

Preface

From the 1880s through the 1920s, European immigrants flowed from their homes in poverty, oppression, and distress, bringing little more than hope and determination. It was a massive migration of 70 million people tossed by 19th-century Europe's monumental disruptions—overpopulation, disease, revolutions, and wars. They were pushed from Europe and pulled to the Americas. Half of them came to the United States, where few warm welcomes greeted them. Poor, ignorant of America's language and customs, uneducated, dressed in antiquated, often shabby clothing, they were easy targets for ridicule, exploitation, and blatant American xenophobia.

They landed at the bottom of the social heap, with few resources. However, millions succeeded in ways that were impossible to achieve in their original countries. In this book, I will remember a group of Southern Italians who came to the United States in the 1920s and settled into the small town of Nyack, just north of New York City. They drew from their personal strengths and from the opportunities offered by their new country. They brought a magnificent capacity for sustained, hard work, even at the meanest of labors, and a guiding idea that each person is responsible for his or her success or failure. They found in the United States a country of contrasts. Despite its brutal prejudice and barriers, America offered unimagined opportunities to work and earn a portion of the country's rich resources, including freedom and respect, neither of which had been available in the oppressive feudal society of their old country.

Their new country was generous—but it was also unforgiving, dangerous, and viciously rejecting of foreigners. “Here are wealth, freedom, and respect,” it whispered to the immigrants. “They are all around you. Earn them, if you can, but be careful, because if you let us, we will destroy you in a minute!” The immigrants heard that voice and took their chances. They came to fear America for its cruelty, to love it for its generosity, and to wrestle with it for its opportunities. They adapted, survived, and succeeded.

But not all succeeded. Many were ground up by America's unforgiving nature and by paths ill chosen. In those who overcame the odds, personal strength combined well with a society that made room for them and offered its resources. They recognized and appreciated that, despite its hard

surfaces and sharp edges, *la bell'America* offered a collective generosity not found anywhere else in the world. “*Dove c’è pane, c’è patria* (where there is bread, there is my country),” they said, and gave their allegiance to their adopted home. It is interesting how readily so many Italian immigrants developed a powerful sense of patriotism for the United States and rejected their commitment to the Italian nation while keeping strong ties with their Italian culture.

Those who immigrated in the 1920s, like my parents, found themselves at the bottom of the deep and destructive depression that wiped out so much for millions of Americans. But the immigrants whom I knew survived that decade of desperation, while so many other Americans, with many more resources, did not. How did they do it? I hope, in telling their stories, to shed some light on this.

Our small group of relatives and friends in the 1930s bore the family names Asaro, Barone, Biancinni, Cervodoro, Conace, Dattilo, D’Auria, Dellolio, Delpizzo, Fatale, Fiola, Gallo, Graziano, Lanzana, Maiorano, Paone, Pugliese, Raso, Renella, Serratore, Scheno, Sutera, and many others that I did not know of until much later. At times, I thought they were simply materialistic, migrating in order to share in America’s wealth. But I came to understand that the United States allowed something far more important, the exercise of a deeply spiritual life, though not in the sense of religious faith. Most of the men I knew were not religious, although the women were. Men were spiritual in the sense of defining and maintaining life’s most important task: nurturing those whom one loves. One gave thanks to those who earned them, our parents, in recognition that their hard labors in the factories, farms, road gangs, and sweatshops had brought it all about. A raised glass, “*a salute*” in chorus, the brief touch and light tinkling of glasses—musical notes floating over the table. What more is needed? The father sat proudly in his honored seat at the head of the table. Were his arms long enough, he would have encircled everyone there, and that is what it was all about—*la famiglia*, the circle of love that transcended everything else, crafted by those immigrants and celebrated each day. In today’s more sophisticated, perhaps cynical world, theirs seems a naive philosophy:

“Protect, enjoy, and be loyal to your family above all, because nothing, not even God, is more important than your family.

“Work hard and succeed, because this great country, *la bell'America*, like no other in the world, will give you the chance to do that.

“Tend to your own business and take care of your family and yourself, because no one else—no God, church, union, or government—is going to do it for you.”

My discussions of Italian history are not objective treatments of historical facts, and they might not fare well under the scrutiny of historians. I consulted historical sources for contexts that support the memories, attitudes, and opinions that were passed on to me by my parents and their



Figure 1.

The relative land areas of the Continental United States and Italy (including Sicily and Sardinia).

Italian compatriots. My version of historical events has been informed by their experiences, by the modifying process of time passing in my life, and, undoubtedly, by some self-serving and unexamined needs of my own. My versions of history, such as the long Italian Revolution or events surrounding World War I, are as those people understood them, or, rather, as I recall and reconstruct what they passed on to me. There is also a good bit of editorializing throughout this work; I do not claim dispassionate objectivity.

Italian immigrants viewed *l'America* as an overpowering colossus of a country. Everything seemed big: the buildings, the streets, the noise, the frenzy, and even the American people, jabbering in their foreign tongue. New arrivals stepping onto the New York pavement must have felt the difference in size between themselves and everything else. For some, that sense of a vast, overbearing country would never be shed. We might appreciate the more abstract, perhaps fanciful, representation shown in Figure 1.

I have tried to present some phrases in the *Calabrese* dialect as it was

spoken in my parents' time as best as I can remember them. My neighbor, Joseph Vircillo of Buffalo, helped me to recapture the Calabrese idiom. Professor Julia Cozzarelli of Ithaca College and my cousin Michael Bartolotti helped to correct Italian phrases. I thank them all for their generous assistance. However, responsibility for the final renditions—errors, inconsistencies, and all—is mine.

Relatives and friends have shared their memories and other mementos of our families in Italy and in Nyack. I thank Anthony Colistra, Maria Colistra Rosado, Elaine Conace, Theresa Lanzana Serratore, and Joseph Dattilo. A special note of gratitude goes to my cousins Elisabetta, Benedetta, and Michael Bartolotti; Anna Dattilo Ottaiano, Michael Dattilo, Theresa Dattilo Fiola, and Fred J. Graziano; to my niece Anne Graziano Keane, and to my lifelong virtual cousins, Theresa Conace, Mary Serratore Lynch, and Laura Serratore Ciliberto. They shared family photographs, newspaper clippings, old books, and stories of earlier times, wrote letters to me, filled out family questionnaires, tolerated my tape recorder, and patiently carried on late-night telephone conversations over the miles between us. Thank you.

I have not discussed my younger cousins, nieces, and nephews, not because I have forgotten them, but because they did not enter the story until much later. Perhaps someday one of them will pick up the tale and tell us more.

As I recounted the 1930s depression, I saw a disquieting familiarity, a resurrection of events that led to the Great Depression. They are with us again: a heavy national debt incurred by war, looting of the nation's resources by well-positioned businessmen, and a failure to share the country's wealth among the general population. We again have huge tax breaks for the wealthy but increased fees, taxes, and prices for everyone else. New laws give advantages to well-placed investors, big business is evermore entwined with big government and the burgeoning war machine. Our schools, hospitals, bridges, and roads deteriorate as our wealth flies overseas. Americans' consumer debt is skyrocketing, home mortgage foreclosures are rapidly escalating, and we see a general failure to save. There is, too, a disturbing similarity of the vicious anti-immigration surge following World War I and our current obsession with Mexican "illegal immigration." These are cause for concern. We would be wise to pay attention.

I have written about many people and events, but this work is primarily the story of Michele Graziano, Teresa Dattilo Graziano, and their son, my brother, Ferdinando.

A.M.G.

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