THE ITALIANS AND SLAVS OF NEW CASTLE: PATTERNS IN THE NEW IMMIGRATION

John Bodnar

Every student of American immigration is well aware of the fact that there have been two great periods of migration. Before the 1880s the source of most American immigration was western and northern Europe and, of course, Africa. The British, Irish, Scots, Germans, and other groups from these regions constituted the bulk of those people who decided to seek a better fortune on this side of the Atlantic.

With the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the origins of most immigrants began to shift to the southern and eastern parts of the European continent. The people were largely either Slavic or Italian. The Slavic group alone included Poles, Bohemians, Slovaks, Russians, Ruthenians, Serbs, Croatians, Slovenians, and other minor groups. By 1930, some fourteen million immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had entered the United States.1

To even the casual observer there was a striking difference between the new arrivals and the older German, Irish, Scandinavian, and British stock. The newcomers represented people who were strikingly different in language, customs, culture, political experiences, and personal standards of living. Many Americans reacted adversely to the influx, feeling the new immigrants would corrupt and lower the standards of American life. Native Americans looked upon the Slavs and Italians as "rag-tag and bob-tail cutthroats . . . from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vistula and the Elbe." Indeed, the report of the Dillingham Commission of 1907, which studied the question of limiting immigration in certain ethnic groups and ran to over forty-one volumes, gave what was felt to be scientific proof of the innate inferiority of southern and eastern Europeans.2

The author is currently in charge of the Ethnic Studies Program for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. He is a Ph.D. candidate in American social and cultural history at the University of Connecticut and is editing a volume on ethnic minorities in Pennsylvania which will be published by the Bucknell University Press.—Editor

2 Ibid.
Pennsylvania, of course, was filled with incoming Slavs and Italians. And the negative view of newcomers was just as prevalent in this state as in others. The Slav, for instance, came to be looked upon as an ignorant, docile “greenhorn” who was easily manipulated by his employer or even his parish priest. In one Western Pennsylvania town, when Slavic immigrants applied for the use of the schoolhouse, they were told there wasn’t much use in asking because “Hunkeyville” was drunk half the time and its residents would be better served by a social club for their drinking.

Recent investigations, however, have tended to alter our view of these “docile” newcomers. Rather than being meek, ignorant, and prone to continued drinking, the Slavs and Italians were, like most Americans, committed to creating a better life for themselves and their families in a strange land. Studies of the Slavic laborers in the anthracite region, for instance, have shown that they were not manipulated by employers to resist unionization but, on the contrary, worked hard to foster unionization. Timothy Smith has suggested similar immigrant initiative among Slovene businessmen in Minnesota iron towns.3

Immigrant initiative can be seen even more graphically if one focuses on a typical industrial town at the turn of the century. New Castle, in Lawrence County, Pennsylvania, presents an excellent laboratory for viewing ethnic groups in action during this period. Fortunately, the record of New Castle’s immigrant activities has been preserved in interviews and studies made during the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Pennsylvania.

New Castle became an important center for iron manufacturing in Western Pennsylvania in the mid-nineteenth century, utilizing a large part of the pig iron produced in Butler County furnaces. The Lawrence (Pa.) Journal for November 2, 1850, boasted that those who formerly were forced to go to Pittsburgh to secure ironware were now able to supply their needs with the products from the New Castle Iron Foundry. The Casal Iron Company of New Castle became an important manufacturer of iron rails. The Orizaba Iron Works became one of the largest iron producers in Western Pennsylvania with furnaces, a rolling mill, and a nail factory, all operated under the same plant roof and management — from raw material to finished product. Indeed, by 1900 New Castle had become the capital of the tinplate industry.

With the increased industrial activity, New Castle became a natural attraction for Slavs and Italians who were seeking better economic opportunities in the 1890s. The tremendous surge of immigrant labor into the town can be partially seen in the rapid growth of New Castle's population from 1890 to 1900. In 1880, the town consisted of some eight thousand residents, only growing by a little over three thousand in the ensuing decade. However, from 1890 to 1900, the population jumped over 150 percent from 11,600 to 28,757. The first decade of the twentieth century saw a return to a more stable growth of about eight thousand in that period.4

Among this population influx were thousands of Poles, Slovaks, and Italians who came to New Castle in search of economic gain. Some would return eventually to Europe or move on to other cities. But most would stay and, far from being docile or manipulated, would settle their families, build churches, organize clubs, and establish themselves in the community.

Let us turn first to the Italians who came to New Castle prior to 1880. In the beginning there were but a few families, but the immigration increased tremendously toward the end of the century until by 1939 the Italians made up approximately one-fourth of the population of New Castle and its environs. The majority came from the southern sections of Italy.

