like Philadelphia's City Hall, Grand Central Station in New York, and the subways.⁴⁷

No federal action was ever taken against the *padrone* system. But while the cities of New York and Boston were slow to curb the abuses, in 1883-1884 an Italian physician in Philadelphia, Dr. D. A. Pignatelli, waged a successful fight against them in Pennsylvania.⁴⁸ The federal Department of Labor recognized differences in Italian colonies, declaring that while in Philadelphia "the bosses have also entrenched themselves . . . they do not appear to carry things in such a high-handed manner as in New York," adding that three special characteristics influenced the socio-economic pattern of Philadelphia's immigration. First, the fact that Philadelphia was not a port for Italian ships meant that the Italian arriving there usually had lived somewhere else in this country. Second, since Philadelphia was known as a city of homes, it had attracted immigrants who sought permanence. Third, new immigrants in Philadelphia were taken in hand soon after their arrival by "politicians," "who naturalize them and form them into clubs."⁴⁹

These Philadelphia politicians, who have yet to be examined in depth, were both like and unlike the more famous *padroni* of New York. They were unlike in that they were local residents of some stature with ties to the city's social structure who apparently preferred power and prestige to cold cash—only through them did the Italian laborers get privileges and jobs. Their chief job area was the exclusive right to keep the city streets clean, a right which was important not only because it cut into Irish political power, but because it also led to a claim on several jobs of importance in the City Hall establishment.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Foerster, 357; Philip M. Rose, *The Italians in America* (New York, 1922), 57.

⁴⁸ Edwin Fenton, "Italians in the Labor Movement," *Pennsylvania History*, XXVI (1959), 135.

⁴⁹ John Koren, "The Padrone System and Padrone Banks," *Bulletin, United States Department of Labor*, 1897 (IX), 123-128.

⁵⁰ Hugo V. Maiale, *The Italian Vote in Philadelphia between 1928 and 1946* (Philadelphia, 1950), 9.

The method of job control was intricate, however, for the politicians could not afford to have a *padroni* revolt. Together they formed a central organization which the immigrants had to join before they could secure jobs, an organization aptly named the *Societa Operaia di Mutuo Soccorso*—the Workingman's Society of Mutual Aid.

Technically, the bosses controlled the organization, but inasmuch as the politicians who belonged to it had control of whole areas of contracts and jobs which the bosses could not touch, not to mention some voice in legislation, both gained from working amicably together. In due course they also gained a joint name which was peculiarly Philadelphian despite its Italian origin. They were called *The Prominenti*.⁵¹

The Prominenti were both admired and fought, but most Italians of this generation and group were, in the main, only too happy to share a little of their pay, however hard-earned, with the men who made their jobs, their savings, the roofs over their heads possible. Few knew any English and few were welcome at the American banks since they never let their savings rest for long; few had the cash necessary on arrival for a private room, and few knew the intricacies of exporting their money back to their families. In short, they embodied all the alleged American virtues of hard work, thrift, and devotion to home and country, but since there was little in the American culture, except work, adapted to their particular needs, they continued their family organizations, and defended with traditional Italian vigor their relatives or countrymen, even when they swindled them out of their full pay or bedded them down on a slim strip of bare and filthy floor.⁵²

How many of these unskilled laborers were there generally in Philadelphia? It is certain that their numbers never rose as high as in New York. A count in 1900 of occupations in a group of Philadelphia Italians disclosed that slightly more than one-third were unskilled laborers.⁵³

Many of those who began as "birds of passage" undoubtedly became permanent residents. By 1900 it was reported that in Philadelphia two out of three Italian immigrants owned their own

⁵¹ Koren, 123-124.

⁵² Foerster, 375.

