

# ENCLAVES OF MEMORY

**Michael Immerso**

## **Sons of Italy Parade**

On September 20, 1916, fifteen thousand Italian Americans paraded along Broad Street in an outpouring of pride and patriotism that concurrently celebrated the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Italy's unification, and the 250th anniversary of the founding of the City of Newark. At the head of one of the fraternal lodges was a young girl dressed as Italia, and a little boy depicting Uncle Sam. The Sons of Italy, organizers of the event, chose to present the Italian community in a deliberate manner. Italian flags and floats draped with red, white, and green bunting were twined with American flags and expressions of loyalty to the adopted country and city. The message was clear: we are proud natives of Italy; we are loyal citizens of the United States. And in some ways, the parade can be understood as a high-water mark for Newark's Italian community.

## **Migration: 1880-1920**

The peak period of Italian migration to the United States ran from approximately 1880 to 1920. During those years approximately **four million** Italians immigrated to the United States. The vast majority came from Italy's southern provinces. Newark's several Italian enclaves took shape during these peak years. In 1880 there were 407 Italians residing in the City. By 1910 the number had risen to 20,000 and Newark had the fifth largest Italian population among American cities. By 1920 there were 27,465 Italians living in Newark. The new arrivals called it NEVARCA. They settled in all parts of the city.

## **Newark's Italian Enclaves**

Prior to the great migration of Southern Italians to the United States, a small Northern Italian enclave was located on BANK STREET and Market Street near the Essex County Courthouse. The first Italian parish church was established there in 1887.

The first Southern Italian enclave was established on BOYDEN STREET in 1873. The colony gradually expanded to Quarry Street and Drift Street. It grew to become Newark's Little Italy in the First Ward.

The Italians who settled on Boyden Street, established a second colony on RIVER STREET. It straddled North and South Canal Street and Cherry Street east of McCarter Highway. The enclave was "cleared" of Italians in 1902 when the land was taken by the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The Italian colony in the IRONBOUND began on Monroe Street around 1875. It centered on Ferry Street and grew rapidly. In 1890 the old Dutch Reformed Church became Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church to serve the Italian population. As the colony expanded, Italians moved further into the Ironbound and began to settle near Independence Park. The new Mount Carmel Church on Oliver Street was established around 1955. As the Italians moved away from Ferry Street they were replaced with Portuguese.

The FOURTEENTH AVENUE enclave was in the heart of the City, between Fourteenth and Fifteenth Avenue. It ran from about Hayes Street to Ninth Street and was centered on Saint Rocco's Church on Hunterdon Street. It had a larger concentration of Sicilians than Newark's other Italian enclaves. In March 1900, it was the site of one of the most tragic events in Newark's Italian history -- a tenement fire that claimed fifteen lives.

The City's largest Italian enclave was Newark's Little Italy in the old FIRST WARD. Before Italians arrived, the area north of Boyden Street was the City's Quarry District. It separated Downtown Newark from the sparsely settled Forest Hills. An Irish enclave, that predated the Italian colony, occupied a portion of Eighth Avenue (then called Quarry Street). The Soldiers Home, housing civil war veterans, occupied a large tract of land from between Sixth Avenue and Seventh Avenue, from Mount Prospect Avenue to Wood Street. The first Italians occupied brightly colored frame buildings along Seventh and Eighth Avenues. By 1901, the area had been transformed. The *Sunday Call* called it "the biggest and best Italian colony in New Jersey without exception." Italian masons built the tenements that lined Garside Street, Drift Street, Seventh Avenue, Eighth Avenue, and Stone Street. By 1920 there were 30,000 people residing in the First Ward. Of these, **8,109** were born in Italy. Another 12,000 were the children or grandchildren of Italian immigrants. In 1920 a single block on Garside street, between Sixth and

Seventh avenue housed **1,226** people. All but ten were Italian. Four hundred and forty-six were children below the age of ten.

## **LITTLE ITALY**

Newark's Little Italy in the First Ward was the quintessential Italian neighborhood. Eighth Avenue, the enclave's main artery, and the surrounding streets, were lined with Italian fraternal societies, social clubs, fish markets, and Italian grocers who competed with push-cart peddlers. The enclave had forty-three bakers and pastry shops. But it was best-known for its restaurants -- Vesuvius, the Grotto, Vittoria Castle, Nanina Mari's, Sardella's -- that drew patrons from far and wide. For First Warders it was a point of pride that celebrities like George Raft, Joe DiMaggio, and Benny Goodman came to dine in their neighborhood. But the First Ward truly came alive during the feasts honoring the patron saints of the Italian villages back home: Saint Rocco, Our Lady of the Snows, Our Lady of the Assumption, and Saint Nicolas. The streets surrounding Saint Lucy's Church were illuminated with lights, bands played, there were fireworks, and the saints' statues were carried in procession. Many First Warders vividly recalled the Flight of Angels during the Feast of Saint Michael. The Angels were little girls in white gowns, fitted with harnesses concealed under their wings. They were suspended by ropes attached to the fire escapes. As the procession approached, men on the fire escapes hoisted the angels onto the ropes that stretched from one side of Eighth Avenue to the other. The ropes were drawn with a pulley, so that the angels appeared to fly over the heads of the crowd. The procession halted as the angels cried out "Silencio! Silencio!" and recited a prayer ending with the words: "Viva San Michele! Viva San Michele." The crowd roared, the angels saluted the statue with flower petals, and there was a burst of fireworks. Twenty thousand people took part the procession in 1935 according to the Newark Star-Eagle. Each of the feasts revolved around Saint Lucy's Church which still conducts the Feast of Saint Gerard. It remains a touchstone for displaced First Warders and their families.

