

PREFACE

In this book I look at the phenomenon of the emigration of Italian men to the United States prior to the First World War from the perspective of the participants in the event, the migrants themselves. The focus is restricted to the greenhorn years—the initial encounter with the immigrant status. The first exposure to the host country was the most trying and turbulent period for the immigrant as he strove to make a functional adjustment to his new environment. What he experienced during the first months and years and the way he responded to those experiences served to shape his immigrant personality and to determine, to a large extent, his subsequent behavior and actions. I have sought in this book to engage the reader with the immigrants' world, to see their world as they saw it and to understand their behavior in terms of their own values and priorities.

Other books and articles have examined transatlantic Italian emigration from a number of points of view and have employed various data sources and methodologies. There have been numerous statistical analyses as well as historical surveys and monograph studies of Italian colonial life. And there is a substantial critical literature in Italian and in English. Taken together, these publications represent an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the entire process of migration. But a number of lacunae continue to exist. More attention should be directed to the individual. Much can be learned by turning the lens on the immigrant himself and allowing him to tell his own story without conceptual encumbrances.

Specialists in the field of immigration studies have often referred to the need for further documentation of the subjective impressions of the migrants. Richard N. Juliani has noted that studies of Italian migration have largely focused upon the larger institutional conditions without an adequate examination at the level of the individual.¹ Rudolph J. Vecoli speaks of the development of the history of the "inner life" of the immigrants,² and Rudolph M. Bell recognizes the value of the historical biography in any analysis of the dynamics of migratory movements.³

In recent years the use of the first-person account in Italian immigration studies has become increasingly more common. Virginia

Yans-McLaughlin⁴ and Josef F. Barton collected interview data as part of their studies of Buffalo and Cleveland. Richard N. Juliani made extensive use of in-depth interviews in his investigation of the Philadelphia Italians.⁶ Ann Cornelisen combined the techniques of observation and the unstructured interview for a successful study of the adjustment patterns of Italo-Germans.⁷ There have been several oral history projects, including one by John Bodnar⁸ of first- and second-generation workers in Pennsylvania and a study by Nuto Revelli⁹ of 270 Italian emigrants, born between 1880 and 1915, who returned to their native northern province of Cuneo.

The literature produced by the Italian immigrants themselves is not voluminous, but it does exist. There are autobiographies, diaries, letters, interviews, and a large number of Italian colony newspapers and pamphlets, as well as the published observations of Italian officials, journalists, and travelers to America, some of which are excellent in their depictions of everyday immigrant life. These materials represent the primary data for this book, especially the autobiographical works by Italian immigrant men in which they describe their lives in Italy prior to emigration and their first few years in the United States. Most of these men were young and single; if they were married, they had left their families at home. They worked in the rural labor camps, and they lived in the cities. They were sojourners who returned to Italy after a few years, or immigrants looking for a new life, or young men who had been lured across the Atlantic by what America promised. Each one experienced his own America, and the book focuses on those experiences.

Life histories as human documents have been called "the most perfect type of sociological material."¹⁰ The advantages of life histories are many: they serve to give substance and detail to the general histories, and to give motive and purpose to impersonal documents and aggregate statistics; actions and attitudes can be more fully understood and more deeply analyzed, since the life history presents the development of a real person and reveals that which accounts for behavior. Yet every data source has drawbacks, and the life history—whether it is offered by the immigrant or sought by the researcher—is no exception. If the source is a diary, one must consider why it was so assiduously kept. The memoir written in old age and the granted interview contain the potential problem of inaccurate recall. If a bias ex-

ists, its type and origin must be carefully evaluated. The value for research of the human document can be enhanced by corroborative evidence, and by judicious and discriminating selection of the material.

Six autobiographies and a diary constitute one major set of sources used in this book. These works were produced by men who came over as ordinary immigrants and who have left behind fascinating and complex descriptions of their greenhorn years. Because their experiences figure prominently throughout the book, a brief description of each author is given here.

Pasquale D'Angelo was a youngster of 16 when he came to this country in 1910 with his father and other sojourners. During the next decade he worked as an itinerant laborer. Self-taught, he mastered the English language, through diligent effort, quit unskilled work, and moved to New York City to become a writer and a poet. He became known as the "pick and shovel poet" after he won a prize for three of his poems. D'Angelo's autobiography, *Son of Italy* (1924), details his life in Italy and his initial years in America as a construction worker. He died destitute in 1932 following a fatal appendectomy.

Constantine Maria Panunzio was born into a middle-class southern Italian family. His early desire to enter the priesthood was set aside when he decided to go to sea as a *mozzo* (shipboy). At age 19, in 1902, he left his ship in Boston and spent the next year traveling through New England working at various immigrant jobs. Driven by a desire to excel, Panunzio then entered school to learn English. In the years to follow he became a preacher, a teacher, and eventually a professor of sociology at the University of California. In his autobiography, *The Soul of an Immigrant* (1921), Panunzio states that the book is an outgrowth of his interest in recounting the inner struggles of an average Italian immigrant, who was neither too successful or too unsuccessful, in his efforts to come to terms with his immigrant status. Such memoirs were very rare, and he hoped to help fill this deficiency. Panunzio's depiction of his demeaning and harsh experience as a greenhorn is an indictment of the indifference and hostility of American society to the plight of the worker immigrant.