⁵³ Dinwiddie, Table 24.

homes—a startling and probably exaggerated contrast to the New York figure of only 637 houses, mostly tenements, owned there by Italians, although by then it was quite clear that if an Italian worker was not sending four out of five dollars home he was investing in real estate.⁵⁴

Three-fourths of the immigrants of this period were peasants from southern Italy and Sicily; those who came to Philadelphia were in the main from Ubrizzo-Molino, the province that stretches east and south of Rome, but some were from Campagna, Calabria, Basilicata, the heel of Italy's boot, and many came from the port towns of Sicily. Why had they left? It is generally held that the chief reason for the southern and eastern European mass emigration of the late nineteenth century was poverty, but this is an oversimplification. The amount of Italian emigration varied from province to province, yet all of southern Italy suffered equally during this period from high taxes, exhaustion of the land, a decline in the lemon market, a grapevine disease, and a rise in population. The difference between the provinces that emptied and those that did not was that the latter contrived to organize successfully and work together so as to manage what land there was communally, while the former did not. The Italian peasant suffered almost as much hunger (although not famine) as did the Irish peasant during the 1840's and 1850's, but the social upheaval that took place in both Ireland and Germany in this period was delayed in Italy by the continuous wars that were fought within and over the Italian states. Wars, no matter how demanding or how disliked, bring with them their own ties of morale and unity even to a hungry populace. Not until the foreign invaders from Austria and France left, not until the dukes of the northern Papal states and the great landholders of the southern kingdoms settled their scores, not until the Church hierarchy had lost its hold, was the Italian little man, the artisan and the farmer, the small tradesman and the laborer, in any position to manage for himself. With Italian unification, new modes of organization were necessary. For those who could not find them in Italy, emigration appeared the answer.⁵⁵

In 1869, when the Italian government first began recording its population losses, 84,000 shipped out, most of them to Europe for

⁵⁴ Foerster, 375.

⁵⁵ Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History*, LI (1964), 406-408.

temporary work, but 36,000 were listed as leaving for South America as permanent settlers. Despite various laws passed against emigration, the outward flow continued and some of it was directed to North America. In 1886, the great wave of immigration into the United States which was to bring in 3,000,000 Italians in the next three decades began to gather power. Unlike the earlier influx, most of these Italians were from rural southern Italy, and centuries of domination by church, state, warlords, and landlords had left them fatalistic, provincial, and trustful of no one except their family groups, their *paesani*, the people of their own village who shared with them local dialect, including gestures, traditions, superstitions, and usually blood ties as well.⁵⁶ While many of the young men had a tradition of migratory work in France or Austria, those families who broke away for good from their small plots of land, from the familiar reassuring sound of the church bell, and from the stone house which had been the family's home for centuries, ventured forth only on the repeated advice, encouragement, and financial assistance of relatives and friends.⁵⁷ This pattern is well-termed "chain migration," for as one or another person in a family or a village began sending for others, literally chains of people wound out of Italy into the Little Italies of the United States. Until this pattern of grouping was revealed, the Little Italies of the United States were seen as cohesive *Italian* groups; closer inspection alone revealed the clusters, the groupings on a street, or even one side of a street, by what the Italians call *campanillismo*, the sound of the village bell, but which is in actuality the grouping by family and *paesani*, or townspeople.⁵⁸

The Italians' first organizations in Philadelphia thus were village or family organizations, but a few, probably in reaction to the pressures of American society, were occupational groups. By 1886, there were eleven Italian clubs in the city, eight of which were of *paesani*, only three of which were occupational groups.⁵⁹ By 1900, the village organizations numbered in the scores.

⁵⁶ Foerster, 6.

⁵⁷ Phyllis H. Williams, *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America* (New Haven, 1936), 1-18.

⁵⁸ J. S. MacDonald, "Chain Migration and the Formation of Ethnic Neighborhoods," *Social Research*, XXIX (1962), 433-448.

⁵⁹ Fenton, 136.

