

Gino C. Speranza, "How It Feels to Be a Problem: A Consideration of Certain Causes Which Prevent or Retard Assimilation," *Charities* v. XII, no. 18 (May, 1904); 457-463.

[Editor's note: *Footnotes have been modified for clarity in presentation.*]

The American nation seems to like to do some of its thinking aloud. Possibly this is true of other nations, but with this difference, that in the case of the American, the thinking aloud is not suppressed even when it deals with what may be termed the "country's guests." Older nations, perhaps because they lack the daring, self-sufficiency of the young, prefer in similar cases, to think in a whisper. All countries have problems to grapple with, economic, political or social; but with America even the labor problem is popularly discussed as if its solution depended on that of the immigration problem.

Now, considering the large percentage of foreign born in the population of the United States, it is a strange fact how few Americans ever consider how very unpleasant, to say the least, it must be to the foreigners living in their midst to be constantly looked upon either as a national problem or a national peril. And this trying situation is further strained by the tone in which the discussion is carried on as if it applied to utter strangers mile and miles away, instead of to a large number of resident fellow citizens. Perhaps this attitude may be explained by the fact that to the vast majority of Americans "foreigner" is synonymous with the popular conception of the immigrant as a poor, ignorant and uncouth stranger, seeking for better luck in a new land. But poverty and ignorance and uncouthness, even if they exist as general characteristics of our immigrants, do not necessarily exclude intelligence and sensitiveness. Too often, let it be said, does the American of common schooling interpret differences from his own standard and habits of life, as necessarily signs of inferiority. Foreignness of features or of apparel is for him often

the denial of brotherhood. Often, again, the fine brow and aquiline nose of the Latin will seem to the American to betoken a criminal type rather than the impress of a splendid racial struggle.

Then there is another large class of "plain Americans" who justify a trying discussion of the stranger within the gates by the self-satisfying plea that the foreigner should be so glad to be in the "land of the free" that he cannot mind hearing a few "unpleasant truths" about himself.

This is not an attempt to show that the tide of immigration does not carry with it an ebb of squalor and ignorance and undesirable elements. It is rather an endeavor to look at the problem, as it were, *from the inside*. For if America's salvation from this foreign invasion lies in her capacity to assimilate such foreign elements, the first step in the process must be a thorough knowledge of the element that should be absorbed.

Many imagine that the record and strength of the American democracy suffice of themselves to make the foreigner love the new land and engender in him a desire to serve it; that, in other words, assimilation is the natural tendency. Assimilation, however, is a dual process of forces interacting one upon the other. Economically, this country can act like a magnet in drawing the foreigner to these shores, but you cannot rely on its magnetic force to make the foreign an *American*. To bring about assimilation the larger mass should not remain passive. It must attract, *actively attract*, the smaller foreign body.

It is with this in mind that I say that if my countrymen here keep apart, if they herd in great and menacing city colonies, if they do not learn your language, if they know little about your country, the fault is as

much yours as theirs. And if you wish to reach us you will have to batter down some of the walls you have yourselves built up to keep us from you.

What I wish to examine, then, is how and what Americans are contributing to the process of the assimilation of my countrymen who have come here to live among them.

The Attitude to the Newly Arrived

I have before me a pamphlet which a well-known American society prints for distribution among arriving immigrants. On the title page is the motto: *A Welcome to Immigrants and [end page 457] Some Good Advice*. The pamphlet starts out by telling the arriving stranger that this publication is presented to him "by an American patriotic society, whose duty is to teach American principles--a statement which must somewhat bewilder foreigners. Then it proceeds to advise him. In America, it tell him, "you need not be rich to be happy and respected." "In other countries," it proceeds, "the people belong to the government. They are called subjects. They are under the power of some Emperor, King, Duke or other ruler," which permits the belief that the patriotic author of this pamphlet is conversant mostly with mediaeval history. There are some surprising explanations of the constitution, showing as wide a knowledge of American constitutional history as of that of modern Europe-but space forbids their quotation. "If the common people of other countries had faith in each other, there would be no Czars, Kaisers and Kings ruling them under the pretext of divine right." This is certainly a gem of historical exposition.

