

Part Two

*Italy's Representatives in America*



LETTER TO FELLOW ITALIANS  
 BY ITALY'S AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED STATES

Between 1922 and 1925, the Italian ambassador to Washington was Prince Gelasio Caetani di Sermoneta.<sup>1</sup> He is the author of the letter—published below—to a group of Italian engineers sent to America by the Italian government on a work-study program. Caetani was the descendant of one Rome's most prominent aristocratic families whose origins go back to the tenth century; and whose deeds were reported in history books of famous scholars such as Ferdinand Gregorovius.<sup>2</sup> Among his ancestors are generals, diplomats, admirals, cardinals and popes. He was named in honor of one of them, Pope Gelasius II.<sup>3</sup> Onorato Caetani,<sup>4</sup> his father, was a politician, initially elected to the *Camera dei deputati* (the lower house of parliament). He was later appointed senator by the king and went on to become minister of foreign affairs under Prime Minister Antonio Starabba di Rudini<sup>5</sup> in 1896. In the course of his distinguished public career he also served as mayor of Rome from 1890 to 1892. A talented amateur archaeologist, he was president of the Italian Geographic Society, one of Italy's most prestigious scientific institutions. Gelasio's aunt, who became Countess Ersilia Locatelli<sup>6</sup> [sic] by marriage, was the hostess of one of Rome's most

1 Gelasio Caetani duca di Sermoneta (1877-1934). Mineary engineer and diplomat, he was Italy's ambassador to the United States from 1922 to 1925.

2 Ferdinand Gregorovius (1821-1891). German historian. He spent many years in Rome where he produced the authoritative *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter* (8 vol., 1859-1872); translated into English as *History of the City of Rome in the Middle Ages* (1894-1900); reissued by Cambridge University Press (2010).

3 Pope Gelasius II (1060 ca – 1119). Born Giovanni Caetani, he was elected pope in 1118. He was the first pope to be elected *in claua*, that is in a secret place where the cardinals could not communicate with the outside. The practice still exists to this day.

4 Onorato Caetani di Sermoneta (1842-1917). Politician. He was mayor of Rome from 1890 to 1892.

5 Antonio Starabba di Rudini (1839–1908). Politician and minister in several cabinets. He was prime minister in 1881-1882 and again from 1892 to 1896.

6 Ersilia Caetani Lovatelli (1840-1925). A self-taught archeology scholar, she became instrumental in starting the first comprehensive archeological studies of ancient Rome.

prestigious literary salons open to the international set; and the first and only woman to be appointed to the Accademia dei Lincei.<sup>7</sup> Since he was a boy, Gelasio had an inclination for mathematics and physics. He attended the Lyceum Gymnasium E. Q. Visconti, graduating in 1896. At the University of Rome he completed the course of studies in the faculty of engineering in 1901 when he received a *laurea summa cum laude*. After college, he first went to Liège, Belgium, where he attended the *École des mines* for one year. In 1902 he moved to New York to study in the School of Mines at Columbia University.<sup>8</sup> In the summer of the same year he attended Columbia University's practicum in mining in the silver mines of Daly West and Ontario, approximately sixty miles from Utah's Great Salt Lake. He was one of twenty-two students. At first his classmates only knew him as Mr. Gelasio Caerani. When they found out about his lineage, a bit intimidated, they started calling him the Count of Bunker Hill, from one of the locations where they were working. It was a typical American educational experience. The students lived in shacks made of wooden boards and slept in bunk beds like in steerage class, equipped with straw mattresses, a blanket and a pillow. A cook would prepare lunch which everyone would carry to the workplace in a tin canteen (that was before the invention of the thermos, today's standard equipment for all American laborers.) The job required climbing steep hills to survey and measure the land, the basic responsibility of any entry-level mining engineer position in America. Caerani was one of the best in his class. I want to skip the rhetoric about the democratic spirit of this aristocrat. I never met him in person; however, I believe I sense in him that simple and very human thing that goes under the rubric of vocation. Caerani must have felt good in that environment and must have liked that trade. He understood that the experience would be beneficial to him and, in fact, later in life he became involved with a mining company. (Eventually he left it when he had to return to Italy to tend to more pressing business. The company resigned itself to the loss only with

<sup>7</sup> Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. One of Italy's oldest academies, it was founded in 1603 with the aim of contributing to the study of sciences. It later expanded its horizon to include various fields in the humanities.

<sup>8</sup> Now named School of Engineering and Applied Science.

great regret.) In June 1903, when he started working for the business concern Bunker Hill and Sullivan Mining and Concentrating Co., headquartered in Kellogg, Idaho, his salary was three dollars for a nine-hour workday. He tried to absorb as much as he could from this experience and he came to the attention of the management for his interest in extraction methods. His first job consisted in driving a train of cargo wagons into the mine. Later, he was put in charge of perforation and subsequently was promoted inspector. After that experience, he moved to a laboratory for metallurgy research. In the new environment the theoretical foundations he had received in Italian schools and his personal ingenuity served him well. The reports on the experiments he conducted captured the attention of management. In June 1904 he was sent to Alaska; then, in 1905, to the gold mines of California. At the end of the year he was promoted superintendent of Bunker Hill and, with the new title, was dispatched to Mexico to conduct more studies and research. At that time his work was cutting edge and his studies were published in prestigious scientific journals. In the five years he spent in the profession he made lots of friends everywhere. In 1912 in San Francisco, with two other partners, he founded the mining company Bursch, Caetani and Hershey. Caetani was in charge of metallurgy research and invented a fusion method with arsenic that later became an industry standard. Between 1912 and 1914, he was working on a book on this subject when his efforts were interrupted by the beginning of World War I. He intuited that Italy would eventually end up entering the war.<sup>9</sup> He put aside the plan to open a new office in New York and decided to return home. The company kept his name until 1918 when it became clear that he would not return to his old profession. Back in Italy he distinguished himself in all of his endeavors. In the war, the mining experience served him well. Decorated three times for military valor, his most impressive deed was the explosion that destroyed the mountain top of the Col di Lana,<sup>10</sup> allowing the Italian army to take it after an endless

<sup>9</sup> World War I started in 1914. Italy decided to enter on the side of the Triple Entente (Russia, France, Great Britain) on May 24, 1915.

<sup>10</sup> Col di Lana: A mountain peak in the Venetian Dolomites, and the site of one of the bloodiest battles of WWI.

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futile siege that had cost, up to that point, more than 10,000 lives. In a round-about way, we can say that this really was an American contribution to Italian history.

When the Fascist movement appeared on the political scene, Gaetani was a member of the Nationalist Party and, with his comrades, embraced the new political entity with the contained enthusiasm the well-bred harbors for the less intelligent but more able. (I personally believe that, without the alliance with the Fascist Party, the Nationalist movement would have never attained power.) When he was appointed ambassador to the United States everything and everybody was in his favor: the Italians, with whom he had fought valiantly; the historical moment that saw Italy and the United States allied; the Americans, who were proud to salute the Italian product of American schools; his bilingual fluency and his ability to relate to people also in dialect and slang. He seemed the ideal person for the post. The only ones who objected were the Fascists of New York who started attacking him in the publication *Il Carroccio*<sup>11</sup> in the period between January and June 1924. They didn't think he was Fascist enough, or maybe he wasn't coarse enough or not condescending enough. Were they able to have his head handed over to them? Officially nothing is known. However, in 1925 he was called back to Italy. He died on October 20, 1934. I did some research on his life and I noticed that only the *Corriere della Sera* published his obituary (paid for by the family). Even the *Nuova Antologia* is silent about him. Apparently the *Piccolo Giornale d'Italia* [sic] published an account that I wasn't able to find. The *Enciclopedia Italiana*<sup>12</sup> gives no details as well. For this reason I am devoting so

11 *Il Carroccio*. Italian review journal, was published between 1914 and 1927.

12 *Corriere della Sera*. The major daily newspaper of Milan and one of the most influential nationwide. It was founded in 1876.

• *Nuova Antologia*. Quarterly journal of "letters, sciences and arts," founded in 1866 by Francesco Protonotari. Published in Florence, it is one of Italy's most prestigious publications.

• Most likely *Il Piccolo*, the major newspaper of Trieste, founded in 1881. It was owned by the publishing company Il Giornale d'Italia, which owned the homonymous newspaper and the daily *La Voce d'Italia*.

• Founded by Giovanni Treccani in 1925, the Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana publishes the most comprehensive general encyclopedia in Italian language.

much space to talking about him here.

The letter I am publishing below was addressed to a group of Italian engineers sent by the Italian government to the United States on a scholarship. It is remarkable in that it lacks the usual international rhetoric (so prevalent these days as soon as a student pokes his head out of his home country) on the inevitable and immediate effect that just a little trip abroad will have on the friendly relations among the peoples of the earth; and on the future prospect of the entire humanity embracing peace and prosperity. It is also noteworthy for its realism: not the realism of an ambassador addressing citizens abroad but the realism of a man who was tested by other men who were also being tested. And finally, it is memorable for the deep sense of national identity, not at all rhetorical, that allows one who lives abroad to accept without idolatry, but with respect, the mores of a different people. I have always been deeply impressed by this letter. Obviously, I can't claim to have seen all the letters that ambassadors (not only Italian) must have written in similar occasions but I doubt that, if more existed, they would be of this caliber. In any case, this is a great document of style that, in my opinion, would make for a great reading in school anthologies. (Even mining engineers know how to write when they have something to say.) Another remarkable detail: the dignified building that houses the Italian embassy in Washington is the result of his work. I also want to add something that is not known about Caetani: while the edifice was being built he was extremely irritated with the Italian bureaucracy.