Many of the Italians planned to work and save in America for a few years and then return to Italy. However, several permanent settlements of Italians in New Castle did appear around their places of employment and around their main churches. One early settlement was "Snakes Rest," northwest of the city, where the Italian men worked as farm laborers. Another was in the Croton district where the men worked in quarries and cement plants. Another community was housed around Sheep Hill; the largest community was in the south side surrounding St. Vitus, built in 1906, the first Italian church in New Castle.

Many of the early Italians worked as laborers on the construction of railroads. The single men lived in boxcars doing their own cooking and laundry and receiving ninety-nine cents per day. In 1900, two-thirds of the laborers in the steel mill were Italians with the Standard

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Steel Car Works and the tin mills employing many others.5

It appears that the first Italian families in New Castle proper were the Barborinis, the Carborinis, the Poggias, the Tardellis, and the Valiensis. The Carborinis kept a candy store on Washington Street, and when Anthony Valiensi and Luigi Tardelli came to New Castle around 1880 they made their home with the Carborinis. Anthony Valiensi was the first Italian naturalized in Lawrence County. Son of a cultured family, and himself a well-educated man, he worked for two years as a laborer, often earning no more than ten cents an hour. After working for two years, he returned to Italy and brought back his wife and two children. Valiensi, with the financial aid of his friend Luigi Tardelli, opened a grocery store on South Jefferson Street. Valiensi was active in local politics and was one of the organizers of St. Vitus Church and of the Casa Savoia Society. When Luigi Tardelli came to New Castle the population was under ten thousand and Tardelli remembers that the roads were unpaved except for the cobblestones on the main street, and that next to the city hall, at the corner of Washington and East streets, was Winternitz’s grocery store with a pigpen in back. Like Anthony Valiensi, Tardelli worked for a contractor. They worked on most of the important construction jobs of the period, including the old Franklin Bridge, the Opera House, and the Phillips Mansion. Tardelli, too, was instrumental in organizing St. Vitus Church.6

The history of the Italian people in New Castle contains one dark chapter. During the first few years of the present century, a society composed of exiled members of the Mafia in Italy, and known here as the “Society of Honor,” or the “Black Hand,” terrorized the Italian communities in and around New Castle, especially Hillsville. Moreover, its threats and depredations were not confined to Italians alone.

Blackmail was the chief object of the organization. Men were forced to join the organization by threats against wives and children. During the years 1903 to 1905, the situation was so bad in Hillsville that as many as fourteen murders were reported around the limestone quarries. The owners, therefore, called in the Pinkerton Detective Agency to investigate and break up the destructive activities of the society. One of the detectives sent out by the agency was an Italian who succeeded in joining the society and learning the names of the

5 “Racial Backgrounds,” Works Progress Administration (WPA) Papers, Lawrence County, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg. All interviews were conducted between 1938-39.

6 Ibid. Interview with Tardelli.
leaders and many of their past crimes and future plans. The work of the Pinkertons culminated in the trial and conviction of thirty-three members of the band in 1907. During the trial the names of leaders of the society in the city of Sharon and in Mercer County also were brought out.7

Respectable Italians, of course, opposed the depredations of the "Black Hand." In New Castle, Rev. Nicholas DeMita organized the Catholic Anti-Black Hand Society. The officers of this society were president, Nicholas Faella; vice-president, Vito De Dimone; and secretary, Luigi Tardelli.8

Finally, it should be noted that a group of Italians settled in the Mahoningtown district because they could be near their jobs as laborers on the railroads. In fact, around 1913 it was said that 95 percent of the Italians living in the Mahoningtown settlement worked as railroad laborers. Italians in this district erected the original St. Lucy's Church of the Mahoningtown settlement in 1905, with Father DeMita the first pastor. In 1931, St. Lucy's, with Rev. S. Ippolito as pastor, erected a $30,000 structure on Cedar Street.

The first Polish settlers arrived in New Castle about the year 1892. They settled in the district called "Oakland" on Oak Ridge. The proximity of the mills and opportunities for light farming and gardening were the inducements to locate here. Most families had a small plot of ground, a horse, a cow, and poultry.

Poles in New Castle showed much initiative in building their own churches. Thus, in 1902 a committee of six men was appointed by the Polish group in Oakland to raise funds toward the building of a church. The first Polish church, located in the midst of the Oakland settlement, was named the Madonna Church.

As did the Italians, the Polish settlers in New Castle came largely from agricultural communities in their native land. Not surprisingly they formed fraternal clubs in order to provide themselves with friendship and a semblance of financial stability in their new homes. Especially, since the men often came first without their families, the initial months in America as one might readily imagine, were times of uncertainty and apprehension.