Then, in order to make the stranger feel comfortable, it tells him, "you must be honest and honorable, clean in your person, and decent in your talk." Which, of course, the benighted foreigner reads as a new decalogue. With characteristic modesty the author reserves for the last praise of his country: "Ours," he says, is the strongest government in the world, because it is the people's government." Then he loses all self-restraint in a patriotic enthusiasm. "We have more good land in cultivation than in all Europe. We have more coal, and oil, and iron and copper, than can be found in all the countries of Europe. We can raise enough food-stuffs to feed all the rest of the world. We have more railroads and navigable rivers than can be found in the rest of the civilized world. We have more free schools than the rest of the world....So great is the extent (of our country), so varied its resources, that its people are not dependent on the rest of the world for what they absolutely need. Can there be any better proof that this is the best country in the world? Yes, there is one better proof. Our laws are better and more justly carried out.

Between such instruction and the welcome the immigrant gets from the immigration officials, he ought to feel that this is certainly the "best country in the world."

Perhaps the first impressions the foreigners receive are not a fair test of what it really feels to be a problem-because the initial adaptation to new and strange conditions is necessarily trying to any one.

The Italian Docile but not Servile

The real test comes after--years after, perhaps-and it is this aftermath that I wish to examine. Perhaps I come from a hyper-sensitive race, and what I say of my people cannot apply to the immigrants of other nationalities, but close and constant contact with Italians of all classes on the one hand and twenty years

of strenuous American living on the other, seem justification for voicing the sentiments of my countrymen among a people, many of whom look upon us as a menace. And the fact that though many suffer, yet few cry out, may be a further justification for one from their common average to speak for them.

Naturally, when one speaks of the Italian in America, the American thinks at once of the ubiquitous unskilled laborer. He thinks of him as a class or a mass composed of more or less picturesque elements, with no particular individual characteristics. This is especially true of the men who employ such a class. Through the padrone system of engaging men, the employer never comes to know the employed. He gives an order to the padrone to get him "five hundred dagoes." The men are supplied, they do their work and are passed on to other jobs. However practical this system may appear, it is based on a vicious mistake. The chief characteristic of the Italian is his individuality, and a system that treats him as one of a homogeneous mass is essentially wrong and cannot yield the best results. When the Irishman supplied the labor market in America, it may have been a simple thing to deal with him in masses; to apply that system to the Italian is to lose sight of elemental differences.

The Go-between Padrone

In endeavoring to graft the system employed in the case of Irish labor on the Italian, employers discovered a new element [end page 458] which they did not care to study or did not know how. So they tried to patch up the difficulty by the introduction of the padrone. This Italo-American middleman is for the laborer, to all intents and purposes, the real employer. How can you expect assimilation of this vast class of laborers when you uphold and maintain a system which completely isolates the class from its American superior? It may be argued that the padrone system is a necessity of dealing with large bodies of Italian laborers; but this is an argument which stops short in its conclusions. It is like claiming

that an interpreter is necessary in addressing a foreigner; he is, unless you learn the foreign language.

And, moreover, if you depend too much on the interpreter you will oftentimes find he is not interpreting correctly. Against this it may be urged that it is the business of the foreigner to adjust himself to his American employer; but how can he when you interpose a padrone?

Now, as a rule, padrones are of a type hardly calculated to teach their men what is best in American life. They are generally shrewd fellows with a good smattering of bad English and well versed in American boss methods. But they know their men well; they count on their ignorance and implicit confidence, on their helplessness loyalty to the *compaesano*--be he right or wrong. Naturally, the padrone will endeavor to keep the laborer from all contact with his American superior; he will make himself the final arbiter and supreme power. I know of several instances where, in order to prevent an appeal to the contractor, the padrone has taught the laborer to fear his superior as a cruel and unapproachable person. Hence this vast foreign mass touches at no point the American element or touches it in a way to make them desire to avoid it.

The Isolation and Misapprehension that Results

Is it a wonder that the intensely sociable Italian herds with his fellows and will not mix? Foreign urban congestion is a real problem, but may it not be that the remedy has to come from others than the foreigners? You begin by drawing a sharp line against him; you distinguish him from others. The cultured among you persist in seeing in him only a wearying picturesqueness with a background of medieval romance and Roman greatness; the uncultured among you see in every *meridionale* a possible *mafioso*, in every *settentrionale* one more mouth to fill from that "bankrupt Italy."

The better disposed tell us we are hard workers and earn every cent we make; but even these speak as from master to man. Perhaps it is our friends that make us feel most keenly that we are a problem. They take us under their wing, they are zealous in their defense, they treat us like little children. They speak of the debt the world owes Italy, they benignantly remind their countrymen that these foreigners have seen better days. It is extremely trying-this well-meant kindness that disarms criticism.

