Good, Bad, and Ugly at Ellis Island

Jerome Krase (April 21, 2016)

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My i-ItalyNY pen-pal Marcello Saija and I agree that although impractical, if not pie in the sky, everyone has the right to fix their residence where they want in the world. I also understand why he would "… honestly be happy if what happens today to migrants in the Mediterranean was even a little bit like that which happened to migrants in America 100 or more years ago."

I must warn the unsuspecting reader however that there is lots more about the great wave of immigrants that crashed on America's dangerously rocky shores between 1880 and 1920 on which we don't see eye to eye. So these conversations may turn out to be long running.

Most Americans would be pleased with the overly generous view of the proverbial welcome mat for the despised minorities who were funneled through Ellis Island to many places and eventual situations unknown. Since we have limited space, here I will try to provide a few alternative views with a special focus on Italians. The first is as to their welcome to America.

Italians as “non-whites” degrading the American Race

In 1906, speaking on “The Immigration Problem” Robert DeCourcy Ward warned that Slavs, Italians and Jews because of their high birth rates would “degrade” the “American race.” Other contemporary critics of Southern Italian immigration warned that Italians were a threat to America because they were not “white.” In fact it has been argued by some experts that the epithet “guinea” was “derived from a name attached to slaves from part of the western African coast.”

The poverty of Southern Italy was so great during the latter part of the 19th Century that a transoceanic traffic was created for “Italian Slave Children.” The New York Herald reported on one of many “raids” on Italian padrones who either through contractual arrangements with parents or kidnapping sent hordes of juvenile minstrels out to beg in the streets of New York and Philadelphia. In one cellar “home” for the children the police and reporters found “an abominable place, the breeding ground of disease and the abode of roaches and vermin.” In 1870 there was a “Riot in Mamaroneck.” Irish and Italian laborers clashed over jobs. The end result of the battle as reported in The New York Sun was: “The Italian population of Grand Park was Driven Out The Women and Children Sheltered in the Town Hall of Morrisania Our Home War of Races.”

Italians as quasi-slave workers

In many cases Italian laborers were paid lower wages than “native whites” or “negroes,” making them more desirable employees. This fact of life was the justification for many riots against Italian workers who also were eager to work as “scabs” during strikes. Southern Italian peasants were seen by Dixie plantation owners as potential replacements for freed black slaves. The Italian government even cooperated in several “experiments” at population transfers, which were unsuccessful.

The problem was Italian peasants were too difficult to control. Late 19th and early 20th Century American press accounts conveyed the message that “dagoes” were “dangerous,” “lazy,” “filthy,” “cruel,” “ferocious,” and blood-thirsty.” One 1880s Irish American critic noted “The Italian was all too ready to ask for public assistance.” And, that the absence of “manly qualities” separated Italians from others in America.

The New Orleans Italian lynching

Much is made of the operation of Ellis Island at “full capacity” in the year 1892. Although there are other incidents of Italian immigrants being lynched by racist mobs, and massacred during anti-labor violence such as in Ludlow, the most (in)famous took place in New Orleans on March 14, 1891 when, as Patrick Gallo wrote: “a mob of 6,000 to 8,000 people, led by prominent citizens, descended on the parish jail to get the “Dagoes.”

State and local law officers, and the governor who was in the city at the time, stood by and did nothing, the mob hanged two of the suspects from lampposts, and lined nine of them up in front of the prison wall and blasted their bodies with rifles, pistols and shotguns, taking less than twenty minutes for their grim work.” The victims of the mob had been accused of killing the New Orleans Superintendent of Police whose dying words were “The Dagoes shot me...the Dagoes did it.” He did not recognize his killers. Neither did any other witnesses. The Mayor of New Orleans therefore ordered the police “to arrest every Italian you come across.” About 150 were arrested. When the courts began finding them innocent, the New Orleans Times Democrat called for “All good citizens ... to attend a mass meeting ... to take steps to remedy the failure of justice...,” resulting in the largest mass lynching in American history.

Public reactions were as good as could be expected. Theodore Roosevelt considered it “rather a good thing,” and The New York Times agreed: “the Lynch Law was the only course open to the people of New Orleans.” To preserve American (dis)honor President Benjamin Harrison apologized to the Italian government for the slaughter of these and other Italians in America and gave a $25,000 indemnity to the families of 18 victims.

Some years later, Joseph E. Persico wrote “Vendetta in New Orleans” “Not everyone who studied the case shared this judgment. During the diplomatic sparring between the United States and Italy, the Department of Justice had been ordered to look into the incident. After reviewing the eight-hundred-page transcript of the Hennessy trial, a U.S. attorney, William Grant, reported that the evidence against the defendants was “exceedingly unsatisfactory” and inconclusive. And later, all charges outstanding against those who had survived the prison massacre were dropped.”

Links
[1] http://108.61.128.93/files/goodbackanduglyjeromekrase1461287929jpg