Most Italians, although gregarious, were not responsive to union organization. Italian barbers, slowly pushing the French out of the business, were more likely to be proprietors than hirelings. In 1900 when some 800 Italian barbers were in the 4,000-strong Philadelphia local of the Barbers International, a strike was called to raise prices and outlaw Sunday work, but the Italian barber-proprietors would not co-operate, and, when shaves went down to a nickel, most of them resigned.⁶⁰ Although Italian tailors and needle workers organized a mutual benefit society in Philadelphia in 1884, and, seven years later, one hundred of them joined the Journeymen Tailors International, they pulled out a year later because the union had no communications written in Italian. It was of little value for them to be organized anyhow; most of them did home or piece work, many were women working long hours at home; others were finishers in sweat shops; some were proprietors who owned their own small retail stores. In 1903, 180 of them rejoined the International, but four years later they refused to strike, maintaining that the union had done nothing to improve their conditions or wages and they had little hope that it ever would.

If not much interested in joining labor unions, Philadelphia's Italians were inclined toward parish affiliation. In part this religious loyalty was due to the women rather than the men, and in part to local proselytizing Irish priests and lay Catholics in the local churches. Although the first comments by church authorities on the increasing numbers of Italians in South Philadelphia carry a note of complaint, later ones suggest some pride. Because the growing number of Italians in the district around Ninth and Christian could no longer be accommodated at St. Mary Magdalen, two Italian priests (Augustinians) were sent for in 1898 and the Lady of Good Counsel on South Eighth was proclaimed an Italian church.⁶¹ In the next two years, a school was opened at St. Paul's Church, at Christian between Ninth and Tenth Streets, to teach Italian boys manual training and English; soon a priest who had at first eyed the new wave of immigration with astonishment declared he could "successfully mould the Italian nature along American lines." Another

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

⁶¹ Kirlin, 504.

school, Madonna House, well supported by *The Prominenti* and including adult medical care facilities, was founded in 1904.⁶² By 1907, there were two more Italian churches, one of which was in Overbrook and the other at Broad and Ellsworth, where land that was once grazing ground for cattle now was fast filling up with Italians.⁶³

At first the Italian churches were supported financially by other ethnic groups, but Philadelphia's Italians soon organized fund-raising processions which wound through the streets of South Philadelphia. Men, women, and children carried plaster images, candles, and poor boxes, singing as they went.⁶⁴ Local groups were helped, too, by sister orders in Italy; as early as 1874 three Franciscan nuns came to Philadelphia to run a school for orphaned Italian children, and by 1903 the Franciscans were also running a kindergarten. Despite this pious work, however, the majority of the first and second generation Italians in Philadelphia went to public schools—at least between October and April when there was no work in the fields and little room in their overcrowded houses—and attended church rarely.⁶⁵

Few Italians became Protestants, although Protestants from time to time were inveighed against by Catholics for attempting to subvert Italians. In 1889, an Italian scholar, Teofilo Malan, started a Methodist church on Catharine Street; in 1902, an Italian Presbyterian and Waldense church with a soup kitchen and poorhouse was endowed in part by John Wanamaker, who also supported a colony of Italian Waldenses in North Carolina. In 1908, Presbyterians were circulating a national church paper in Italian and running a settlement house in South Philadelphia, while other city groups had opened two other settlement houses.⁶⁶

There can be no question that this outpouring of public charity was necessary, as vividly disclosed in the detailed study made by Emily Dinwiddie for the Octavia Hill Housing Association in 1900. Through this study it is possible to concentrate attention on the daily life of a single block, the block bounded by Carpenter and

⁶² *Ibid.*, 450.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 363, 508.

⁶⁴ Rev. Antonio Isoleri, *Souvenir and Bouquet* (Philadelphia, 1911), 24-25.

⁶⁵ Maiale, 122-124.

⁶⁶ Sister Gertrude, 204-205.