Of course, criticism by the stranger within your gates seems ungracious; but whenever it is attempted it is suppressed by this common question: "If you don't like it, why don't you go back?" The answer is never given, but it exists. For the majority of us this is our home and we have worked very hard for everything we have earned or won. And if we find matter for criticism it is because nothing is perfect; and if we institute comparisons it is because, having lived in two lands, we have more of the wherewithal of comparisons than those who have lived in only one country.

Then there is the American press. How is it aiding our assimilation? It would not be difficult to name those few newspapers in the United States which give space either as news or editorially, to non-sensational events or problems with which Europe is grappling. As regards Italy, there is such a dearth of information of vital importance that little, if anything, is known by the average American, of the economic or political progress of that country. Columns on Musolino, half-page head-lines on the mafia, but never a word on the wonderful industrial development in northern Italy, never a notice of the financial policies that have brought Italian finances to a successful state!

What is the American press doing to help assimilate this "menacing" element in the republic?

"Why is it," was asked of a prominent [end page 459] American journalist, "that you print news about Italians which you would not of other nationalities?"

"Well, it is this way," was the answer, "if we published them about the Irish or the Germans we should be buried with letters of protest; the Italians do not seem to object."

It would be nearer the truth to say that they have learned the uselessness of objecting unless they can back up the objection by a "solid Italian vote."

One result of the unfriendliness of the popular American press is that it drives Italians to support a rather unwholesome Italian colonial press. Why should they read American papers that chronicle only the misdeeds of their compatriots? Better support a local press which, however poor and oftentimes dishonest, keeps up the courage of these expatriates by telling them what young Italy is bravely doing at home and abroad. But this colonial press widens the cleavage between the nations, puts new obstacles in the way of assimilation and keeps up racial differences.

A Change in Attitude Needed

To feel that we are considered a problem is not calculated to make us sympathize with your efforts in our behalf, and those very efforts are, as a direct result, very likely to be misdirected. My countrymen in America, ignorant though many of them are, and little in touch with Americans, nevertheless feel keenly

that they are looked upon by the masses as a problem. It is, in part, because of that feeling that they fail to take an interest in American life or to easily mix with the natives. And though it may seem far-fetched, I believe that the feeling that they are unwelcome begets in them a distrust of those defenses to life, liberty and property which the new country is presumed to put at their disposal. They have no excess of confidence in your courts and it is not surprising, however lamentable, that the more hot-headed sometimes take the law into their own hands. You cannot expect the foreigner of the humbler class to judge beyond his experience-and his experience of American justice may be comprised in what he learns in some of the minor tribunals controlled by politicians, and in what he has heard of the unpunished lynchings of his countrymen in some parts of the new land. What appeal can the doctrine of state supremacy and federal non-interference make to him? Imagine what you would think of Italian justice if the American sailors in Venice, in resisting arrest by the constituted authorities, had been strung up to a telegraph pole by an infuriated Venetian mob, and the government at Rome had said, with the utmost courtesy: "We are very sorry and greatly deplore it, but we can't interfere with the autonomy of the province of Venetia!"

I am aware that the question is often asked: If these people are sensitive about being discussed as a problem and a menace, why do they come here? It is a question asked every day in the guise of an argument, a final and crushing argument. But is it really an argument? Is it not rather a question susceptible of a very clear and responsive answer. They come because this is a new country and there is a great deal of room here, and because you invite them. If you really did not want them you could keep them out, as you have done with the Chinese.

The Italian Immigrant as Raw Material

I am not attempting to minimize the bad aspects of large numbers of aliens pouring into a new land; it is because I recognize such bad aspects and the necessity of using means to prevent harm, that I urge the study of the question from a neglected side. If assimilation is the only way out, then I say, do not follow methods that negative all efforts toward such a desired end. This new material in your body politic call *dangerous*; why not be more precise in your definition and call it *raw*? One of the most intelligent American women I know, when told of my intention to write on this subject, said to me in all seriousness: "You must take your subject broadly. Go back to the time when your ancestors watched the Goths come over the mountains into what seemed to your ancestors to be their land." Of course, if you approach the question in that spirit, if you see a similitude between a barbaric invasion by martial usurpers bent on destroying a great civilized power, and the peaceable and natural process of emigration of civilized peoples from a land of [end page 460] classic civilization to a new country in its infancy, then there is little hope for an understanding. If you approach this raw material as dangerous, you will force it back on itself and perpetuate racial distinctions; you cannot, in the nature of things, deal fairly, calmly and scientifically with what you fear. Certainly you cannot deal with it in a sympathetic spirit. But look upon this foreign contingent as raw and crude material, and then the opportunity for infinite possibilities is within your grasp. What is dangerous demands destruction; but you can mould the raw. And with the possibility of tangible results in such moulding, is born hope and sympathy, optimism and enthusiasm.

