

= Salvatore A. Cotillo =

Salvatore Albert Cotillo ( November 19 , 1886 ? July 27 , 1939 ) was an Italian @-@ born New York lawyer , Democratic Party politician and judge . Elected in 1912 , he was the first Italian @-@ American to serve in both houses of the New York State Legislature and the first who served as Justice of the New York State Supreme Court . Nominated to the court in the First District , he sat on the bench from 1924 until his death in 1939 .

Cotillo was a strong proponent of social and pro @-@ labor legislation . He defended ethnic Italians against the stereotyping by Americans not of Italian descent , but also urged the need for Americanization of the Italian community . As such , he stood between the mores of the Italian ethnic ghetto in East Harlem where he grew up , and the judgment and norms of American society where he made his career .

= = From Naples to New York = =

Born in Naples , Italy , he came to the United States in 1895 with his parents at the age of nine . His father Francesco Cotillo , had been a caterer in Naples . The family originally came from Avellino ( Montella ) , in the hinterland of Naples . The family settled in East Harlem in East 113th Street among the increasing numbers of Italian immigrants . His father took up catering again and opened a popular pastry and confectionery shop . He has been credited with introducing the Italian ice cream spumoni into the United States .

The oldest of four children , the young Salvatore did not speak English and went to Public School 83 and later to DeWitt Clinton High School and Manhattan College . During those formative years he worked in the family 's pastry shop , where intellectuals of the neighborhood gathered in the evening to discuss social and political issues with his father . Those debates gave birth to Cotillo 's early social consciousness that formed the basis of his adult devotion to social reform legislation . The young Cotillo was passionate about baseball and became a New York Giants fan . In return for free tickets he used to clean the stadium seats .

In 1911 he completed a law degree from Fordham University and was admitted to the New York State bar in 1912 . As a young attorney Cotillo had to distance himself from the local underworld that incorporated many members of the Camorra from Naples who tried to impose their " services " . When the so @-@ called King of Little Italy , the Camorra boss Giosue Gallucci , was arrested for carrying concealed weapons , Cotillo was asked to testify as a character witness on his behalf , but refused . Cotillo felt that Gallucci looked at others as if they " were either hirelings or payers of tribute . " According to Cotillo " it was a matter of concern in the neighborhood if you were looked down upon by Gallucci . " Despite the temptation of attractive fees , he refused to help men of Gallucci 's disposition to secure gun permits .

= = Early political career = =

Cotillo 's early law practice included a lot of uncompensated charity for the neighborhood . Apart from a genuine social compassion , Cotillo was also building political alliances that would make it possible for him to use the Italian @-@ American voter power as his Irish @-@ American forerunners in New York were using the power of other immigrant groups .

With his father , Cotillo was among the co @-@ founders of a political club called the Tomahawk Democratic Club that took on the Tammany Hall political machine supporting Nicholas J. Hayes , putting forward Henry H. Lazarus as his opponent . The fight was ruthless , with both sides harassing the other 's speakers . Lazarus got beaten in the electoral contest , but Cotillo , supported by the Italian @-@ American vote , made a deal with Hayes that gave Little Italy a political foothold in the city . " I want to help my people , " he said explaining his switch , " and can do so only with the backing of those in power . "

In 1913 , at the age of 27 , he became the first Italian @-@ born assemblyman . When Cotillo arrived in the New York State Assembly in Albany that year , the powerful ethnic Irish State Senator

" Big Tim " Sullivan observed : " Mark my words , it is the beginning of the Italian era in politics . Watch them . "

Cotillo would be elected to office from Italian East Harlem between 1912 and 1922 . Raised in the ghetto , he was chosen by the largely Italian neighborhood and continued to depend upon their political support throughout his political career . He was a member of the New York State Assembly ( New York Co . , 28th District ) in 1913 , 1915 and 1916 . He drew support from the Citizens Union and was identified for two notable pieces of legislation ; pensions for widows and the Workmen 's Compensations Law . He advocated for women 's suffrage , gun control , the end of the death penalty and school lunch programs .

