

EMIGRATION STORIES

Aldic archive – Campania region, Italy

In the section of ALDIC on emigration, there are interviews with migrants and with scholars interested on Italian diaspora, photos and videos from many countries where people from Irpinia and San Mango sul Calore moved. Here, a summary of these stories.

The archive and emigration

Diaspora, flood, exodus, exile. All these words, traditionally used to describe Italian emigration, are an intrinsic part of the history and drama of a phenomenon that over a period of about a century of Italian history (from 1876 to 1976) has involved nearly 30 million Italians. It has become a constant characteristic of the political, social and cultural life of our country and has had important influences on language use. As soon as Italy became a reality, emigration became a part of Italian life. This slow and painful development is reconstructed by the witnesses in our archive: the stories of migrants, on return and from abroad, letters, as well as dictionaries of dialects which are treasure chests of words which, together with other things, emigrants brought back home with them.

Emigration from Irpinia to America in the 19th and 20th centuries

From 1880 there were 1000 departures a year, and these quadrupled by 1900. During these years, the people of Irpinia emigrated mainly to central and southern America and to the cities of Boston (Massachusetts), New York and Stamford (Connecticut).

It was during these years that the overseas colonies of people from Irpinia were formed. One example is the first, from San Mango sul Calore to Stamford, Connecticut, where in 1906 they founded a club called the “Club di San Mango”, which is still in existence today, though the members are all the most elderly and the club is known as “*il clobbo*” even by those who did not emigrate and remained in San Mango. Another community is in Boston; they came from Montefalcione in the early years of the 20th century and kept the feast of Sant’Angelo, the patron saint of Montefalcione, just like the people of the tiny commune in Irpinia.

Emigration from Irpinia after 1945

There was a considerable decrease in emigration between the two World Wars, there being only 25,000 people from Irpinia who challenged the political uncertainties of these years by deciding to

leave the country. But it was soon to pick up again, and the flow began again after the end of World War II, when the Italian government made agreements with some European countries to encourage emigration in order to ease the demographic pressure which in many areas of southern Italy had become unsustainable. Many still remember De Gasperi's suggestion that people should learn foreign languages and emigrate, just as the sadness felt at having no other alternative but to emigrate is still remembered. A certain Franco, for example, like many people of Irpinia, is still moved when he tells the story of having been sold for a gold pound coin; and Antonio thinks he was sold to Belgium for a kilo of coal. During these years, almost everyone living in country towns had a relative who emigrated, someone who kept them informed about the world and who brought back new words and new things. The "mascina", or gramophone, the "cuotti" or "cutti" (American-style coats), the "beche" (bags), and above all the "cecche", that is the cheques that for many people of Irpinia were a precious means of support.

Earthquakes and emigration from Irpinia

Irpinia was to undergo much more suffering even after the decrease in emigration in the 70s. While in other regions of the south and in the nearby provinces emigration gradually saw a reduction, the earthquake of 23 November 1980 caused a new and dramatic exodus. With its 2,735 dead, 8,848 injured and 368,707 displaced persons, the earthquake was a point of no return in the history of Irpinia. Many emigrants returned home to see what had happened, and the scene that awaited them was often devastating. Reactions were very emotional. Never having forgotten their village of origin, many of them were to find that it no longer existed and their houses, a symbol of their memories and of family history, had been raised to the ground. Forever. Efforts by those who had emigrated to rebuild were in many cases of a really practical nature: at San Mango sul Calore, which was one of the villages that had been most badly hit, those who had emigrated to Canada financed the building of the residential complex known as the Italo-Canadian village, those in England the rebuilding of the church cemetery, and those in the United States the new church in the village piazza.

Emigration from Irpinia in recent years

From the time of the earthquake to today, the flow of departures has not dried up, but continues to drain the local workforce and operate a brain drain in many communes of Irpinia. This situation has encouraged new forms of mobility and the creation of *business communities* which are organised and which benefit from the to-and-fro and transnational life which increasingly characterises

contemporary life and many areas of southern Italy which, like Irpinia, are migrant areas par excellence.

Young graduates and others, in fact, still take the same roads as the migrants of the past to the old and to new destinations: apart from the traditional countries such as continental Europe, the United States, and Australia, they now emigrate to China, India and Brazil.

