

Italy: Immigration Politics in a Land of (Former) Emigrants

Judith Harris (September 12, 2008)



Thoughts of an American Expat about how contemporary Italy, after over a century of emigration, deals with it's own immigrants today

ROME. Visitors to Genoa this summer have delighted in the exhibition "La Merica! Da Genova ad Ellis Island". Opened last June, it is now a huge permanent installation in the [Galata Museo del Mare \(Museum of the Sea\)](#). [2] The curators have used letters, diaries, taped accounts, film sequences and imaginative multi-medial techniques to illustrate the voyages of the millions of Italian migrants who sailed from Genoa between 1892 and 1914, when the outbreak of World War I interrupted the flood.

For the new installation, the old maritime station at Ponte Federico Guglielmo (today's Ponte del Mille) has been recreated, so that the museum visitor—armed with passport and ticket—can board



the ship and visit sleeping quarters, latrines, infirmary (one doctor per ship), and dining hall. Real time would require two weeks at sea, but today's time traveler speedily arrives at a reconstructed Ellis Island reception point, where he or she disembarks to get in line for questioning and inspection for disease.

Until 1905, when norms to protect passengers were first established, the ships in use were simply adapted from whatever freighters were to hand. Fatal illnesses were frequent, especially pneumonia and typhoid.

Many arrived nevertheless. A youth from Genoa recounts that, at Ellis Island, he was amazed to hear for the first time people speaking a Babel of languages. Fearing that no one would come to find him, he waited, panicky, until a young man came up and demanded, "Where are you from?" The boy gave the name of his town. "I'm your brother," cried the older youth. This was their first meeting.

Then there was Carlo Fagetti, age 23, who wrote his mother on May 25, 1907, "Dear Mamma, I had a pretty poor trip, 27 days at sea, always suffering from hunger. We disembarked and then after three days on the train we arrived in Los Angeles."

Last week on Capri this reporter, in real time, met a charming Italian of sixty or so selling trinkets at beachside —postcards, necklaces, bracelets, seashells—to tourists. With his profits over the years this pleasant, good humored gentleman had funded his son's chic new restaurant in Chelsea. This man's son, like my own, is one of the new Italian migrants into New York, remote from the stinking holds of steamships and Ellis Island.

Today, immigration into their country is among Italy's most perplexing problems. This was recognized late last month by Pope Benedict XVI, when he spoke specifically of his "grief" at the "massacre at sea of immigrants fleeing from war, hunger and disease...an open sore that poses a question of conscience to all men of good will." He referred specifically to the 71 who had just drowned off Sicily, and called for "new policies for receiving" migrants in Europe.

Coincidentally (well, not quite a coincidence), the Vatican sponsored a conference on the Roma [Gypsy] question, held last month in Friesing, in the pope's home region of Bavaria. "In the EU country racist and xenophobic attitudes towards nomads [Gypsies] and immigrants is on the rise," warned Mons. Agostino Marchetto, heads of the Pontifical Commission on Migrants and Itinerants. Coincidentally (again, not quite), Kevin Appleby, speaking for the U.S. bishops conference, warned both Republican and Democratic candidates that a 700-mile wall will not stop illegal immigration, encouraged by overly restrictive laws. What we need, he said, are "less rigid laws that will encourage work and opportunities for everyone, and compassion."

As Adriano Sofri wrote in "La Repubblica": "And weren't we the Gypsies back then?" Probably, he added, in fifty years or so these migrants to Italy will be touring a museum installation showing all the horrors they lived through.

Mindful of their own past, Italians have traditionally done a good job of respecting new arrivals, but have been caught short by the sheer numbers of arrivals today. The Roma have taken the brunt, and this writer is among the many complaining about the Interior Ministry's decision to fingerprint Roma children. It is only fair to say, therefore, that in Rome at least this has evolved into a census-taking operation in official Roma camps, conducted by the Red Cross. So far this census has shown that one of five Roma children has never been vaccinated, nor attended school.

On the other hand it also shows that four out of five have been vaccinated and go to school, at least in the legal camps.

Anti-immigrant feeling is still strongest in the North, where populist Northern League leader Umberto Bossi is on record suggesting that Italy shoot cannon balls at the incoming boatloads. Short of this, how much can we sympathize with the anti-immigrant Italians?

With a huge legal immigrant population, 12% out of a total population of 360,000, Verona is a case in point. Since the Middle Ages, when it vaunted one of Europe's greatest animal fairs with attendant entertainment, the city has been a crucial East-West, North-South crossroads, including today for TIR traffic from East Europe. Today, says Mayor Flavio Tosi, things have gone too far.

In an interview with Enrico Bonerandi, Tosi dismissed the Bossi solution ("only verbal cannonballs") but also the pontiff's plea for more compassionate policies, saying that the pope had not been



speaking of Italy, but of Spain and Greece. Anyway, the tragedies at sea "are hardly the fault of the Italians," which is true enough in its own way.

On the other hand, Tosi praised Premier Silvio Berlusconi for signing a treaty with Libya last month that includes proposals aimed at reducing the pressure of migrants—the working words here are "aimed at"—landing on the beaches at the island of Lampedusa, whose medical and housing facilities have been overwhelmed by the hordes of arrivals, from 30 to 100 a day, during this long summer of good weather.

"There is a limit, and we have reached it," says Tosi firmly.

Dear Mr. Mayor, The only response to this is: I don't think so. No less than global business, the escape from global poverty will not be stopped. All praise to Benedict XVI for offering wiser counsel than the politics of the cannonball.

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