Royal Italian Embassy  
Washington

Dear Engineer:

Enclosed with this letter please find your paperwork. I am taking this opportunity to extend my cordial and paternal welcome to this hospitable land, together with my best wishes for the difficult task you have endeavored to undertake of starting your career in humility, from the lowest rung of the ladder. You will be following the same

path I walked on when I was your age. You will respond with the same curiosity, illusions, hopes, disappointments that I experienced in the first years of my career and that are now the pleasant memories of an adventurous past. You too will find out that reality is almost always different (and most of the times less attractive) than what is at first envisioned. But, behind this facade you will discover horizons and opportunities that you now ignore and that could lead to a reality even more attractive than what you had imagined. It will be difficult for you, with an academic degree in engineering, to start working as a simple laborer. Moreover, you will be a foreigner, a person whose trustworthiness people will instinctively question; and you will be the representative of a race whose history, traits and achievements are ignored by ninety percent of Americans.

More than once I felt the impulse to give up, but what kept me here was the wish to demonstrate personally the qualities of our people, and I think I succeeded. This was one of my greatest gratifications. My first advice is to work tirelessly to perfect your knowledge of English. Most of your success will depend on this. You should also try to penetrate the mentality and adapt to the American lifestyle without prejudging, without being critical and without inhibitions. Your success is inseparable from this kind of attitude. You will never be able to advance if the Americans you will meet do not feel you are attuned to the spirit and the social dynamics of the United States. You should not be afraid to become Americanized on the outside. Your Italian soul won't change. Do not express generalized and gratuitous criticism and forget about persuading Americans with the usual clichés of all Italians being geniuses. If you do not criticize them, you will see that Americans will criticize themselves. Let them speak and do not comment. If you want to prove our [Italian] superiority, do it with your deeds. Do not lose heart if you have to work for months with pick and shovel; or if you are asked to monitor the monotonous work of a machine; or spend the whole day working on boring drawings. I personally endured, physically and emotionally, more than anyone can imagine. I don't believe we only learn what our mind believes it is learning. I don't believe that three months spent on a monotonous, repetitive and boring task is time wasted. We always learn something even when we don't realize



it: we learn by breathing the atmosphere and absorbing impressions almost unconsciously. Once assimilated, the sum of these small bits of knowledge will turn out to be extremely useful in the future. You won't be able to reach a high position unless you immerse completely in the psychology and the mores of the American people, and unless you learn to distinguish, in all its details, the state of the art of the particular sector where you work. A career depends obviously on an individual's intelligence, willpower and character. But it also depends on time, and time—Einstein's theories notwithstanding—remains immutable and unperturbed by our impatience. Be aware that in America nepotistic connections and impressive academic titles count for naught. The only things that matter are personal performance and the ability to deal with human beings. The best *connection* you can count on is what you can prove about yourself. Do not rely, as they do in Italy, on the friendly push of an ambassador or some other big wig. Americans will discard it mercilessly. What really matters is *character*:<sup>13</sup> fairness, loyalty, frankness, moral courage and honesty. Your bosses will observe with attention how you treat your associates and subordinates. Those who don't know how to treat people cannot lead them. Your chances of a successful career are all there. You will have to soften your personality and eliminate impulsive reactions, angry moments and big blow outs. One must be calm, dignified yet ready, when necessary, to engage in a good fist fight to demand respect. Keep your eyes open to catch new opportunities. Nobody will blame you if you leave a company and move to another job. But you should do so openly and earnestly.

Your future is in your own hands. Do not count on the ambassador if you tire of a job and want something else. The ambassador is very interested in helping you getting started but he is not a job referral service. In the United States there are many opportunities for those who have the right stuff. If a person does not succeed, he should not blame the circumstances or other people. One should look into himself to understand what is lacking. I am certain that ninety percent of our newly graduated engineers will go very far, but it will happen only after working hard... for years. Those who will decide to return to Italy will

<sup>13</sup> In English in the original.

bring back something more important than money: the treasure of the American experience. Thus far, the only people who have come from Italy have been peasants and laborers but, unfortunately, not Italy's best minds. This has had a negative effect on our reputation. You, my young colleagues, have the very arduous and noble task of demonstrating that Italy is not inferior to any other nation. Please, keep me informed about your progress. I have no interest in helping the inept but I will give all my support to those who will demonstrate their worthiness. I wish you the greatest success. The future of my younger colleagues and the prestige of Italy are very dear to my heart. Be well.

CAETANI  
January 7, 1955

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ITALY'S REPRESENTATIVES IN NEW YORK

Italian affairs are not my concern and I am not interested in talking about this topic, especially in this forum. However, when Italy sends its representatives to America, they fall in my crosshair. A while ago Italy sent to New York a great and beautiful ocean liner together with an undersecretary who was neither great nor beautiful. The ship spoke very good American, namely it showed every aspect of the ingenuity, the craftsmanship and the flexibility of a people that can learn new languages from other peoples. The representative of the Italian government, to the contrary, was endowed with none of these qualities. He arrived here with a great desire to speak in public, but, since he didn't know the local language, he was limited to speaking to an Italian audience, any Italian audience, indiscriminately, no matter where and when; as long as he could speak. Out of curiosity I went to his speech at the consulate with a crowd of about a hundred people that the functionaries had managed to herd for the occasion. In front of this public the orator spoke for one hour about the rebirth of Italy after World War II. He didn't say anything new for we have heard the same things in reports of the Italian Chamber of Commerce, in press releases by ANSA,<sup>1</sup> in Italian newspapers and even by American correspondents in Italy. And yet, apparently, these facts must have been new to the undersecretary because he had to read them from a cheat sheet. And poorly did he read them, in fits and starts, stumbling on words, with long and extremely boring lists of statistics. As an excuse he claimed that in America speeches are full of data—something that is manifestly not true. If anything, speeches by Americans are full of funny anecdotes. Every so often the undersecretary would get stuck trying to decipher whether the figure he was reading was millions or billions. The difference is not irrelevant, and he should have been better prepared. Despite the fact that he was a long-term member of parliament, his Italian pronunciation was awful; with words like

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<sup>1</sup> ANSA: Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, the leading Italian wire service, founded in 1945, after the fall of the Fascist regime, replacing the state official press agency Agenzia Stefani. Agenzia Stefani was founded in 1853 and shut down on April 29, 1945.

*buoncrassia* and *democrassia*? [sic] that reminded me of vernacular theater. Obviously, he had never bothered to correct it. For an entire hour I did not hear a single meaningful word, an intriguing thought, a new idea or a sharp observation that would catch my attention. He paraded in front of us all the trite clichés of propaganda, including the myth that the electoral success of the communist ideology in Italy is the result of poverty; even though even children know that it is the richest areas of Italy that vote for the Communist Party. The other shopworn cliché was that the common sense of the Italian people would eventually reject communism. This would have given us a shiver if we had not already become frozen solid by the time he raised that point. The parade of banalities, of cookie-cutter slogans, saccharine and bromides reached the peak when he begged the public to press the *generossa democrossia americanà* to help Italy. This shocked me more than any other mediocrity that had come out of his mouth because the tone was humiliating and the hope was phony. Nothing of what he said would ever go farther than that room because nobody in New York would ever pay attention to a speech on provincial topics in front of a public of a hundred people. If one wants to be heard in New York, one must reach a different public, in English, via radio or television.

In his speech the undersecretary kept going back to the fact that he had been “close to De Gasperi”<sup>4</sup> that he “had spoken to De Gasperi”; that he “had seen De Gasperi”; that he “had heard De Gasperi” and he “had worked very close to De Gasperi”. Finally, the entire credit for the reconstruction of Italy was De Gasperi’s, with the help, of course, of the pathetic orator who was gratifying us with his presence. I am not an expert of Italian affairs, but from what I read it seems to

2 *Buoncrassia*; *democrassia*. The phonetic spelling is meant to reproduce the speaker’s regional pronunciation (most likely from northern Italy, possibly Emilia-Romagna) of *buoncrassia* and *democrassia*.

3 Ditto.

4 Alcide De Gasperi (1881-1954). One of the founders of the political party Democrazia Cristiana that dominated Italian politics until 1992. He was Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953 in the post-WWII period known as *Ricostruzione* [reconstruction]. His major accomplishment was the electoral defeat of the leftist coalition *Fronte Popolare* [Popular Front] in 1948, and the alignment of Italy with the Western alliance of liberal democracies led by the United States.

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me that De Gasperi's major achievement was doing good and some bad, allowing all the political factions, communists included, to take advantage of his government's passivity.

Earlier this year, another government representative had arrived on a visit. This one was a lady and the result was even worse. She stayed two months (presumably at tax payers' expense) with the excuse of a sprained ankle that she could have easily taken care of on a ship heading home. She enjoyed herself by delivering speeches, in Italian of course, to those same identical audiences that understand Italian. In terms of ideas her speeches were at the level of a domestic servant's; and, in terms of rhetorical flourish, of a bigoted church lady's. Long and tedious as a rosary, they gave me the impression of a long skirt that is dragging on the floor and is about to fall off but is still hanging by a thread while everybody is waiting for the moment when it will slip down revealing long underwear.