The Polish National Alliance first organized in New Castle in

7 Ibid. "The Society of Honor."
8 New Castle (Pa.) News, Aug. 21, 1907.
1899. The organization began in the Oakland district, and it went under the name of “Volunteers of Kosciusko.” Its original organizers included Mikael Gurgacz, Mikad Janicki, and Joseph Zombeck. Eventually, other Polish National Alliance groups were formed, including a ladies group in 1913.

The Polish Falcon Club was organized in the year 1909, by the Polish people of the south New Castle district with John Tamseyk and Gabriel Boron the organizers. These men set about arranging athletic activities, concentrating on gymnastics and military drills. At the time of World War I, about twenty members of the Falcons volunteered to fight with the United States Army; about thirty-seven were sent to the Polish Army. When the men were leaving New Castle to enter the services, the members of the club, with the aid of a Polish band, paraded with the men to the railroad station, giving them a good send-off.9

The Kasmier Pulaski Club originated in the combining of the “Third of May” and “St. Joseph” clubs, and by 1924 the organization had over two hundred seventy members. By the middle-thirties, the club had paid over forty thousand dollars in sick and death benefits. Such organizations, of course, were vital to newly arrived immigrant groups in helping them adjust to a strange land.

As if the uncertainty, apprehension, and longing for loved ones was not enough, the newly arrived workingman was thrown into the crowded life of the boardinghouse. Each man contributed on an average of three dollars a month for a place to sleep and to have his food cooked. These boardinghouses provided beds for eight or ten men and were in use constantly. As the day shift men left, the night shift men would be ready to occupy the bed just vacated.10

The work they were doing, mostly in the steel mills and Aetna Furnace, left the men little energy for recreation. They liked beer and relaxed over it in the evenings. Some Sundays, when work was slack, they would attend church. As time went on, the men were able to send for their families and build up the homes which form the foundation of the present Polish community.

As more and more Polish people came to New Castle, the Oakland settlement became crowded. So, finding another location with room for small gardens and proximity to the mills, they built up a second Polish settlement in Sheep Hill. Eventually, this group became large

9 "The Polish Falcon Clubs," WPA Papers, Lawrence County.
10 Ibid. Interview with Valentine Jacobs.
enough to construct Sts. Philip and James Church in 1922 at the corner of Hanna and Charles streets. Services were held in the basement of the church, and on December 25, 1923, the first devotions were held in the church itself.

The Slovak immigrants to New Castle first arrived around 1889. They came from the eastern provinces of Czechoslovakia, from towns such as Hozin, Peice, Kaminka, and Chomec. Some came from the areas around Bratislava and Turciansky Svaty Martin.

Like the other immigrants, they too came from farming communities. They usually were loaned passage money by the steamship companies and sent for their families after working in New Castle for a short while. One Slovak man of New Castle says that the men often lived on bread and coffee until they had saved money to repay the original loan for their passage to America.

The Slovaks also endured the crowded boardinghouse life which included hard labor and heavy drinking. But the Slovaks also shared with other immigrants a strong desire to succeed and to make a better life for themselves. Consider the story of an anonymous New Castle Slovak who became foreman in the tin house at the Shenango Mill. When this man was a boy of twelve, he worked in the fields of his native land, often putting in twelve to fourteen hours a day without any food. The boy later signed on as a blacksmith apprentice for four years without pay. When he was eighteen the lad received a letter from a friend in America which told him of opportunities for greater earnings. He borrowed money from friends and relatives to come to America and soon found a job here which paid nearly five times as much as the one he had held in Europe. Soon, it was noticed in the tin mill that he could do repair work no one else was capable of. He was promoted to millwright and later made a foreman.11

Not all immigrants, of course, experienced a rapid road to advancement. Many unemployed spent their days picking coal in order to at least heat their homes. Work was never steady, and their futures were continually uncertain. The majority of the early Slovaks went to work as laborers in the steel mill and blast furnaces. Their first homes were in boardinghouses near the mills on George Street and Sciota Street.

There were two Slovak families in New Castle who took in the

11 Ibid. “Slavic Groups.”
bulk of early Slovak immigrants as boarders — Mrs. Kicas and Mrs. Mary Valko. These two families came from different parts of Czechoslovakia. The people coming from Mrs. Kicas’s part went to her home, and the people coming from Mrs. Valko’s part of the country lived with her. The Slovak men who came to New Castle would not go to live with any other people but their own. Later, when they were able to save enough to send for their families, they bought homes and built their church on Sheep Hill. The president of the People’s Bank in New Castle, a leader among the Slovak people, made it possible for them to buy homes by erecting small houses and selling them to the Slovaks for as little as fifty dollars down payment. When they were ready to build a church, he also arranged for the financing of it.\(^1\)