In 1953, the First Ward was uprooted by urban renewal. Over 4,600 people were evicted -- their homes were razed. Eighth Avenue ceased to exist. In many ways, the dismemberment of the First Ward traumatized Newark's Italian population.

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Italians and others who lived in ethnic enclaves in Newark in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century believed that their neighborhoods would endure. The Calabrian hill-top towns, and Irish villages they had come from, had existed for centuries. They believed the communities they created would persist. They built brick tenements that housed extended families. They buried their dead and memorialized them in granite. They built monuments to their heroes and named buildings and swimming pools after them.

In various ways, Newark's ethnic groups endeavored to institutionalize their traditions and wed them to their adopted city. German beer gardens and choral societies beget Sanger Hall, Kreuger Auditorium, and Sheutzen Park (which became Electric Park). Jewish cultural life in the Third Ward flourished at the YMHA on High Street and Elving's Yiddish Theater on Montgomery Street. Italians frequented Alfredo Cerrigone's Newark Opera House and the Italian marionette Theater on Seventh Avenue and they listened to broadcasts of "An Evening in Naples" from the Saint Francis Hotel.

Ethnic enclaves were defined by a parish church or a synagogue that reflected distinct cultural norms, and also by the institutions they created. For example: German Hospital, Columbus Hospital, Beth Israel Hospital. All of these cultural and institutional markers reflect a belief in permanence: the idea that something enduring was being created and inscribed in the city's DNA. But it now seems that ethnic enclaves come with an expiration date: perhaps measured in generations, or perhaps decades. There are many reasons for this.

The collapse of the city's industrial base, its aging infrastructure, the city's failure to expand beyond its boundaries, crime, racial tension, and rampant urban renewal --- each contributed to the collapse of Newark's ethnic enclaves. But there is one more factor which I want to address briefly, because it speaks to the current moment.

Our ethnic enclaves were a product of calamity abroad. The Irish fled the potato famine; the Germans came after the failed revolution of 1849; the Jews were escaping persecution and pogroms; Italians sought relief from dire economic hardship. But migrations often wane when calamities abate. They can also be constrained by imposing restrictive quotas.

## Immigration Act of 1924

Between 1905 and 1914, about 216,000 Italian immigrants were arriving in the United States annually. At the same time, opposition to immigration was growing. In 1907, Congress established a JOINT IMMIGRATION COMMISSION. The DILLINGHAM REPORT, produced by the Commission, was released in 1911. It was a blueprint for restricting immigration from Southern European and Eastern European countries, and especially Italian and Jewish immigrants.

Southern Italians comprised over 80 per cent of those entering the country from Italy. The Commission looked favorably on Northern Italians who were described as having a “large admixture of Celtic and Teutonic blood.” Southerners were a “mixed type” in which “Greek, Spanish, Saracen, and other blood is more or less prominent.” Neapolitans, the Report noted, are: “said to incline slightly toward the African or negro type.”

The Commission concluded that the “number of South Italians ... constitutes the real problem. It is generally accepted that the North Italians make a most desirable class of immigrants. They are more progressive, enlightened, and it is claimed are more easily assimilated than their southern countrymen, who, because of their ignorance, low standards of living, and the supposedly great criminal tendencies among them are regarded by many as racially undesirable.”

The Dillingham Report set the stage for the Immigration Act of 1924 which imposed quotas on immigrants based on their nation of origin. The annual quota for Italians was set at 3,845. Similar restrictive quotas were applied to Eastern European and Slavic countries, including Poland and Russia which were sources of Jewish migration.

How can we quantify the impact of restrictive quotas on Newark’s Italian enclaves? For four decades they had been replenished by new arrivals as others departed for different parts of the city or moved beyond its boundaries. The enclaves were a mix of Old World and new. They were constantly in flux. And for many, that Old World Flavor was a point of pride. But in 1924 this abruptly changed. Today, we would call this racial profiling. And I would argue that it had a lasting effect on the city’s ethnic enclaves.

I believe there is a direct link to the experience of the First Ward, the city's largest Southern Italian enclave which was razed by urban renewal in 1953. It is easier to label a neighborhood a slum and displace those who are living there when you have already labelled them "racially undesirable."

Soon after the quotas were enacted, the Great Depression struck; then came Fascism, Stalin, Nazism, the Second World War and the Holocaust. And those who would have sought refuge were blocked from coming. In Italy, 8,000 Italian Jews died in the Holocaust.

## CONCLUSION

The Italians who paraded on Broad Street in 1916 declared themselves descendants of Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, Michelangelo, Dante, and Columbus. But these were men from the North: Florentines. Genoese. Newark's Italian enclaves was built by Southerners. Our forbearers were poor city dwellers. Some were peasants. My great-grandfather, Angelo Esposito, was one of them. The first time he passed through New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty was under construction. It was headless, wrapped in scaffolding. The next time, when he came to stay, the Statue had recently been unveiled. Emma Lazarus's poem, beckoning the "huddled masses" hadn't yet been placed at its base. But the Italian immigrants knew why they had come. They made something here. They have moved on. We remember ... and that is enough.

There will be new calamities.

The city will beckon.

And that is what endures.

***Michael Immerso***

***5/23/2019***