= = New York senator = =

He was a member of the New York State Senate from 1917 to 1923 . He served the 20th District in the 140th and 141st New York State Legislature and represented the 18th District in the 142nd , 143rd , 144th , 145th and 146th New York State Legislatures . In March 1918 , Cotillo opposed the proposed prohibition of alcohol in the state . Although he believed in temperance , he doubted if that would be achieved by prohibition ; he advocated education and not infringing on civil liberties .

In May 1918 , he was sent to Italy by President Woodrow Wilson to make a study of the economic conditions of that country during World War I in order to provide information for economic relief programs and encourage the Italians to continue the war effort after the disastrous defeat at Caporetto . As a representative of the Committee on Public Information , he spent most of the year in Italy and won the praise of President Wilson . He also received the decoration of Grand Officer of the Italian Crown from King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy .

From mid @-@ June to the end of September of 1918 Cotillo traveled around Italy , meeting officials and politicians , giving interviews to the press and addressing large crowds . His efforts in Italy were reported by the press and Italian language newspapers at home in the U.S .. When he returned to New York , Cotillo had risen from a largely unknown local politician to achieve public stature and become a leader of the Italian community . Based on this experience he wrote the book ? Italy During the World War ? , published in 1922 .

= = Social reforms = =

Back from Italy and in the New York State Senate , he fought hard for the regulation of informal immigrant banks and banking agents that handled money transfers abroad , an issue of significant importance to his Italian constituency who were often swindled from their remittances to their families in Italy . Cotillo ? s 1921 banking reform bill , which placed express companies and steamship agencies that transferred money abroad under the supervision of the New York State Banking Department , annoyed powerful interests of such companies as Wells Fargo and the Cunard Lines . He received death threats and offers of bribes to drop the legislation he had introduced in the Senate . During the hearings on Cotillo ? s bill in March 1921 , a devastating crash of the Tisbo Brothers immigrant bank in lower Manhattan left 2 @,@ 000 angry depositors with losses of more than three million dollars . As a result , four bills that regulated the sector were signed into law on May 1 , 1921 .

Cotillo was member of the Joint Legislative Committee on Housing , also known as the Lockwood Committee because it was headed by Charles C. Lockwood . The committee investigated renting and building conditions in the City of New York and ended a spate of rent @-@ raising as a result of the housing shortage after World War I. The group found that the housing conditions at the time constituted a serious menace to public health in New York since some 400 @,@ 000 persons were directly affected by the scarcity of affordable dwellings and the poor quality of the existing ones . Later he was the chairman of New York state commission to investigate child welfare , and a member of the Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate Exploitation of Immigrants ( 1923 ? 24 ) .

As the foremost force on the Child Welfare Commission , concerned with issues of custody , orphanage , child support , and state wardship and institutions , Cotillo pushed a comprehensive

reform through the legislature with the support of the social @-@ welfare advocate Sophie Irene Loeb and the Hearst newspapers . His biographer , Nat Ferber , a former Hearst reporter , considered the reform to be " the outstanding achievement of Cotillo 's career " .

= = Troublesome relationship with Italian Fascism = =

Cotillo was a Grand Master of the Order Sons of Italy in America ( OSIA ) and after World War I actively propagated the nationalist cause of Italian control over Fiume , despite President Wilson 's denial of the Italian claims to the Adriatic port . In the 1920s Cotillo tried to ease the rising tension between Italian @-@ American Fascists and anti @-@ Fascists by taking a stance between the two . In 1923 , he went to Rome to meet Benito Mussolini . He was impressed and described Mussolini as a " commanding element of the highest order " . He vowed to correct the image of Mussolini and Fascism , but also cautioned his Italian @-@ American countrymen saying that the American way was to be preferred above Fascism .