Christian, South Eighth and Ninth, the very heart of Little Italy. Miss Dinwiddie viewed the black-eyed, playful children, the bright dresses of the women, and the street vendors with pleasure, but noticed with pain the deplorable lack of sanitary facilities, the ramshackle growth of alley houses and lean-tos, and the pitiful overcrowding. The business dwellings were sturdy and many Italians lived over-the-store in customary city fashion. A few also lived in handsome single residences, but, while there was only one actual tenement, there were houses so added on to by shacks and alley houses, that she named them "horizontal" tenements. This arrangement resulted in several families sharing a single hall, doorway, lavatory, and cellar just as they did in a vertical tenement.⁶⁷

One in three families, indeed, had but one room for kitchen, bedroom, and eating room purposes, a situation which thrust most of the inhabitants onto the street a good part of the time. In the tiny yards lay beds and old mattresses; it was considered bad luck to keep a bed in which someone had died. The only plumbing was a hydrant every four or five houses which served as the city counterpart of the old village pump. There were no gutters, no sewers; often the yards were flooded with water. Some houses had toilets in outdoor shacks, but almost none had baths. Startlingly, however, despite these foul conditions, Miss Dinwiddie reported the Italian bedrooms and living rooms were clean and scrubbed, except those in which men lived without women. The kitchens, however, were not so clean and many Italians, still peasants at heart, kept chickens in their bedrooms and goats in their cellars.⁶⁸

In the one block inspected by Miss Dinwiddie lived 366 families, 338 of which were Italian. They occupied 180 houses, ran five banks, two saloons, and the Marionette Theater. Thirty-four families owned their own houses and lived in them alone, while another twenty-six owned the houses they lived in but shared them with others. There was a boarding house, run by Walter Palumbo, but many single men lived with other families, three or four to a room. Family overcrowding was also serious. Statistically there were about 200 people to an acre; the second, third, and fourth wards in 1900 contained one-

⁶⁷ Dinwiddie, 2-4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

sixteenth of the city's population in one-fiftieth of its space. The one-out-of-four families who lived in a single room suffered most. Because of the overcrowding, Miss Dinwiddie reported, "families stay outdoors as much as possible, the rooms are unendurable, cleanliness impossible, decency is utterly disregarded, contagious diseases spread with frightful rapidity, there is no home life anywhere" for these families. "To call such a habitation a home is but a mockery," she wrote. "Moral and physical evils of every kind result."⁶⁹

The men's occupations ranged from a single junk man to thirty-four storekeepers, from ninety-three day laborers to five bankers. About a third were peddlers, vendors, and merchants; nearly a third were in skilled work such as dressmaking and tailoring, stoneworking, and shoe cobbling; somewhat more than a third were unskilled teamsters, janitors, ragmen, and laborers.⁷⁰

There was one "sweating shop," that is a tailoring shop in which workers outside the family were employed on finishing and piece work. There were several houses in which ragpicking was done—twenty-eight men considered this work their sole source of revenue. Six were hatters (the big Stetson factory was nearby); another seven were stonecutters and masons; four worked in the stables that stood in the center of the block.⁷¹

How many women were involved in the various businesses Miss Dinwiddie did not record, but it is known that any Italian business was a family business. Since Italian men did not encourage their women to go out to work—in Norristown, indeed, they worked in factories only when chaperoned—it can be surmised that most of the men had wives and children who labored in the family business as hard as they did. Among the home tailors, in the three cigar stores, the two candy shops, and the twelve grocery stores, women and children attendants were doubtless a familiar sight, but it is unlikely that even one woman ever entered the poolroom or the Marionette Theater. The old country Italian pattern of male dominance continued for at least two generations.

It is probable that for many families overcrowded conditions were but temporary. Italians early overflowed their original Little Italy

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Table 24.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

into land along South Broad, West Philadelphia, the Main Line, adjacent New Jersey, and Germantown. As early as 1890, Frank di Bernadino, chief steamship agent for the Italian lines, moved his family to Overbrook. By 1900 the Talone family was in Ardmore as tailors, and countless Italian gardeners and stonemasons were at work on Main Line estates. Soon after, there was a growing colony at Manayunk and, across the Schuylkill, a larger cluster in Germantown, a smaller one in East Falls. In the rural area east of Philadelphia, the area now known as Cherry Hill, there was another colony, while up the Delaware at Tacony-Palmyra was still another. In one sense all these areas were subdistricts of South Philadelphia because it was there that Italian businesses had their home offices, the great market, and it was there that many of their leaders and friends lived, but in another sense each move constituted the beginnings of an independent colony which soon enjoyed its own meat and fruit store, shoe repair shop, pasta makers, and bankers.⁷²