I have seen several representatives of the official Italy in the United States. Before the fascist period the representatives of the liberal governments were often good people, lazy and uninterested. They were happy with a good meal and a good cigar sitting in a comfortable armchair: at least they didn't bother anyone. The Fascists were arrogant know-it-alls who annoyed everyone; commanded the best cabins on a ship; hit on girls and demanded to stay at the Waldorf Astoria. The latest ones, the Christian Democrats, poor saps, grew up in the most remote parishes of provincial Italy; have never struck their noses outside their native hamlets; have never traveled first class and are just childishly happy for having the kind of power they had never dreamed of. And of course they have no idea what to do with it. The functionaries who know America well but who must comply with the wishes and orders of these ignoramuses look at them with a diplomatic smirk while they fulfill their desire to speak in front of a hundred Italian Americans, reassuring them that they are really addressing the *generosa democrazia americana*. In the past it seemed to me that some of the Italians in power wanted to make Italy bigger than it really was, but now I wonder if the remedy isn't worse than the problem, since they are making it much smaller than it is.

*New York, September 17, 1954*

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PRESIDENT GRONCHI SHOULD REPRESENT  
ALL ITALIANS, NOT JUST THE IMMIGRANTS

The visit to America by the president of the Italian republic has been the object of discussions and negotiations in Washington, not only at the state department but also in the Italian diplomatic and consular circles. This event could provide a new opening and raise the profile of Italy to a new level of responsibility and respectability. Will this happen or will the visit run the usual course? In a few words, the Italian president's agenda could finally signal the visit of a representative of all Italians, not just of Italian Americans. By now, practically all Italian Americans are American citizens and they constitute a small percentage of the population. Therefore, in order to emphasize the difference between the two groups, it would be necessary for Mr. Gronchi to visit American institutions and associations. This, at least, is what leaders of other countries do on a regular basis. And this approach is desirable and possible and even necessary for Italy as well: Gronchi's visit to the United States is the first ever by an Italian head of state. In the past, until now, the highest Italian authorities to visit have been prime ministers, not presidents. The unique role of the president's office and its functions, which are more symbolic than political, offers an ideal opportunity to introduce the entire Italy as a whole to the American people, marking a distinction with the country that sent here millions of workers who—by now—have been absorbed into society.

Without getting into too many unpleasant details, we can say that the previous visits by Italian statesmen contained more folkloric elements than political goals. For the American public, Italy is a country that has given a significant demographic contribution of enterprising and hard-working citizens to the development of their country but that now—in the historical context of post-war developments—represents something different in terms of institutions and goals. In other words, Americans incorrectly believe that Italian American immigrants, and nothing else, constitute the fundamental ties between Italy and the United States; a belief that is confirmed by the choices made by politicians and diplomats in charge of Italian foreign affairs. But this notion is wrong and outdated, first and foremost because we live in

different times. As the years go by, the old immigrants are replaced by new generations of Italian Americans who are completely Americanized and whose feelings for Italy are—at most—a residual form of affection and reverence. ~~due~~ <sup>more</sup> to social habits than culture. It is also wrong because the two countries, the old and the new, are different places. Italian exports to the United States are targeting all Americans, not just Italian Americans. In other words, we are moving from chestnuts and olive oil to machinery and fashion. The new relationship with America is based on the taste of a rich and sophisticated international middle class, not a civilization of common foods.

Many think President Gronchi's visit could be the best opportunity to mark a change in the official relations between the United States and Italy, moving away from the limited platform of Italian American issues to a much wider one that encompasses shared political and cultural interests. The same people also suggest that President Gronchi spend time visiting and learning about organizations such as the *New York Times* or the *Daily News*<sup>1</sup> (each with a circulation of 3,500,000) rather than local little Italian-language newspapers. They also think it would be worthy for the president to study the workings (since he is an academic it should not be difficult for him) of one of the many large foundations that donate huge amounts of money for the advancement of the sciences, such as the Rockefeller or Ford foundations. This seems a better way to allocate resources instead of wasting time and prestige in order to raise funds for small enterprises with limited vision. These people also believe that, in the interest of all Italians in America, the president should emphasize that the recent immigration from Italy, unlike that of the past, is characterized by individuals with technical skills and a higher level of education, with needs that are different from those of the immigrants of yore. It should not be difficult for the organizers of the president's visit to find in ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> ~~American~~ <sup>debate</sup> society people suitable for a welcoming committee. From Wall Street bankers to Broadway playwrights; from film producers to museum directors in Washington and New York; from novelists enamored of Italy to the CEOs of multinational corporations with a presence in Italy; there is

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1 Official name of the newspaper, also commonly known as *New York Daily News*. It was founded in 1919.

an endless list of names that in America have a much deeper meaning than the usual, worn-out ones. There are also serious organizations that could take care of the logistics and the meeting agenda of the president. The America-Italy Society,<sup>2</sup> whose president is former ambassador Ellsworth Bunker,<sup>3</sup> was originally created with this goal but has been excluded in favor of committees with a much narrower focus. What matters is that President Gronchi is received by America as a whole and not only by a small sect, even if his Italian heart is closer to them. The issue is political relations, not emotions.

This may be hard to swallow for those who consider themselves the irreplaceable operatives of every official visit because they have been taking care of the various ignorant and dialect-speaking ministers who routinely visit here. Isn't it about time Italy's representatives learn—metaphorically—to speak Italian instead of their regional dialect?

Italy today enjoys a new reputation in America. Educated Americans and their newspapers and magazines are captured by the charming image of modern Italians, elegant, refined but at the same time grounded in the ancient traditions of high quality craftsmanship. You can't open an American periodical today without seeing Italy being mentioned in its pages. To understand this enormous change in status, one should remember what used to be published in the past. Examples are the caricatures that appeared in *Harper's Weekly*<sup>4</sup> between 1880 and 1900. The visitors of the exhibition *Four Centuries of Italian Influence in New York* at the Museum of the City of New York in 1955, surely noticed that Italy was represented by a stocky man with handlebar moustache, grinding the organ with a monkey on his shoulder. Today, advertisements in major newspapers and magazines show the slim figures of classy ladies or the puzzling and fantastic paintings of famous artists. In the past, to the American public, Italy meant pick-and-

<sup>2</sup> The America-Italy Society was founded in 1925 and dissolved in 1959. Its records are kept at the University of Minnesota's Archives and Special Collections.

<sup>3</sup> Ellsworth Bunker (1894-1984). U.S. Ambassador to Italy in 1953-1954.

<sup>4</sup> *Harper's Weekly* (1857-1916). Subtitled *A Journal of Civilization*, it was a general interest magazine dealing with politics, culture and other contemporary topics.

<sup>5</sup> *Four Centuries of Italian Influence in New York*. Special exhibit, Museum of the City of New York, Sept 15, 1955.



shovel workers. Now the name is invoked in discussions about shoes made in Florence so fine they seem chiseled by Benvenuto Cellini<sup>6</sup> himself. We should make it clear that we do not want to disparage millions of Italians who came here in the past and confronted the most difficult challenge a person can face, namely being transplanted from one civilization to another, without any support from the Italian government and no welcome from the American ruling class. Those who have *survived* deserve our respect, and, most of all among them, those who have not put up airs and become pretentious. Their names only appear in newspapers when they die and only at that point do we find out about their achievements in American life and the modest wealth they have accumulated without hurting anyone.

Some say that the monopoly on Italy's image should not be delegated to small minorities dominated by arrogant, self-important and self-promoting individuals. The problem is two-faced. Italian Americans should not be the only ones to represent the ties between Italy and the United States. Moreover, among Italian Americans there are many valiant individuals who disdain showing off and, therefore, never appear in official ceremonies, pushed aside by the bombast of others more able at making noise with drums and trumpets. The visit by President Gronchi could mark the beginning of new relations and in this sense it takes a historic meaning. Only this president, who has already shown his independence of judgment in many other circumstances, could take this step. Will this be the time, or will he take the path of least resistance allowing the old forces and the traditional power to prevail? This is the question many are asking.

*New York, January 23, 1958.*

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6 Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571). Most renowned for his work as a goldsmith and cast-bronze sculptor. His most famous work is the *Persius* statue (1554) located in the Loggia dei Lanzi outside Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

NEW YORK'S POLITICOS PUT THEIR STAKES IN GRONCHI  
TO CAPTURE THE ITALIAN AMERICAN VOTE

When I stuck my head out of the taxi this morning, wrapped in my cashmere scarf to fight the cold, I saw the ocean liner Cristoforo Colombo.<sup>1</sup> She was gorgeous with her streamlined bow pointing upwards into the sky; white in a day whitened by frost and sunlight; so peaceful, moored at the friendly pier, unaware of the more than thousand people it was carrying; all happy to have arrived and yet sad to leave behind the warmth, the fine foods and the new friends they had just made onboard.

As inhabitants of this port city, we know the port gives us life. We know the outlines of the many ships that approach, blowing their sirens, helped by little hustling tugboats covered in icicles. All we need to identify them is a glimpse at the smokestacks. Their colors are like flags and we feel we almost hold them in our hands when they dock at the pier. They are our guests of honor and, whenever a newcomer arrives, the whole city of New York seems to take on a festive tone. Sirens wail; airplanes fly overhead; balloons float in the sky; newspapers have huge headlines and TV and radio stations fill the air with their broadcasts. Even priests sometimes mention the event in their sermons. There is happiness in the air and often the mayor himself comes to welcome the new arrival.

