

ETHNIC ARGENTINA: PASTA AND VERDI CONNECTION

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Body

From the rich pastas to the love for opera, Argentines are a Latin American people uniquely influenced by Italy.

Argentines are often described as Italians who speak Spanish, and they do even that with an Italian accent. Italian immigrants flocked to Argentina as they flocked to the United States and long ago overtook the Spanish to become the largest ethnic group here.

BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 12 - From the rich pastas to the love for opera, Argentines are a Latin American people uniquely influenced by Italy.

In the process, they created an Italianate country acutely divergent from -and sometimes arrogant toward - the mixes of Indian, Spanish, Portuguese and African that characterize the rest of Latin America.

Most Immigrants From Italy

Intermarriage confounds any attempt to measure the extent of Italian ancestry among the 28 million Argentines. But in the great growth period from 1869, when Argentines numbered 1.8 million people, to World War II, when they had multiplied to almost 15 million, some 55 percent of immigrants were Italian.

It was no surprise here that 26 prominent Argentines were listed as members of the powerful secret Italian Masonic lodge Propaganda 2, which was uncovered in a scandal in Italy last year.

The lodge's fugitive grand master, Licio Gelli, had a fraudulent Argentine passport when he was captured in Switzerland. He also reportedly was in hiding here for most of the 18 months that police around the world were looking for him on charges of international bank swindling.

During Argentina's war with Britain for the Falkland Islands, the Italian Government, citing the ties of kith and kin, was one of the first to break with the European Common Market's trade boycott of the South American country.

Italian Seeks to Mend Ties

Italy's Foreign Minister, Emilio Colombo, who visited here several weeks after the war's end in June, has been Argentina's broker and adviser in re-establishing relations with the Common Market and the rest of the West.

An Italian diplomat, though finding life familiarly comfortable for him here, stressed that Argentines are still politically and culturally immature compared with his countrymen.

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And Roberto Cortes Conde, an economic historian who heads the Di Tella Institute for social research here, cautioned, "It is intellectually dangerous to say there has been a repetition of national characteristics."

But, he added, "the Italians certainly had some influence." While a large number of the Italians who went to the United States came from Sicily and southern Italy, the bulk of the Italian immigrants to Argentina were from the more industrial and developed north. Although most were peasants, they brought with them a refined identification with the mainstreams of European culture. Opera, for example, is pervasive here. It is not unusual to hear strains of Verdi floating from radios in blue-collar neighborhoods on a peaceful Sunday.

Italians in All Classes

But many of the Italians also brought with them political attitudes that may have contributed to this country's political instability.

Italians, meanwhile, have successfully moved into all classes, but they are concentrated in the urban middle as shopkeepers, factory workers, bureaucrats and the like. Farmers and ranchers are mostly descendants of the Spanish, English and Welsh.

Perhaps a typical Italian immigrant is 41-year-old Liberato Pollio, a fishmonger who came from Sorrento, 15 miles southeast of Naples, 25 years ago.

"Politics I don't understand," he said recently in his shop, where pictures of Sorrento hang on the wall. "But the style of life here is the same. And here, whatever a person wants to do, he just has to work and he will get it. I like it here."

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