Pro @-@ Fascists opposed the assimilation policies of Cotillo , who had become Grand Venerable of the New York State branch of OSIA in 1921 and had started an ambitious English language program as a means for upward mobility of the Italian @-@ American community . According to Cotillo , Fascism as a movement was " out of place in the United States " although it could serve its purpose in Italy . He said that American citizens of Italian origin that were truly engaged in Americanization should reject Fascism as incompatible and un @-@ American . Eventually , he joined Fiorello La Guardia and Luigi Antonini , of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union , in founding an anti @-@ Fascist New York State chapter of OSIA , the Sons of Italy Grand Lodge . Nevertheless , Cotillo was a staunch supporter of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 .

In October 1938 , Cotillo lobbied Mussolini " for more lenient consideration of the Jewish problem in Italy . " In a letter to Il Duce he tried persuade the Italian dictator that Fascist Italy 's recent anti @-@ Semitic legislation was unwise , and asked to " postpone execution of such drastic action for a reasonable time until an opportunity has been afforded me to appear before you and present the worthy cause because your edict may result in serious consequences in America . " He asked for the repeal of the anti @-@ Jewish laws and warned for a boycott of Italian goods in New York , where , as he wrote , " we live in close interdependent relationship " with Jewish people .

= = New York Supreme Court justice = =

After the 1922 elections , Cotillo became the chairman of the influential State Senate Judiciary Committee , a sign of his rising authority . The post helped him to get ready for a next step . In 1924 , he was the first Italian @-@ born to become Justice of the New York Supreme Court , First District , where he would he remain until his death . He was elected with the endorsement of the Tammany Hall political machine , many social welfare organizations and organized labor , the Citizen 's Union and several bar organizations .

While an immigrant himself and although he had been an ardent defender of the liberal interpretation of the naturalization law for a long time , in 1939 and in the wake of World War II , Cotillo advocated more stringent naturalization methods . Immigrants would be forced to pay the costs of an exhaustive investigation of their qualifications . He argued that there was a " need for more hesitation in the granting of this charter of liberty to each and every applicant without a more thorough search of each and every applicant 's capacity to benefit from such a gift . " He also recommended revocation of citizenship when found guilty of fraud or other wrongdoing .

Earlier , Cotillo had opposed the anti @-@ immigration restrictions of the Immigration Act of 1924 that significantly limited immigration from Italy . In 1931 , Cotillo protested against unnecessary stringent requirements of a proposed registration law , particularly the requirement of the equivalent of a public school education and the fingerprinting of applicants . A naturalized citizen had the same rights as native @-@ born and fingerprinting would make the foreign applicant feel like a criminal , Cotillo pointed out . He referred to the findings of the Wickersham Commission that the foreign @-@ born committed considerably less crime than native citizens . He also attacked the revocation of

citizenship because of evil doing , while a native born was not affected . At the time , Cotillo claimed to have naturalized some 25 @, @ 000 immigrants in the eight years he had been on the bench .

= = Death and legacy = =

On July 27 , 1939 , he died following an operation for a chest tumor at Columbia @-@ Presbyterian Medical Center , Manhattan , New York , at the age of 52 . He was survived by his widow , Ida Berthold , and two daughters , Helen Paterno ? who had married the son of prominent real estate developer Charles V. Paterno ? and Sally Cotillo . More than 3 @, @ 000 people attended his funeral in Saint Patrick 's Cathedral , including New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia , Lieutenant Governor Charles Poletti , District Attorney Thomas E. Dewey and former New York Governor Alfred E. Smith . He was the subject of a biography by Nat Ferber , A New American , published in 1938 .

Throughout his life , both as a legislator and judge , he earned a reputation for compassion with the underprivileged and social activism which put that compassion to work . According to New York Governor Alfred E. Smith in his introduction in Cotillo 's biography , Cotillo " introduced a new era in social relations between the immigrant and native or older Americans " .

In the obituary of The New York Times , Cotillo was described as " a leader of the Italian Americans in New York " . He defended ethnic Italians against the stereotyping by Americans not of Italian descent , but also urged the need for " Americanization " of the Italian community . As such , he stood between the mores of the Italian ethnic ghetto and the judgment and norms of American society .