Welcome, ocean liner Colombo, for carrying new people to this land made of many people. Welcome for ferrying across the globe these hurried Americans, voluble, restless and eager to embrace new ideas and challenges. Welcome for representing Italian ingenuity, Italian cuisine, Italian hospitality and Italian unpredictability. You are our champion. Forget about politicians and ministers. A ship like you is the symbol of a nation that was able to design, build, equip, make comfortable and hospitable an industrial marvel and point it in the right direction at the right time. This is a real ambassador because it knows how to communicate, and its reputation becomes the reputation of the country of origin. Those who travel to Italy will form here a

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<sup>1</sup> Cristoforo Colombo. At the time of launching in 1953 she was Italy's largest ocean liner. The maiden voyage took place in 1954. She was scrapped in 1982.

first impression they will never forget and when they return they will be left with a last and lasting one. Ninety percent of the impressions Americans have about Italy are now shaped by the ocean liners that carry them. In this context we heard great news about Italian passenger ships on the Italy-America route: they are the second in the world by traffic volume and they are acquiring new routes around the world. This will enhance their visibility and status in the United States.

Meanwhile, the city's politicians are waiting for president Gronchi with anticipation and some anxiety. This is an election year in the United States and ~~maybe the Italian president is not fully aware~~ that this is the most exciting game and the most important lottery in America. The fortunes of the two parties are rejuvenated at the prospect of distributing a handful of plum jobs worth a hundred thousand dollars a year as well as thousands and thousands of lesser jobs worth much less, sometimes so little that they are barely enough to live by. But everybody is out to get something for himself/herself in this game and all is grist for the electoral mill.

As soon as the visit of the president of Italy was announced, the city's politicians hurried to picture him as the president of Italian Americans, or, at least, of those among them who bother to vote. Meetings have been held in private offices in the skyscrapers overlooking Central Park and lunches in clubs overlooking the harbor. Everybody is asking the same questions: who will win the race to be the first in line to greet Italy's president; and who will appear with him in the right photos with the usual say-cheese faces and the one-more-time handshakes? Those photos; the printed programs with the list of names; the mention of the seat of honor at the inevitable banquets; ~~or the chairmanship of an honorary committee aren't just ink stains on useless pieces of paper.~~ They are true electoral IOUs. They convince the little voter who still can't read English newspapers that the old country is represented in America by such and such party and such and such politician. Past Italian governments have given legitimacy to local authorities in this manner, and they, in turn, spent it on the local political market. Everyone knows that in politics selling illusions on the market for power is an essential function.

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All these things would be tolerable if they were limited to awarding cheap, meaningless medals. Instead, they also touch and ~~effect~~ <sup>effect</sup> American interests. In the off years, when no elections are held, nobody pays attention to these ceremonies, and the gratifications they dispense are purely personal. But this year the competition is fierce, and the bets even involve the health of the American president's heart.<sup>2</sup> Thus, any little preference for one candidate instead of another could be wrongly interpreted. It so happens that the [Republican] party, currently in power in Washington, is the party less favored by Italian Americans; at least by those who live on the eastern seaboard. It is a problem that complicates things for the Italian president. Italy, as a nation, could pay the price for unknowingly favoring one party and offending the other. But it is a problem that could be solved by relying on other forces, outside the sphere of partisan politics.

*New York, February 12, 1958*

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<sup>2</sup> President Dwight Eisenhower suffered from heart disease and his health condition was an issue of particular concern in the last years of his presidency.

## THE POLITICS OF AN ITALIAN CONSUL IN NEW YORK

The post of consul general of Italy in New York is difficult. Indeed, I would venture to say that, for the Italian diplomatic corps, it is the most difficult of all similar positions in the world..

First of all, the location: all sorts of important personalities pass through here, including those who outrank the consul and who blame him if the city doesn't notice them or the mayor doesn't run to welcome them with the key to the city on a golden tray. Then there are true tragedies, like the sinking of the Andrea Doria,<sup>1</sup> when the telephone rings incessantly for days and days. One more problem is the close relationship with the embassy. When the ambassador is a gentleman like Manlio Brosio,<sup>2</sup> the consul doesn't have to worry about pettiness and backstabs: but with other ambassadors? The consul, moreover, has to constantly worry about his actions and words on a big stage like New York, where everything is under scrutiny and analyzed with a magnifying glass. Things that would go undetected in Seattle quickly become reasons for scandal in New York. The biggest current problem concerns criminals of Italian origin that America wants to get rid of by expelling and dumping them in Italy like garbage bags. The consul must oppose these moves despite the fact that international law allows it. Another test of patience for the consul must be the distorted, confused and mistaken image harbored by all Italians about America, Americans and Italian Americans. From top ministers to humble shoeshines, from the Marquis of Forlimpopoli to Guccio Imbratta,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Doria, Italy's largest ocean liner at the time, was launched in 1951 and had her maiden voyage in 1953. She sunk in 1956 near Nantucket island, off the Massachusetts coast, after a collision with the ocean liner *Stockholm*. Fifty-one people died while 1,600 were rescued by the crew using lifeboats.

<sup>2</sup> Manlio Brosio (1897-1980), Minister of foreign affairs in 1945, he became the first Italian ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1947. He was also ambassador to the United Kingdom, the United States and France. In 1964 he was appointed secretary general of NATO where he remained until 1971. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Richard Nixon in 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Marchese di Forlimpopoli. A character in Carlo Goldoni's comedy *La locandiera* (1782). He represents arrogant and impoverished aristocracy, contrasted with the

they all have irrational expectations that America will shower them with support and warm feelings of friendship.

As if this were not enough the biggest headaches, like icing on the cake, come from the Italian American community. This mass of people is divided along lines of personal loyalties; of thousands of narrow-minded, parochial associations; full of insatiable vanity, grandiose ambitions and incurable thin-skinnedness; full of *nouveau-riche* delusions and contempt for the poor. In theory they should not be in the purview of the Italian consul, in that almost all are American citizens. However, in reality, based on my observations, this has always been the main preoccupation of consuls, whether they were from the liberal, Fascist or republican regimes. This happens by virtue of sophistry and the complicity of the money that Italian Americans send to Italy to support various organizations and the little hopes that the dream of money from America triggers in the majority of Italians, from university professors to shoes exporters.

Thus, it's not hard to understand why some consuls only lasted for a short time: some left unhappy and others left behind much unhappiness. For those who understand the situation—and I think I am one of them—the function of the Italian consul in New York generates much admiration together with a sense of pity for the man who occupies that post. High doses of admiration and pity saluted Baron Carlo De Ferraris<sup>4</sup> who managed to stay here for five and a half years in addition to a year and a half in Chicago. When he left, he was honored by so many cocktail parties, private dinners, lunches and banquets that he probably had to skip regular meals to avoid dying of overeating. Even if we discount some obligatory homage required by etiquette and the general hypocrisy of social functions, such a unanimous choir of approval was rather impressive. It should also be said that the departure of Consul De Ferraris was even mentioned

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Conte d'Albafiorita, a rich merchant who bought his aristocratic title.

• Guccio Imbratta. Translated into English as Sloppy Hugh, is a character in one of Boccaccio's short stories in the *Decamerone*. He is the lazy, glutton, unreliable, messy, hair-brained servant of the shrewd Frate Cipolla (Day VI, n. 10).

4 Carlo De Ferraris Salzano (1905–1985). Career diplomat, consul general of Italy in New York from 1953 to 1958.

in a short editorial by the *New York Times*. (I seemed to recognize the style of Herbert Mathews, a former correspondent from Italy who has maintained a great interest in the country and its cultural and political developments.) The consuls of other countries also gave him a good-bye dinner party. Last but not least was the so-called Italian community, namely those Italian Americans who are constantly trying to show off and appear on the pages of newspapers that are still printed in a language that approximates Italian; or composed of clips from newspapers from Italy to which the only local contribution are typos, grammatical errors, layout mistakes and headlines that have nothing to do with the story they cap.

If nothing else, De Ferraris was able to navigate around rocks and shallow waters. A year ago, in recognition of his high-quality diplomatic work, he was promoted to the rank of minister and was appointed director of the office in charge of relations with the United Nations, which is a very sensitive job. It was a very well deserved promotion. Later, he became general secretary of the ministry, and, after some major changes under Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani,<sup>5</sup> he was promoted ambassador to Canada.

All this notwithstanding, I will repeat here what I told him privately: my opinion is that his political approach in New York (his strategy was approved by Rome) was profoundly wrong. Personally I had a very good relationship with Baron De Ferraris. We would meet once in a while, alone or with other worthwhile guests (otherwise I would have declined). His conversation was refined, elegant and erudite. He was the scion of one of the few Neapolitan aristocratic families that—after the military conquest of the south by the Piedmontese in 1860—understood immediately that the Bourbon regime was over and that the Savoy<sup>6</sup> dynasty was going to stay. They recognized the new situation and decided to cooperate with the new liberal Italian state

5 Amintore Fanfani (1908-1999). Politician. He served as prime minister in five governments: 1954; 1958-1959; 1960-1963; 1982-1983; 1987.

6 Royal House of Bourbon. This royal dynasty lorded over southern Italy for 150 years until it was defeated by the house of Savoy in 1860 in the long battle for the unification of Italy.

• Royal House of Savoy. Piedmontese dynasty that lead the process of unification of Italy.