The Chestnut Hill colony, however, grew separately by drawing its newcomers from north Italy, and, indeed, almost totally from one village there, Poffabria, the home village of the original quarry workers. Between 1890 and 1905 when the stoneworkers made many trips home, often to get brides, Poffabria's population dropped from 2,200 to 1,000 while the Chestnut Hill group grew correspondingly. In due course, these stoneworkers joined with the Irish bricklayers to form the nucleus of the building unions, hired and trained help—"bullworkers"—from South Philadelphia, and became responsible for almost all of the Chestnut Hill stone and tile work, as well as about eighty per cent of the Main Line's.⁷³

By 1920 census reports showed 55,972 Italian adults in Philadelphia, of whom almost one-third were naturalized. With the legislation of 1924, which permitted only citizens to bring over wives and children as nonquota immigrants, the number of naturalized leaped. But despite their common background and the poverty and prejudice which drew them together, the Italians were not a united group. In the nineteen twenties they were divided not only by their old world village organizations into fragmented groups but politically into

⁷² Gaetano J. Fonzi, "Philadelphia's Italians: A Bubbly Minestrone," *Greater Philadelphia Magazine* (January, 1961), 68.

⁷³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 24, 1952.

clericalists and socialists.⁷⁴ With the rise of Mussolini, the clericalists tended to become pro-fascist, the socialists, anti-fascist, primarily because the Catholic church, like Mussolini, was unalterably opposed to communism. Most of the Italian newspapers during this period, and Philadelphia had seven, concentrated more on news of Italy than of the local community. The depression of the thirties brought difficulties and change. Many Italian banks, newspapers, and benevolent organizations failed. Unemployment was widespread. The community leaders could not provide independent aid and support; the city did little to assist either their ethnic organizations or a movement to bring Italians into the mainstream of Philadelphia life. The result was a break away from total community commitment, which politically was Republican, towards American nationalism as it was represented to them in their living rooms by the radio presence of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and by the New Deal relief workers in their neighborhood.⁷⁵

When America entered World War II, the conflict between its old Italian ties and its new American ones was extremely disheartening to the older generation, but less so to the newer, which was by then English speaking and American in habit, although still strongly family oriented. In fact, the Italian community was beginning to come of age politically and to demand representation in the city's affairs commensurate with its size. As the city's leadership became Democratic, new divisions turned on American partisan lines.⁷⁶

With the end of the war, education began to be seen as the area of achievement in American life and the third generation began moving upward through the high schools into the colleges. By 1950 more than two out of ten Philadelphia men of Italian stock were in professional or technical work, thirty per cent were craftsmen and foremen, and fifteen per cent clerks and salespeople.⁷⁷ By the sixties, children of Italian heritage filled forty per cent of the seats in the growing number of Catholic schools in Philadelphia and the influence of their heritage was being studied by the Catholic church.⁷⁸ As more and

⁷⁴ Sister Gertrude, 259.

⁷⁵ Maiale, 112-118.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-151.

⁷⁷ Stanley Lieberson, *Ethnic Patterns in American Cities* (Glencoe, Ill., 1963), 163, 212, 289.

⁷⁸ Statement of Father Bartholomew Fair, Catholic church historian, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Overbrook, Pa.

more of the second and third generations moved into the mainstream of Philadelphia's life, however, the basic variety within the American-Italian group became more and more visible. There were still Waldensian Protestants as well as Catholics among them, still musicians, artists, and intellectuals, and while the number of professional and skilled men and women grew steadily, there were still the unskilled. Some of the young insisted on staying in South Philadelphia despite the steady pressure of the Negro population, others moved to the suburbs. Many kept the family business growing; others preferred to enter the larger community as individuals.

These generalities brush only the surface of the present day Italian-Americans. The story of their assimilation, or lack of it, after the great wave of immigration subsided in the twenties to a mere ripple of about 4,000 annually, is yet to be written.

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