The Slovaks followed the same pattern as other groups in regard to church building and fraternal groups. Before their own church was built in 1910, the Slovaks attended St. Joseph’s Church, established by German Catholics in 1888. They had planned as early as 1904 to have a parish of their own but met with many difficulties. For a time they held services in a hall on Washington Street under the guidance of a student from abroad who posed as a Catholic priest. Before this man was exposed as a fraud, he succeeded in doing much harm in the community.\(^2\)

Another setback was encountered in 1909 when a tin mill strike threw most of the Slovaks out of work. However, in 1910 plans for the church were forwarded to Bishop Hugh Boyle at Pittsburgh by Adolph Green and Joseph Klarmar. Bishop Boyle did not immediately approve the project, believing that the families interested were not sufficient to support a church. Mr. Green, however, was able to secure a loan and enough money was secured to start building a church. In October 1910, the cornerstone of the new church was blessed. It was called St. Michael the Archangel and had for its first priest Rev. Paul Herman.

This was another example of immigrant initiative in action. Far from being docile bystanders, the new immigrants were working hard to establish themselves in a new land. The efforts of Adolph Green are a case in point.

The Slovaks formed their own societies as well. On January 28, 1916, the Slovak Roman Catholic Beneficial Society of New Castle was founded. The society adopted a resolution proclaiming that its aim was to promote the ideals and traditions of their adopted country

\(^{12}\) Ibid. “The Slovaks.”

\(^{13}\) Ibid. “Slavic Groups.”
and encouraged all Slovaks to become American citizens.

New Castle also received a smaller influx of several other Slavic groups. The Roumanians, the Russians, the Ukrainians, and the Croatians all found their way to the Western Pennsylvania community in search of an improved life. They too were attracted by the promise of higher earnings in the industrial city, and the pattern of their settling process was similar to other immigrant groups. They struggled for several years through the routine of the boardinghouse before they could eventually bring some stability into their lives with the reunion of families, the building of churches, and the forming of fraternal organizations.

About 1901, a group of young Roumanian men came to New Castle from Transylvania to work in the steel and tin mills. They also settled on the south side of town. Many Roumanians eventually left New Castle to return to Europe or to find work in other cities after the discontinuance of operations at the steel mills. This is evidenced by the drop in membership of the Roumanian Club; in 1917, the membership totaled 320 whereas by 1938 it amounted to only 91.14

There was also a significant influx of Russians and Ukrainians into New Castle. The first Carpatho-Russians came to New Castle around 1890. Generally they settled around an area known as Spring Hill. Later arrivals settled on Atlantic Avenue and elsewhere. Most worked in the Aetna Furnace. They organized the Greek Catholic Church Society in 1907 which eventually built St. Nicholas parish.15

The Ukrainians of New Castle first had settled in Allentown, Pennsylvania. While there, the men received information that the New Castle cement plants were paying fifty cents an hour for laborers, and they soon headed west. The first Ukrainians came to New Castle about 1918 and settled on Cascade Street, which is located on the outskirts of the city. This section was located near the Lehigh Cement Plant and Radiator Works where they were employed. The women and children worked in the National Pants Factory, which is also near this settlement.

Croatian men, like many of the new immigrants, came first and sent for their families as soon as they were settled. The first Croatian settlers arrived in New Castle around 1900. The biggest part of them

14 Ibid. “Smaller Groups.”
15 Ibid. “New Castle Russians.”
settled on Sciota Street near the mills. The men worked for a dollar and fifty cents a day — seven days a week — in shifts of ten to twelve hours. When the Slovak people began to build St. Michael's Church, they made their homes in that locality.

Too often, the story of the new immigrant has focused on the violence and conflict that pervaded his relationship with native Americans. (The Haymarket Riot and the Homestead Strike are good examples.) Recently, however, historians have taken note of the everyday life of the new arrivals and the personal struggles they endured in order to assimilate themselves into the community.

In our own brief look at New Castle, we have seen certain patterns emerge. Far from being docile, the Italians and Slavs actively sought a better life. They created churches through their own efforts and were certainly not manipulated by their pastors. They resisted crime, as in the case of the Italians organizing against the Black Hand. And they displayed a persistent desire to be assimilated into the community as witnessed by the aims of the Slovak Beneficial Society.

Finally, it seems that the churches and fraternal organizations which were formed among all groups did not contribute to the isolation of particular groups. Rather, they may have been what stabilized the immigrants' lives and consequently eased their integration into the rest of the community. Once an immigrant could bring his family over, build a church, and establish a fraternal organization, the unsettled life of the boardinghouse was left behind. Indeed, we might suggest, that in forming their own individual communities, the new immigrants actually were merging slowly with the community-at-large.