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out of a sense of duty. This is something that still remains as a vestigial trait, at least in part, in the aristocracy that lost its power. I have met very few *servitori dello stato*<sup>7</sup> who had the same sense of commitment toward the government as De Ferraris. I was deeply impressed by the long days he put in at work; by his patience in dealing with situations that were often both unpleasant and ridiculous; by his self control and skills in time management. Except for the long hours, I have none of those qualities. Without ostentation, he would keep me informed about books that I should know about. His criteria in judging Italy, from the *Risorgimento* to recent events, often found me in agreement and, to my great surprise, I wasn't able to get into a fight with him about these topics. I also knew, from other sources, about his efforts to prevent the American government from dumping back in Italy the garbage of gangsters who are properly a by-product of American culture.

One evening I ran into him near my house. He had come to pick up his daughter who was studying architecture and was staying at her studio until very late at night. He told me she worked past midnight five days a week and he had to pick her up after a long day of work, with more meetings in one day than I would have in a month. But what about his strategy and politics? It was based on Italian Americans. I want to make it clear that I don't want to diminish their merits and importance. Indeed, I have always maintained that the great majority of Italian immigrants ought to be admired for the economic success they have attained. Moreover, they owe these achievements only to their vitality as they owe nothing to the various Italian governments that abandoned them in America without an education, without leaders and without support. They also owe nothing to the American government that, in those days, did nothing to protect immigrants. However, Italian consuls ignore the healthy, successful majority of our fellow Italians. The only part of this population they pay attention to is also the worst: vain, loud, ignorant, often connected with criminal elements or at least in silent complicity with the criminals whom they never dare oppose or denounce. The complicity of all Italian consuls with this minority has always stunned me, not because of its immorality, but because

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<sup>7</sup> *Servitori dello stato*. Public servants. The Italian expression implies that the state, not the public, is the ultimate holder of legitimate sovereignty.



it's the wrong political strategy. These individuals, a minority, sell to the Italian government the influence they claim to have, but they would have no influence in the community if the Italian governments just refused to treat them with favors, protections, honors and with covered invitations to banquets and social events. Moreover, the new generations of Italian Americans couldn't care less about this minority that is losing strength with every passing year.

This minority survives by exploiting the myth of the Italian American vote despite the fact that this vote doesn't exist. Those who claim to control it are just like Dulcamara,<sup>8</sup> as the victories of Fiorello La Guardia (who fought against political machines) and Vincent Impellitteri clearly demonstrated. Both these candidates defeated their Italian American adversaries supported by their respective parties' electoral machines. Meanwhile, new generations of Italian Americans have emerged who speak American and don't read the community newspapers printed in what passes for Italian language. If Italy cares about its long-term relationship with Italian Americans, it must learn to invest in these new generations instead of aiming at quick-and-dirty immediate results with the old ones. Italy can still be very appealing to young Italian Americans on the condition that a new tone and new policies are put in place. Obviously, the consul general of Italy in New York can't be like Don Quixote and can't be a moralist either. He still finds in many Italians a mentality that is stuck in the past; as if we were still in 1880 when America was only concerned with getting workers from Italy to replace Blacks who were no longer slaves, or more labor to employ in the emerging industries. A consul is a consul, not a miracle worker, but he should not be nearsighted.

Italy's major political problem in these times is how to establish new relations with the American people, not with Italian Americans. The visit to the United States by President Gronchi should have been a splendid opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the real leadership of America. The president should have taken the opportunity to step up to a higher level and explain that Italy and Italians are not longer like those who arrived here in 1880. Italy should also be more careful

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<sup>8</sup> Dulcamara. The charlatan doctor in Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Elisir d'amore* (1832).

about the kind of Americans it invites to Italy. Many Professor Sausage (a caricature of teachers of Italian I created), people with very little understanding of Italy, have been introduced to Italian universities as ambassadors of American culture. These people harbor notions about Italy that are based on old clichés while their academic work is worthy that of a typist. Many fake and so-called valuable individuals have passed through the consulate's filter and have been welcome by ministers, universities and even by the Vatican. Venality and vanity dominate these relations. This is why I thought Consul De Ferrari's politics were wrong: despite the fact that I spent some delightful hours in conversation with him and that I greatly respect him as a functionary. But maybe it wasn't his fault. Maybe he just followed orders. I don't know which one is true. In five years he never asked me what I thought about anything. I never felt more useless as an Italian than when I was with him.

*New York, December 19, 1958*

Part Three

*Criminality*



## HOW AMERICANS IN 1891 BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MAFIA

The Oxford English Dictionary mentions 1875 as the year when the word Mafia appeared for first time in a London newspaper. The term started spreading worldwide with the mass emigration of Sicilians from their island, following the military *Spedizione dei Mille*<sup>1</sup> headed by Giuseppe Garibaldi that resulted in the annexation of Sicily to the kingdom of Italy. The word Mafia surfaced with great sensation in America in 1891, related to the New Orleans lynchings;<sup>2</sup> a historical event that has been forgotten on both sides of the Atlantic, but that at the time created huge sensation in the press both in Italy and in the United States and caused a break in diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 1958 I happened to be in New Orleans and so I started looking into the collection of old local newspapers preserved in the city's library. I noticed that the newspapers' pages with the reports of those events were rather worn, often held together by tissue paper; a sign that several people must have studied them. I also learned that a local, impartial scholar had published his findings in a journal devoted to the history of Louisiana. Outside New Orleans, when it took place, this episode of violence became the object of congressional investigations; sociological essays; fictionalized history and a lot of diplomatic correspondence between the federal government of the United States and the state of Louisiana. I will give here as faithful

<sup>1</sup> *Spedizione dei Mille* [Expedition of the Thousand]. This military venture took place in 1860 and became the single most important and almost mythical episode of the *Risorgimento*. Sponsored by the Savoy King Vittorio Emanuele II, a corps of volunteers—the famed *Camicie Rose* [Red Shirts] under the command of General Garibaldi—left Genoa by ship and landed in Sicily. Here they fought the poorly organized and demoralized army of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies ruled by the Bourbon dynasty. With support in part from the local population, they made their way to the capital, Naples, deposing King Francis II. The kingdom was annexed to the kingdom of Sardinia which, at the time, was the official name of the Savoy state before it was renamed kingdom of Italy in 1861.

<sup>2</sup> See Patricia Salvetti's *Conda e sapone* (Roma: Sellerio, 2003); *Rope and Soap* (Bloomington, Bordighera Press, 2016) for the history of lynchings of Italians in the United States.

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a report as possible of the events that left a very deep impression on America. It can be said that it was in that moment that the word Mafia became associated with Italians and with time the association has become even stronger and more widespread.

The evening of October 15, 1891 was humid and rainy. The New Orleans Chief of Police David Hennessy<sup>3</sup> was walking home with a friend, a detective from a private agency. While they were walking, they did not pay attention to a boy ahead of them who kept turning to check which direction they were going. From time to time the boy would whistle two high notes followed by three low notes. Some said it was the *Marcia Reale*, Italy's national anthem. Not far from Hennessy's house the two split up and went separate ways.

Hennessy lived in a poor section of town. His biography states that his father was a mercenary soldier who had named his son after himself. Allegedly, Hennessy senior was a veteran of the Civil War on the Confederate side under General Godfrey Witzel.<sup>4</sup> After the war, during a period of intense struggle between whites and Blacks for the control of the city, he had joined the police. Wounded several times in war, he died in 1867 in a tavern brawl, killed by a certain Guerin who, in turn, was later killed on the steps of a court house. In 1878, the future chief of police killed some unidentified person during a fight in a bar. He was arrested and tried with his cousin Mike, but both were acquitted by the jury. Cousin Mike was a policeman, but the scandal forced him to resign from the force and eventually ended up getting killed in Houston, where he had become a private investigator.

In 1888 Dave Hennessy was appointed chief of police by a mayor named Shakspeare ~~fishel~~.<sup>5</sup> Prior to that, he had been working for a private security agency owned by a certain Ferrer. When Ferrer died, Hennessy bought the agency. Both names, Hennessy and Ferrer, are clearly Irish. In that period the biggest American cities were dominated

<sup>3</sup> David Hennessy (1858-1890). New Orleans's chief of police from 1888 to 1890.

<sup>4</sup> Godfrey Witzel (1835-1884). German American major general in the Union Army and interim mayor of New Orleans.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Shakspeare (1837-1896). Mayor of New Orleans in 1880-1882 and 1888-1892.

by bands of tough, fearless, violent troublemakers of Irish descent. Many elected politicians were Irish as well; as were the majority of the police, a true force in the city. The law-and-order situation was such that the official police were like a little private army that could not be bothered to catch criminals. Private citizens or businesses that could not count on the protection of the police had to turn for security and protection to one of the innumerable private detective agencies, as did the Sicilians who had emigrated to New Orleans and who quickly learned the local customs.

These details illustrate the environment and the local conditions on the ground. People who hung out in taverns, where one could kill or get killed, could be gangsters one day and become policemen the next without any screening. This made me think back to the time of the Papal States when the authorities recruited into the police bandits that were roaming the countryside if they agreed to drop the old profession.