Perhaps the hopefulness of this contention needs some proof of its reasonableness. In other words, what evidence is there that my countrymen, for example, should be considered rather raw material than

a dangerous element? Let us study this point carefully, seeking arguments, if any there be, based not on the data of sentiment or from facts covering a short period or a small locality. Men and races cannot be judged by such standards. Let us rather examine historical, economical and political facts.

Judged by a Historical Standard

The racial traits and characteristics that have made Italy the "loved Mother of Civilization" are not ephemeral qualities any more than is the cephalic index of the Mediterranean. They are qualities that persist and count; they may be dormant or the opportunity may be lacking for their display or action, but they must be counted as an asset in inventorying an Italian. There is more than a reasonable presumption that the race that achieved the dual political and spiritual supremacy in the Rome of Omar and in that of Peter, that saved Europe from the eastern rule and found for it a new empire in the West, has the seeds of great possibilities. Those that crossed the mountains and brought light to Gallia, and those after them who, in a gentler age, crossed beyond to the land of your forefathers as heralds of that humanism that ennobled all that received it, were the ancestors of these people that flock to you now and whom some of you dread. Until you can show that the advent of these people has had a harmful influence upon new neighbors in the past, your conception of them as a menace has at least no historic basis. The evidence is all the other way.

Political Testimony

Let us examine the political testimony in the case. Here we need not go very far back; the memories of living men suffice. By a tremendous and heroic effort, Italy achieved the dream of political unity in 1870. Such accomplishment meant the destruction of the results of centuries of well-entrenched oppression

and foreign bondage. But Italy was united as much by the political sagacity of Cavour as by the heroic qualities of Victor II and Garibaldi. It was the one country that justified its bloody struggle by the sanction of the political plebiscite. And ever since young Italy has patiently and bravely fought its way against tremendous odds toward its political ideals. Popular American belief to the contrary, as Dr. G. Tosti, one of the most scholarly of Italians in America, has shown, Italian financial policies have been so ably planned and handled that there has been a continuous rise in the value of Italian state bonds on foreign markets and a constant diminution in the rate of exchange.¹ Nor is it to be forgotten that, despite the heavy taxes imposed to meet the tremendous demands made upon her youth, united Italy has never admitted the possibility of bankruptcy and never paid her national debt in paper as, for instance, Russia has done.

Hence we see that the political and economic as well as the historic evidence tend to support an optimistic view of the possibilities of the Italian immigrant.

The Standing of Italians in America

Not more relevant but more convincing, because more susceptible of direct and personal certification, is the evidence that the Italian immigrant himself furnishes in this country. It is true that, as a nationality, Italians have not forced recognition; though numerically strong there is no such "Italian vote" as to interest politicians. They have [end page 461] founded no important institutions; they have no strong and well-administered societies as have the Germans and the Irish. They have no representative press, and well-organized movements among them for their own good are rare. Those who believe in assimilation

may be thankful for all these things; for it could be held that it is harder to assimilate bodies or colonies well organized as foreign elements, than individuals held together in imperfect cohesion.

Yet the Italian in America as an individual is making good progress. In New York City, the individual holdings of Italians in savings banks is over \$15,000,000; they have some four thousand real estate holdings of the clear value of \$20,000,000. About ten thousand stores in the city are owned by Italians at an estimated value of \$7,000,000, and to this must be added about \$7,500,000 invested in wholesale business. The estimated material value of the property of the Italian colony in New York is over \$60,000,000, a value much below that of the Italian colonies of St. Louis, San Francisco, Boston and Chicago, but, a fair showing for the great "dumping ground" of America.

But the sympathetic observer will find the most remarkable progress on what may be called the spiritual side of the Italians among us. It is estimated that there are more than fifty thousand Italian children in the public schools of New York City and adjacent cities where Italians are settled. Many an Italian laborer sends his son to Italy to "finish his education" and, when he cannot afford this luxury of doubtful value, he gets him one of the *maestri* of Little Italy to perfect him in his native language. In the higher education you will find Italians winning honors in several of our colleges, universities and professional schools. I know of one Italian who saves money barbering during the summer and on Sundays, to pay his way through Columbia University. I know of another who went through one of our best universities on money voluntarily advanced by a generous and farseeing professor. The money was repaid with interest and the boy is making a mark in the field of mathematics. I know of a third, the winner of a university scholarship, who paid his way by assisting in editing an Italian paper during spare hours; a fourth, who

won the fellowship for the American School at Rome, and thus an American institution sent an Italian to perfect his special scholarship in Italy.