So that now the complex universe of Italian communities abroad is a mixture of young and old emigrants whose experiences are greatly different and perhaps not commensurable, but what they have in common is that they are all the creators and inhabitants of other Italies.

Emigration before Italian Unity

Looking further back, it is clear that emigration played a significant role in the social, political, cultural and linguistic history of our country long before Italian Unity. The migration of individuals and groups has characterised the area from medieval to modern times. In more recent times, we have the many Italian patriots who went into exile during the Risorgimento, their role being a determining one for the unification of the country: Mazzini organised schools for the education of migrants in London; in South America, Garibaldi recruited hundreds of migrants who returned to Italy as ‘garibaldini’ to defend the Roman Republic in 1848-9, and they remained until the Sicilian campaign of 1860.

Emigration from Campania

The hinterland and the coastal areas were not to suffer in any particularly different way simply because of the notable contrast between the coast – the so-called ‘flesh’, wealthier and more industrialised – and the ‘bones’, the interior mountainous area covered with oak and chestnut woods, hardly touched by the process of industrialisation. These were the areas that paid the highest price in terms of expatriation, and during the great emigration the provinces which most felt the crunch were Salerno (from 1876 to 1901) and Avellino (from 1902 to 1913).

Francesco Saverio Nitti and emigration

The exodus was especially dramatic in the regions of the south, which were suffocated by large estates leaving no room for smallholders, as well as widespread poverty. It was Francesco Saverio Nitti who best synthesised the situations: “especially in some of our provinces of the Mezzogiorno, where poverty is widespread and where injustice rules, it is the most disinherited classes which suffer most, and the law is sad and unavoidable: emigrate or become a brigand.”

From Montefalcione to Boston: history of a saint

The people of Montefalcione began to arrive in Boston at the end of the 19th century, and brought with them their dialect, their eating habits, and their saint: Sant'Antonio. The saint has been feasted in this city since 1919; the religious festival, in Boston as in Montefalcione, is celebrated on the last Sunday of August, and, in city and in village, sees the same procession with the statue being accompanied by a band. On both sides of the ocean, therefore, a saint acts as the glue between two communities, the original and the emigrant, who feel one and the same.

Sant'Antonio and the feast of the saints in Bedford (England)

Wherever they went, the Italian emigrants took with them words, objects and traditions. The religious festivals, an expression of profound religious belief and symbol of their wish to maintain links with the community they had left behind in Italy. This is exactly what happened in the English town of Bedford, about 60 kilometres north of London, where since 1951 emigrants from various regions and towns have met, each with their own saint. The immigrants from Montefalcione, Avellino, brought Sant'Antonio, those from San'tAngelo Muxaro, Agrigento, San'Angelo, those from Busso in the province of Campobasso, San Lorenzo, and those from San Ciriaco, in the province of Caserta, San Ciriaco Abate. All these saints are carried in procession, but at a distance of nearly sixty years, the immigrants from each village still continue to kiss and carry on their shoulders only their own saint, and no other.

The emigration of women

During both the great emigration and emigration after World War II, it was mainly men who emigrated. They were often young and had been married for only a few years. Their wives remained at home, "white widows" (wives living alone in the absence of their husbands) whose job it was to work in the fields, look after the family and keep up relations with neighbours and fellow villagers. In many cases, the women followed their husbands abroad, and worked hard in the countries to which they emigrated. Ida, who joined her husband in Bedford, recounts how she worked in a hospital in the morning, washing the floors "on her knees", went home to look after the children, and after dinner in the evening, went out again to do office cleaning. Even when she returned home exhausted, she still had clothes and sheets to wash (without a washing machine).

The story of Ida is typical of the role played by the women who emigrated – stories which are often untold, but fundamental.

Here come the Americans!

In many villages of Irpinia, social life is measured by the time of silence and the solitude of the winter months, when the villages are deserted, and the time of religious festivity in the month of August, when the emigrants return for their annual holiday and the whole community plays out its life around the feast of the patron saint. This is the picture of a community life which has been shattered and whose pieces come together again in August, when the “Americans”, the “English” and the “French” return to the warmth of their families and the procession with the saint, considered by many emigrants as the only way they have to become part again of the life their minds and affections have never left behind. These are the days of the year when the villages resound with the same dialect in every voice, enriched by new nuances.