By contrast, the memoirs of Francesco Ventresca, *Personal Reminiscences of a Naturalized American* (1937), are instilled with high hopes and a buoyant optimism. Ventresca always looked on the bright side of every venture and saw life as a challenge, which he cheerfully

accepted. He did not consider oppressive the grinding manual labor that he performed in Italy and in America, but neither did he find it fulfilling. After a year of moving from one immigrant job to another, he decided that if he did not learn English, he would be doing the same repetitive work the remainder of his life. At age 20 Ventresca entered elementary school, and once he had perfected his English, he pursued his education to the university level. He became fluent in six languages and worked as a teacher and translator. Although the book was written some years after his greenhorn period, a number of the events narrated are based on a diary that Ventresca kept during the first years after his arrival in 1908.¹¹

The book by Gabriel A. Iamurri, *The True Story of an Immigrant* (first published in 1945), documents his early life in the province of Campobasso and his eagerness to see the world, which finally won out over his thoughts of a career in the Church. Still in his teens when he landed in New York in 1895, Iamurri worked as a railroad hand for several years before deciding to enter school to learn English. Thereafter, his language skills enabled him to become a timekeeper and foreman on the railroad, a job that he fell back on often over the following years. He later entered college, studied briefly in a seminary, received a law degree but never practiced, and was trained as a detective. After service in the Canadian army during the First World War, Iamurri returned to the railroad for a few years before settling down with his wife in a candy store business. His memoirs are perceptive and critical, his descriptions of immigrant processing and his first few months in the United States very evocative.

Carmine Biagio Iannace emigrated to America in 1906 at the age of 16, returned to his village in 1907, and after a brief stay came back to this country to settle. With only a third-grade formal education, Iannace acquired during his immigrant years sufficient knowledge of written Italian to be able to produce an autobiography, *La scoperta dell'America* (1971). Professor M. Ricciardelli of the University of Buffalo, who contributes an introduction to the book, met Iannace two years before his death in 1968 and was instrumental in getting the manuscript published posthumously in Italy. Carmine Iannace was an unpretentious man who had spent a lifetime as an ordinary laborer and who had lived to see each of his American-born children enter the professions. At the age of 70, with free time on his hands, he suddenly

felt the strong urge to put down some of the events, which came flooding back to his memory, of his first year in the United States and his return to Italy. Halfway through his manuscript, his energy partially spent, he had second thoughts about his skill in expressing those mental images in words. "Today is March 6, 1966. I have reread the pages I have written and they have assaulted me with a sense of discomfort. My words now seem inadequate to what I want to say. These anecdotes of my youth have come back to me bit by bit until one day I got this sudden need to express myself on paper. The thoughts came to me in a rush—my life and the lives of others. I wanted to do so much more with this, but my preparation is inadequate" (p. 124). Despite Ian-nace's doubts, the book succeeds admirably.

Antonio Margariti also decided to write his memoirs in his old age. A farm laborer from Calabria with no formal education, Margariti left Italy in 1913 and, like millions of other immigrants, built a life for himself and his family in America. He held a number of temporary immigrant jobs before settling after the First World War in Philadelphia, where he worked in an automobile plant until his retirement in 1965. After the last member of his family died in 1978, Margariti sat down and typed a 47-page autobiography, *America! America!* (1979), in his own unschooled Italian. The sentences, and some of the words, run together with no internal punctuation or terminal stops, and there is no paragraphing. Margariti sent his typescript to an Italian editor, who decided to publish together in a single volume Magariti's original pages and the editor's version written in proper Italian. The effect is dramatic, and both can be read easily and with profit.

In 1972 I acquired a set of diaries written in Italian that had been kept by an immigrant known only as Totonno from 1906 until after the Second World War. I have translated the 1906-19 diaries; the Totonno excerpts in this book are from that translation (only the 1906-7 segment has been published; it appeared in *Attenzione* magazine, January 1981). Leaving his native village represented for this 19-year-old butcher's son so decisive a moment in his life that on April 22, 1906, a few days before his departure, he began a running record of his experiences. The diary opens with these words: "With my new life, going to America, I want to write down for my old age, if nature permits me an old age, my youthful adventures, so that one day I can read about the life I have had." The diary is rich in detail. Totonno had an unerring

eye and a receptive ear, and could effectively capture a mood or a subject in a few well-chosen words. Although he was a man of many deep passions and fixed ideas, he was capable of lucid and impartial descriptions of people and occurrences.

Both Margariti and Totonno were lifelong socialists and idealists, not passive persons who took life as it came, and they were sensitive to the suffering of others. Both loved America and like many immigrants valued what America represented—freedom of thought and action. The two men differed radically, however, in their attachment to what they had left behind. Margariti never looked back, but Totonno remained emotionally tied to his village and to his Italianness. These diverse perspectives influenced the way in which the two men viewed their immigrant experience.

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