New York City now counts 115 Italian registered physicians, 63 pharmacists, 4 dentists, 21 lawyers, 15 public school teachers, 9 architects, 4 manufacturers of technical instruments and 7 mechanical engineers. There are two Italian steamship lines with bi-weekly sailings, 16 daily and weekly papers, and several private schools. Italians support several churches, one modest but very efficient hospital, one well-organized savings-bank and a chamber of commerce. They have presented three monuments to the municipality, one, the statue of Columbus, a valuable work of art. They are raising funds to build a school in Verdi's honor, under the auspices of the Children's Aid Society, and are planning to organize a trust company.

I have given the statistics for New York City because the Italian colony on Manhattan is less flourishing than those in other large American cities. So that what is hopeful for New York is even more promising in Philadelphia, St. Louis and Boston.

Some Characteristics as Citizens

As regards the dependent and delinquent classes among Italians, a good deal of misapprehension exists. There is no such thing as a dependent *class* of Italians in the United States. Mendicancy, which is pointed out by the foreign traveler as one of the sores of Italy, is practically unknown among Italians here.

Of the delinquent class, some consideration is necessary. While it is true that many Italians are arrested for "violation of city ordinances," these arrests are often the result of ignorance--being the infraction of rather *mala prohibita* rather than of *mala in se*. The viciousness or weakness which results in drunkenness seldom manifests itself in Italians. In several years of practice at the bar, I have seldom seen an arrest for intoxication among them.

On the other hand, I am aware that Italians are often guilty of crimes of blood. But because these are mostly [end page 462] crimes of passion, committed without secrecy, they make excellent copy for the newspaper writers. As we read of these, while less exciting crimes fail to be chronicled, the popular belief is formed that more crimes are committed by Italians than by any other foreigners. I have yet failed to see any reliable statistical proof of this assertion. I do not seek to justify crimes of passion when I say that it is something to remember that an Italian will stab or shoot, but seldom poison. His hot-headedness prevents his committing crimes necessitating subtle and careful planning. One result is that by such "open crimes" he always pays the penalty of his misdeeds because proof of his overt act is always possible, whereas the carefully planned crimes of others often go unpunished from lack of evidence.

We have rapidly surveyed the conditions of the Italian among us--his historic background and the political and economic achievements of his brother at home. To consider him without his hereditary possibilities is to measure him by an unfair standard. The most highly civilized and desirable immigrant cannot adjust himself quickly to the environment of a new land; probably the only fair test of the value of

any immigration is what it contributes to the new land through the second generation. If this is so, all discussion on the menace of Italian immigration would seem premature.

There is one more question that an Italian, speaking for his countrymen here, may urge upon Americans who are interested in the problem of assimilation. It is this: That you should make my countrymen love your country by making them see what is truly good and noble in it. Too many of them, far too many, know of America only what they learn from the corrupt politician, the boss, the "banchiere" and the oftentimes rough policeman. I have been in certain labor camps in the South where my countrymen were forced to work under the surveillance of armed guards. I have spoken to some who had been bound to a mule and whipped back to work like slaves. I have met others who bore the marks of brutal abuses committed by cruel bosses with the consent of their superiors. What conception of American liberty can these foreigners have?

This, then, is the duty upon those who represent what is good and enduring in Americanism-to teach these foreigners the truth about America. Remember these foreigners are essentially men and women like yourselves whatever the superficial differences may be. This is the simple fact far too often forgotten-if not actually denied. And this must be the excuse if you discuss these people as a menace, pitching your discussion as if we were beyond hearing, and beneath feeling, and sometimes even as if beyond redemption.

Make us feel that America has good friends, intelligent, clear-sighted friend; friends that will not exploit us; friends that will not be interested merely because of what Italy did in the past for all civilization, but

friends that will extend to us the sympathy which is due from one man to another. You will thereby make us not merely fellow voters, but will prepare us for the supreme test of real assimilation-the wish to consider the adopted country as a new and dear Fatherland. [page 463]

¹ "The Financial and Industrial Outlook of Italy." By Dr. G. Tosti in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. VIII, No. 1.