Depopulation figures

The word ‘desertification’ in relation to Irpinia appears to be an exaggeration and a paradox, but the figures relating to emigration from some Irpinia communes in the demographic picture as a whole suggest very clearly that it is apt. Ever since Italian Unity, in fact, Irpinia has had a rate of emigration resulting in a demographic impoverishment that has been dramatic at the very least. Morra de Sanctis and Salza Irpina, for example, saw their population halved from 1871 to 2007; the population of villages like San Mango sul Calore and Sant’Angelo dei Lombardi was reduced by two-thirds; while that of Greci and Teora was almost 75%.

Brain drain?

The expression *brain drain*, also in everyday speech, describes an aspect of present-day emigration which refers to a considerable number of young graduates or specialists. Some specialists feel that the expression gives a false impression of the contemporary situation. The “drain”, in fact, consists not only of “brains” attracted by the greater opportunities of working at a university or a foreign research centre, and the “professionals” who are unable to find a satisfactory and secure position in Italy, but also “workers” (often skilled workers) looking for a secure and better-paid job than is possible to find in Italy. The “brains” and the “workers” often depart in the same way as others have departed during decades of migration, still linked firmly to their past, and with one member of the family leaving Italy first, followed by others joining him or her.

Influences of emigration on the dialects of Irpinia

In the archive, there are many lexical items on emigration. The study of the lexis of a language enables us to reconstruct the political, economic, and cultural links between peoples near and far, as

well as the ways they influence each other. Irpinian dialects and the dictionaries that have recorded them make it possible to identify some of these influences, such as that which can be traced to emigration. This influence is evident in the new words that dialects acquired. In the dictionary of the dialect of Morra De Sanctis, for example, the entry *legnu*, *-i* is defined as “bastimento (cruise vessel) – when the people Morra departed for America they said they were taking ‘lu légnu’ to cross the ocean, or that they were taking ‘lu vaporu’ (steamship).” But the dictionaries of Irpinian dialects and the speech of their users show a clearer influence: words imported from English by emigrants: *boss* for “capo” (chief), *bisnissu* for “affare” (business), *chenga* from “combriccola” (bunch), all signs of a contamination and circulation of words and things which changed the language and culture of Irpinia.

The experience of emigration: the point of view of those who stayed put

As you walk through many of the communes of Irpinia, you notice that many houses are uninhabited, some rented out, many others up for sale. This is only one of the effects of emigration from the areas of exodus. The mass departures have left indelible signs on human and social history in these parts. For those who stayed put, emigration has meant the depopulation and gradual social and economic death of their villages. The houses are shut and you see the mournful faces of elderly people who tell of times when their village was “full”, when you could leave the door open because you knew someone would come in to say hello or even to dip a piece of bread in the tomato sauce simmering on the stove.

From San Mango to Stamford: history of a community on the move

Having great difficulty in getting used to a metropolis certainly much bigger than the tiny village perched on the mountains that they had left behind, and hearing the strange sounds of the English language, which they found incomprehensible and inevitably unfamiliar, the emigrants often felt lost in this foreign country. Solidarity between fellow villagers who identified with the same dialect, the same customs, the same position as emigrants, was of vital importance. It was for this reason that the various Italian communities set up mutual support associations, often for those from the same village. This was so with the Club di San Mango, set up in 1906 in Stamford; with the help of the club, which from its very beginnings had a stature that is still valid, the immigrants strengthened their sense of community and were able to offer to their fellows, in Stamford as they would have at home, support and assistance.

The young and emigration

Even today, emigration from Irpinia continues, the emigrants being mostly young people, with or without degrees, who can count on a long migration tradition and almost always a relative or friend who is already living abroad and is able to offer useful advice and, when needed, even a job. The new migrants do follow the same old road, but take with them knowledge and competences which their predecessors did not have. They can speak foreign languages, can use the Internet, and by means of mass communications and social networks set up transnational relationships and keep in contact with a simple “click”.

Many of them leave Italy because they are unable to find employment or think they have no future in Italy. Many say that, when abroad, “all you need to do is show your passport and ... they take you on.” Others, however, decide to leave to get to know the world, thinking of it as an adventure, but at the same time convinced that abroad, much more than in Italy, they will discover a way of finding their identity, whether artistic, professional, or simply human. For many of them, being somebody abroad is better than being nobody in Italy.