Hennessey is described as tall, massive and attractive (if you like a face like that of a bulldog), with hazel eyes, black moustache and jet-black hair kept together by shiny grease with bangs on the forehead. His description reminded me of the *bravi*<sup>6</sup> and their hairstyle in the *Promessi sposi*.<sup>7</sup> He was considered a typical policeman for those days, courageous, merciless and with no morals. In the words of an historian who wrote about him: "Today we would call him a gangster who happened to be on the side of the law." He was the first official American victim of Mafia, thus it is important to describe him with precision. Sicilian immigrants had been suspected of several murders, but the real killers had never been found. Local newspapers talked

<sup>6</sup> *Bravi*. The term indicates thuggish private guards hired by local lords as security force in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were usually outlaws. Manzoni in *I promessi sposi* described them as sporting a characteristic look, with long hair and flashy clothes.

<sup>7</sup> *I promessi sposi*. Written by Alessandro Manzoni, the most famous Italian novel (for Italians) was published in several dispersed editions with major changes between 1825 and 1842. The first edition was printed in 1825-6 by printer Vincenzo Ferrario in Milan. The final and definitive edition was published by printer Guglielmini e Radelli in Milan in 1840. The events narrated take place in the Milan and Lake Como areas around 1630 during the Spanish domination.

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about them and the vow of *omertà*,<sup>8</sup> the wall of silence that the police could not penetrate. Some of the murders probably were motivated by honor; or by the desire to avenge the death of a friend or relative; or by business disputes. The police, as often is the case in America in these kinds of situations, didn't really put many resources into investigating crimes that involved those damn foreigners. However, it looks like Hennessey made a mistake. He got in the middle of a fight between two Sicilian gangs that were fighting for the control of the fresh-produce business. In those days New Orleans had become the capital of Sicilian immigration. Typical of all immigration waves, one Sicilian would call another and so forth. The southern climate; its looks and character; along with the presence of a large contingent of French and Spanish people; gave the city a distinct Mediterranean flavor; with lots of Catholic churches. This was at the time when no passports, police controls or consular visas were required to immigrate.

The citizens of New Orleans were descendants of pirates, smugglers and other scum of the Caribbean seas. As in many other port cities, morality was rather wobbly; but here it was more so than in other places; mostly as a consequence of the Civil War and the defeat of the South, which had brought turmoil and a period of oppression by the winners on the losers.

Brothels had sprouted on every corner so brazenly and loudly that they caused consternation in other parts of a more hypocritical America. It is no surprise that Sicilian criminality saw New Orleans as an attractive new turf for its activities and also as a safe harbor, far from the *anti-bandidismo*<sup>9</sup> campaign launched by the new Italian state after the unification. Certainly, among them were honest citizens but these tended to settle mostly in the countryside where they created

<sup>8</sup> *Omertà* is the implicit vow of non-cooperation with the authorities by an entire community. The term derives from *uomo* [man] and refers to the fundamental property of manliness. *Omettoso* would be the opposite of a *snitch*.

<sup>9</sup> *Bandidismo*. In the years after the annexation of the south to the kingdom of Italy, bands of outlaws were controlling the territory and the population in large swaths of the countryside, especially in Calabria and Sicily. In addition to criminal intent, these gangs also had—albeit vague—political goals of resistance and self-determination in opposition to the oppressive regime imposed by the new northern regime.

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important agricultural centers. (Edmondo Mayor de Planches,<sup>10</sup> one of the first high level Italian diplomats to write about Italian immigrants, visited them a few years later and left a historical description.) However, it is also a fact that the Italian consulate had a list of criminals, at least a hundred-names long, that were sought for extradition back to Italy. The ambassador wanted to share it with the local authorities, but these didn't know what to do with it or how to handle the entire situation. At the time of the Hennessy murder trial, which turned out to be the real fulcrum of the tragedy, the list had grown to 1,100. The consul was successful only in the case of a notorious bandit from Calabria, Giovanni Esposito, who, according to the accusations, had committed eighteen murders in Italy. In Louisiana he kidnapped for ransom a protestant minister, Rev. Rose. To prove that the pastor was in his hands, and also show his determination, he cut his ears off and sent them to the family.

Esposito was discovered thanks to a tip from an informant while he was living in New Orleans under a new name. He had a nice life and a second wife who swore he was a great husband and father. After Hennessy arrested him and the consul obtained the extradition, his friends collected several thousand of dollars to pay for his lawyer and tried everything possible to keep him in the country. Rumors among the population had that Esposito had been betrayed by a certain Abbruzzo who was later found murdered. The police could not find his killer. Esposito was deported to Italy, tried, sentenced to life and imprisoned at Santo Stefano.<sup>11</sup> The history of his trial and his portrait were reported in the periodical *Illustrazione Italiana*<sup>12</sup> of 1890. After that, I don't know what happened to him. His reputation on this side of the world is that he was the person responsible for importing Mafia to New Orleans and the United States.

This was Hennessy's first battle with the Sicilian Mafia. The

<sup>10</sup> Edmondo Mayor de Planches (1851-1920). He was ambassador to the Unites States between 1901 and 1903.

<sup>11</sup> The little island of Santo Stefano, where a penitentiary was located, is a few miles from the port of Naples.

<sup>12</sup> *Illustrazione italiana* (1873 - 1962). Published in Milan, it was one of Italy's best selling illustrated weeklies.

second battle led to his death. The war for the control of the fresh-produce business was waged by two families, Provenzano and Matranga. Apparently, Hennessey backed the former. One episode accelerated the events: the Matrangas were ambushed by the Provenzanos while they were leaving the port in a horse-drawn carriage. Many shots were fired and one of the Matrangas lost a leg. At the trial, the Matrangas realized that Hennessey was backing the Provenzanos. Among other clues, the lavish treatment and excellent food enjoyed by the Provenzanos in jail were attributed to Hennessey's influence. Hennessey was a member of the Red Lantern Club (one can easily guess what kind of place this club was.) Ostensibly it had a social mission but one cannot avoid noticing that red lanterns were the common signal for brothels. Red Lantern is the generic name given to a district where brothels line the streets and prostitution is practiced openly—despite the laws—under the protection of corrupt police. (In those days their locations were reported in a tourist guide called *Blue Book*,<sup>13</sup> which is now a rarity sought after by collectors.) Among the club's members was a certain Joseph Macheca, most likely from Malta, a man with power and influence, who, in association with other Sicilians, owned ships for the transport of fruit in the Gulf of Mexico. He warned Hennessey not to get involved in the business of other people and particularly that of the Sicilians or he “would end up in a box.” Hennessey dismissed the threat. On the evening of October 15, 1891, as he was about to step into his house, Hennessey was targeted by a volley of shots from rifles and pistols. He managed to return fire with his pistol as two of the assailants approached him and shot him at close range. He then stumbled for a few steps toward the friend that, upon hearing the shots, had run back to help him. When asked who the killers were Hennessey replied: “It was them.” “Them who?” “Dagoes.”<sup>14</sup> This was the derogatory term used to indicate Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and in general all southern Europeans with darker skin and a foreign accent. In this case the accusation pointed clearly to the Italians. Hennessey

<sup>13</sup> Author Unknown. *Blue Book*. New Orleans: Thomas C. Anderson, circa 1911.

<sup>14</sup> The footnote in the original text explains the origin of the term: “*Dago* (pronounced *deigo*) is probably the metathesis of Diego, a very common name among Iberians and in countries they dominated, Sicily included.”

did not personally recognize any of the killers, since it is (still) standard practice for these operations to be carried out by hired gunmen that cannot be identified. Moreover, the killers wore the typical kerchief that conceals the bottom half of the face, leaving only a small slit open for the eyes, under a hat's wide brim.

As long as Sicilian immigrants in New Orleans kept to themselves and took care of their rivalries of honor and business among themselves, the New Orleans police (a misnomer) weren't particularly concerned. But when it became known that Mafia was involved in Chief Hennessey's assassination, popular resentment started growing and became so intense that it eventually led to one of the worst cases of lynching in history. Carlo Matranga was probably the most notorious of the suspects and was in fact the first to be arrested. He had a bomb-proof alibi: that evening he was playing cards with some *patani*. In a way his alibi was a bit too strong and it seemed planned. The suspicion against him was based on the fact that the abandoned house from which some of shots were fired had been rented with his money. To get rid of the indictment, Matranga hired one of the many private detectives that, due to lax rules, were working in a gray area between private and public law enforcement agencies. When Matranga was acquitted, the initiatives of detective Dominic O'Malley—the man he had hired—became the basis for the accusations of jury corruption. O'Malley, by the way, was Irish.<sup>15</sup> Twenty other Italians were arrested together with Matranga. Some were friends of his: Antonio Scaffidi, already known to the police for attempted extortion of a merchant named Messina; Emanuele Polizzi, otherwise identified with the name Polissi; Pietro Monastero, a landlord; Bastian Incardona, whose brother was working for Matranga; Charles Traina, James Caruso and Antonio Marchese. Antonio Bagnetto, a guard at the fruit market who for his superior intellectual abilities—he knew both languages and translated for the other men—was called *il professore*, was found in possession of three revolvers. All the names were of Sicilian origin. Others involved were Loretto Comitez [sic]<sup>16</sup> and Frank Romero, presumably Hispanic.

<sup>15</sup> Italian readers would not recognize the name as Irish, thus the author added the detail for clarity.

<sup>16</sup> Loretto Comitz.

although in those days it was common for people to change name upon receiving U.S. citizenship, a practice that is often mentioned in the correspondence of many Italian consuls to the central government. Alternatively, one should always be aware of the chance of simple spelling errors. Marchese was the father of the boy accused of giving signals for the ambush by whistling in code. Another one of the crew was Rocco Geraci, who had already been accused of killing an Italian shoemaker. With the exception of Marranga and the Maltese Macheca, the rest were petty criminals who, at one point or another, had had problems with the police. An incident that took place while they were behind bars gives an idea of the kind of atmosphere at the time. In the discovery phase, a certain Duffy, an Irishman and a friend of Hennessey, picked one of the accused to carry out his personal vendetta. He applied for a permit to visit in jail Antonio Scoffetti, whom he blamed more than anyone else for the death of his friend; and shot him with a gun, wounding him only superficially. Duffy himself was arrested and tried but got away with only a few months behind bars.

The chief of the Pinkerton Agency<sup>17</sup> reported a story, widely circulated in Italy as well, that I personally find questionable and that was never proved to be true. He claimed to be a friend of Hennessey and said he had planted a spy in the jail where the Sicilians were being held. The spy's name was Di Dio. His cover was as a counterfeit expert who had been jailed after being mistreated by the police. Ostensibly, he struck up a friendship with the Sicilians persuading them he was a member of organized crime and managed to get the story of the assassination conspiracy from Polizzi (or Polissi). The newspapers of the time did not report anything about it. Polizzi, in all likelihood, was frazzled and on the verge of mental collapse. During the debate in court he suffered from seizures. He first confessed but later withdrew his confession, which was then thrown out by the judge. This entire episode feels like a cheap mystery novel or some dramatization thereof; something that would fit a whodunit play, but that leaves serious

17 Pinkerton National Detective Agency. Founded in 1850, it was for decades the most notorious private security agency in the country, often working in concert with government law-enforcement agencies to maintain public order, disrupt labor strikes, and conduct clandestine operations of dubious legality.

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historians very skeptical. The truth is that there was no need for spies. Everyone believed the Sicilians were guilty and everybody expected the jury would find them guilty.

At that time the city had a vigilance committee appointed by the mayor composed of fifty members, charged with looking into public safety issue. Its chairperson initially was E.H. Farrar (an Irish surname) and, later, a certain Flower. The committee was the peculiar re-incarnation of similar volunteer groups that, in other occasions, had taken over the reins of armed control in the city in periods when the police seemed paralyzed and City Hall was similarly indecisive. The history of New Orleans before 1900 shows several periods when these kinds of arrangements had taken place, with the corollary of erudite debates by American jurists about the right of the people to take direct control of public order when elected officials are patently derelict in their duties. In Italy we have had similar situations even in the twentieth century. History doesn't care about justifications or reprimands: it is what it is. However, we should remember that the apparition of a similar explosion of popular furor by irregular forces in New Orleans had already taken place only a few years earlier with the White League,<sup>18</sup> a movement that fought against the alleged excesses of the Union administration after the victory in the Civil War. These forces, one way or another, always appeal to the supremacy of white Anglo Americans. In this case they targeted Italians. Professor Giovanni Cecchetti,<sup>19</sup> a personal friend who works at Tulane University in New Orleans, hypothesized that this popular uprising was connected to the election of President Grover Cleveland<sup>20</sup> who had campaigned with an anti-foreigner agenda.

In these circumstances the official function of the committee was

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18 The White League was active in the years 1874 and 1875 in Louisiana. It was one of many paramilitary organizations whose goal was the defeat of Republican politicians in local elections.

19 Giovanni Cecchetti (1922-1998). Professor of Italian at Tulane University, Stanford University and finally at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he was chair of the Italian department from 1969 to 1977.

20 Stephen Grover Cleveland (1837-1908). He served as president of the United States for two separate, noncontiguous terms in 1885-1889 and 1893-1897.

to secure law and order. In reality it fostered a climate of tension and danger in Italian neighborhoods where, in those days, the windows and the doors of houses and businesses were kept shut. The trial lasted from November 20, 1890, until March 13 of the following year. It took two juries to reach a verdict. The first one was dissolved after nine days due to irregularities. Apparently the Italian community, or at least the best organized group, the one called Mafia, was able to collect enough money to hire top lawyers and private investigators. The court heard 319 witnesses. The judge in person exonerated Marranga. For three of the accused the outcome was a hung jury, and, according to the local laws, they were either to be retried or let go. The others were all found not guilty.

When the verdict was announced, the city erupted with outrage and cries for justice. The revenge plan was organized in the open with the vigilance committee taking responsibility for all that would ensue. We know the names of the organizers who signed a manifesto published by the newspapers. (A few years later, the main organizer was elected governor.) We also know who incited the populace; who distributed the arms; and who led the armed volunteers. The way the plan unfolded shows it was put together carefully to make sure it would appear it fell within the boundaries of legality, or at least that its execution would avoid implicating directly the organizers. For this reason, for instance, some of the Italians were taken from the prison and formally handed to the crowd, so as to avoid the possible accusation that they were killed by identifiable individuals inside the jail.

George C. Parke died at age 87 in Tampa, Florida, a few years ago. In a sealed envelope, to be opened after his death, he revealed that he had lived in New Orleans where he had been part of a squad of twelve people armed with rifles and to whom the lynching's organizers assigned the goal of killing the Italians. He also said that he had been living in hiding his whole life in fear of retribution by the Italians. Could it be true? None of the organizers was alive at that time and even if someone had been, nobody would have ever confirmed his version.

In an exclusive club in New Orleans, a couple of days ago, I met the son of attorney A., the lawyer who defended the Italians. He looked quite nervous and, in too many nervous words, told me that

his father had taken that case as a pique. After the assassination of Hennessey, he had volunteered to be one of the prosecutors but was rebuffed. Thus, to show his professional skills, he took the opposite role and succeeded in getting the not-guilty verdict. I reminded him that, based on what I had read in the local newspapers, his father, during the closing argument boasted that he was a personal friend of the victims and that he would have never accepted to defend the accused if he doubted their innocence. I am not sure whether for the son historical truth trumped his antipathy for Sicilians: what was evident was that he didn't hold much respect for his father.

The reason for the massacre was the indignation of the whole city at the verdict. Mobs do not normally follow the light of reason or the law. The jury, instead, in this case, used reason and the result was a careful, cautious and free decision. The jurors were all native New Orleans citizens, of French, Anglo-Saxon or German ancestry and, probably, a Jew, Seligman. There were no members of the Italian community. Regardless of this, the jury was accused of being corrupt. Italians or, better, Mafia was believed to have paid large sums of money to ensure the acquittals or at least a hung jury. In old documents, yellowed by time and typed in the tiniest of fonts, I read the interviews with the jurors. At first they all refused to talk, as was their right. They were unanimous in saying that they were not convinced by the evidence presented by the prosecutor and that they made their decision without pressure. Some complained about the low cultural level of fellow jurors, who were basically illiterate and, conceptually and intellectually, inadequate to the task at hand. They all denied they had received money from the Mafia. Nevertheless, the press published figures that even today look ridiculous. One of the jurors allegedly received \$150, another one \$500. I am not claiming here that a conscience is necessarily more expensive, but I would like to note that to risk one's life is worth more than \$150, even if it's only for the conscience. The risk of being the target of violence for the jurors was indeed real, to the point that some of them had to leave the city to protect themselves, at least temporarily. The jury's foreman, Mr. Seligman, a professional jeweler, took a coach to a train station near New Orleans. Due to a mishap, he found himself walking in public. He was recognized and

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was surrounded by a menacing crowd. Luckily, a police officer was nearby and intervened after calling for reinforcements. Other jurors hired armed guards to protect them even in their own homes. It took a while for things to settle down. The son of the lawyer who defended the Italians assured me that his father's business was not affected negatively; indeed, it boomed, as he gained a reputation as the kind of lawyer who could handle hopeless cases. Anyway, if corruption had taken place, it is nevertheless sure that the Sicilians of New Orleans had learned a very important lesson very quickly: American justice in those days was worth its weight in gold, and in order to get justice they had to fork out all the gold they could. I am not claiming they were moral individuals, I claim, though, that they were quite smart.

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A crowded calculated to be around 6,000 people, a big number for a small city, gathered in front of the statue of the patriot Henry Clay<sup>21</sup> on Canal Street, to this day the most elegant street in New Orleans. It was March 15, 1891. The population was angry at the verdict that acquitted all the Italians accused of murdering Hennessey. Probably everything would have ended with shouts and maybe some fist fights if it hadn't been for an organization, the so-called Fifty, which prepared, planned, directed and quite openly took charge of the operation. "When law enforcement is lacking, the people have the right to take control of public interest and see that justice is done." This is a theory that has surfaced often and in many different times and places around the world, and it was applied that very day. Was it justice? Or wasn't rather a barbaric act? History is what it is and it allows for no corrections. No argument will give back life and honor, if indeed they had honor, to the Sicilians who were massacred. Later, and after long and protracted fights, the American government paid the sum of 125,000 Lira (in 1891 the currency was the gold-Lira) to the families of three victims who at that time were still Italian citizens. All the protagonists are dead and probably their descendants meet in some political club and shake hands at a costume ball during Mardi Gras. But in New Orleans people still talk about it, albeit in hushed tones. If we could foresee the final outcome of our passions, or what

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21 Henry Clay (1777-1852). Congressman and senator from Kentucky for several terms, and speaker of the House. He served as secretary of state from 1825 to 1829.



our sacrifices will produce, including the compromises with our own conscience, it is probable we would never get much done, or, at least, nothing great and nothing big. In and by itself a crowd is nothing. A crowd does not think or decide or act. But there is always someone who directs and leads it. At times, a crazy rider grabs the reins and in those cases we know how things end up. In Renaissance Florence we have the written accounts of events when (as Florentine historians told us) leaders called the people to gatherings. This usually was the beginning of arson, vandalism, looting and killing. The long speech given that day by in New Orleans by a self-appointed leader inflamed the souls. The crowd had only a marginal role, limited to shouts and threats, but with its presence it supported the tragic operation with the real operatives organized in an armed team. At the right time they picked up the arms that had been kept in storage nearby and used them as badges to get through the mob. Only twenty-five people entered the jail where the Italians were kept. Nobody in a position of authority bothered to protect the prisoners: not the governor, not the mayor, and not even the new chief of police who, predictably, had a personal animus against them. The prison warden, when he saw the crowd and the armed squad, opened the cells of the Italian prisoners and told them to hide in the women's section. From the reports of the journalists of the time and from the autopsies of the victims, it is possible to reconstruct what happened to each of the prisoners. Only one of the Sicilians was lucky enough to be able to mingle with the common prisoners who stayed behind on the ground floor. He wasn't recognized and thus was saved. Everyone else was in a state of sheer terror. Who wouldn't be? Some incredible things happened. Sunseri<sup>22</sup> and Polizzi were found inside a dog shed so small that people wondered how two human bodies could possibly fit in it. Another one, Incardona, crouched in a fetal position, hid in a garbage bin and survived.

Macheca. Scaffidi and Marchese Sr. ran back to the third floor where their cells were but found them locked. The corridor leading to the cells was exposed to the lynch squad that, as soon as they saw them, started shooting. Macheca brandishing a club tried to break the lock of a cell where he thought he could protect himself. He

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22 It is possible the author may be referring to Salvatore Sinceri.

was found dead clutching the club, his hand smashed by a bullet. Marchese Jr., the child who was the alleged lookout for the ambush, was recognized but was spared due to his young age. Matranga and Charles Patorno were able to hide only to re-emerge later, dirty and slimy, from another room where they had hidden under a pile of garbage. They also survived.

In New Orleans a descendant of one of the victims of this tragedy told me that Matranga later managed to become a big shot in the local longshoremen union. He was murdered by a professional killer from Chicago, hired by an enemy faction inside the same organization. Before dying he shouted to his son: "Get that son of a bitch." The son gave chase and shot the killer. According to the witnesses, the wound his son inflicted onto the killer was identical to the wound suffered by Matranga: two bullets to the heart, the only two that were fired. The implication may be that both belonged to the same school.

The group that entered the jail placed sentries at the door and didn't allow access to anybody. The vigilantes immediately killed three Italians but, in order to avoid being singled out and to assert the democratic principle of popular justice, they brought two of them outside and gave them to the crowd. One of them was Polizzi, one of the strangest characters in the trial, during which he kept moving and shaking uncontrollably, screaming and shouting for the entire time. Today he would certainly be committed to a mental institution for epilepsy. He was the only one who, approached by a fake Italian criminal—a Pinkerton spy—allegedly confessed he committed the crime, a confession he later recanted. He was brought out of jail held up by the shirt collar by a gigantic individual, someone the press described only as "a well known cotton grower." It could be that the name was not mentioned to protect him and other members of his family; or because he was part of the agrarian aristocracy that shared control of the city (but that was slowly surrendering power to the industrial neo-capitalists from the north). Polizzi was taken to the Old Quarter to a street corner that borders Canal Street and hanged from one of the gas lamps that, to this day, make the area so charming and picturesque for the delight of tourists.

Often, as I was wandering in that part of town, I asked myself if

the lamp in front of me may be the one where the poor epileptic was hanged. One particular was reported by the press, and it is so crude and realistic that it helps explain the madness of the whole thing. As soon as the body of Polizzi was hanged from the street lamp, the crowd, of its own initiative and in an act worthy of them, started grabbing him to take a souvenir of the event. So, they ripped off shoes and clothes until he was left naked. But apparently that wasn't enough because eventually his body was cut up in parts. Maybe in an old New Orleans house, preserved under a glass dome or between the pages of a book, there still are strips of skin or scalp, with the date of the fateful day neatly written on them.

The second public victim was Bagnetto. Back in the prison, when people approached, he pretended to be dead but he could not fake it long enough. He was dragged out of the jail with a rope around his neck. The mob decided to hang him from a tree. A child climbed up to tie the knot, but the branch snapped so the operation had to be repeated a second time until it finally succeeded.

After Bagnetto, six other Sicilians were taken from the prison and killed one by one: Geraci, Monastero, Traina, Caruso, Comitez and Romero. At 9:15 AM the massacre was over. There were no more people to kill. The day ended with a triumphal parade culminating with a speech, given from the platform of a statue, to inform everyone, at 11:00 am, that the execution was complete. When it was all over, eleven people had been lynched. After the tragedy, none of the relatives dared go looking for the bodies. Only a woman, Polizzi's companion, went to the prison while thousands of people were still crowding the area with bellicose and hostile disposition. The woman must have been half crazy herself. The reporters noted that she was wearing a worn-out print cotton dress with a wool blue shawl on her head and a yellow ribbon around her neck. She was in her mid thirties, with a Mediterranean complexion. With the exceptions of two dead that ended up in a common grave, the bodies were returned to the families who gave them funerals, some quite elaborate and some in the city cathedral. Apparently, in attendance were not only relatives, friends and other Italians, but also Anglo-Saxons. According to a reporter

who visited the Italian quarter near Poydras Market<sup>23</sup> by the port, the survivors “showed neither anger nor fear, although they said those few hours felt like years. Everyone thanked God for having been saved from such a horrible destiny.” I imagine that quite a few candles were lit in the New Orleans cathedral. In the pockets of the dead, a rosary, images of saints and even a small statue of Saint Joseph were found. In the pockets of Comiez, instead, a German calendar was found.

After the verdict, suspicion and animosity were high against the jurors. Some were openly accused by the press of having been corrupted by Mafia. It appears that the price of a conscience in those days was rather low but, conscience notwithstanding, a vote to acquit the Italians certainly meant troubles for the rest of one’s life.

The jury’s foreman, as I mentioned earlier, was almost killed by the mob that recognized him while he was trying to get out of town by train. All the jurors who were interviewed denied there had been attempts to corrupt them and maintained that the decision to acquit depended only on the fact that the prosecutor had failed to present convincing evidence. One of the jurors gave the most eloquent answer to a journalist: “There were two Black folks who claimed they recognized the killers. But, how can I believe the word of two Blacks against that of a white man?” The detective hired by Marranga to find evidence to support his alibi was also forced to leave town for a while.

The Italian quarter is centered around Orsoline Street,<sup>24</sup> that is, ironically, the place where the first proper girls from France found a home and an education in America. As soon as the news of the verdict reached the quarter, Italian flags were flying in front of all windows. But when, later, after the massacre, the reporters stormed the area, they found that all the flags had disappeared while the women were busy taking care of the green grocery stores and the men had all gone into hiding.

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<sup>23</sup> Also known as the Poydras Street Market, it was an early market area in New Orleans.

<sup>24</sup> *Congregazione delle Orsoline* is a Catholic organization founded by nuns in 1535 with the mission to educate young girls. In the course of the centuries the order prospered and created a world-wide network of schools for girls and young women that is now present in every continent.

The city-appointed commission charged with investigating the facts didn't find anything wrong. The chairperson of the commission, who was believed by most to be corrupt, was expelled from the chamber of commerce. The American government was forced to explain to the Italian government that the autonomous sovereignty of the state of Louisiana precluded federal intervention; therefore Washington couldn't even provide that the killers would be tried in court. Diplomatic relations between Italy and the United States were broken for a time; then, the American government paid the puny sum I mentioned at the beginning. In the state of Louisiana, the organizer of the lynching was elected governor. Historians emphasize the fact that, after the massacre, Mafra continued to commit crimes but never attacked the police directly. That is to say: what happened was not right, but at least it was efficient.

The readers are probably asking: what is the point of talking about those sad pages? And who do I think was right: organized crime (that actually did have a fair trial) or those who took the law into their own hands? These are good and heavy questions, and, of course, I have given them a lot of thought. It is a fact that the episode always made a deep impression on me from the moment I found out about it. When I was in New Orleans I searched those places and tried to envision what happened. Nowadays, all is quiet for Italians in New Orleans, although American writers are still talking about it. The impeccable newspaper collection at the public library (with extremely polite service) counts innumerable documents with articles on Mafra updated to today. As far as who was right and who was wrong, I side with Alessandro Manzoni<sup>25</sup> who said that no one has yet invented the knife that can separate exactly right from wrong. For me it is enough to say that this historical episode is to be considered as evidence of the fact that the immigration was a tragedy; that the difficulties of communication among different peoples and races are immense; and that, for sure, humans are not kind to one another; particularly when they gather in

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25 Alessandro Manzoni (1785-18730). Novelist, poet and playwright. He is considered by Italians one of the country's greatest writers. He is best known for his novel *I promessi sposi* (1840) which was instrumental and enormously influential in reforming the Italian language. To this day he is regarded as a master of prose.

groups and don't think for themselves but give in to group thinking. I am saying all these things a bit crudely, and, provisionally.

*New Orleans, January-February 1958*