



Millions of Italians, anxious to escape the poverty of their homeland, journeyed by ship to America. During the long voyage, they endured crowded, smelly conditions and poor food.

25.3 Italian Immigrants

When Pascal D'Angelo heard that his father was leaving their poor Italian village to work overseas, he was angry. "America was stealing my father from me," he later said. His mother tried to soothe him, saying that soon Papa would return, "laden with riches." But Pascal begged his father to take him along. His father agreed, and the two of them boarded a steamship bound for the United States.

From Italy to America Like millions of other Italians, Pascal and his father came to America to escape poverty. In the late 1800s, much of Italy, and especially mountainous southern Italy, could not support the country's rapidly growing population. Farmers struggled to eke out a living on worn-out, eroded land where crops too often failed. There were few factories to provide other jobs.

Poor immigrants like Pascal and his father usually made the ocean passage in "steerage." Steerage was a deck, deep in the

ship, that was reserved for the passengers who paid the lowest fares. These passengers were given narrow beds in crowded compartments that smelled of spoiled food, human waste, and sweating people who had nowhere to bathe.

Steerage passengers were allowed on deck only once a day. The rest of the time, they tried to amuse themselves by playing games, singing, and making music with accordions, mandolins, and other instruments.

After almost two weeks, the weary travelers arrived at the immigration station on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. There they had to pass medical examinations and answer questions about how they planned to support themselves in the United States. People who did not pass these inspections could be sent home, even if other family members were allowed to enter. So many families were forced to separate that Italians started calling Ellis Island "The Island of Tears."

Starting a New Life Judged healthy and ready to work, Pascal and his father entered New York City. A fellow Italian, a work agent called a *padrone*, helped them to find jobs building roads. *Padrones* helped many Italian immigrants get unskilled construction work building sewers, subways, and roads, cleaning streets, and laying bricks for new **tenement buildings**.

Nearly half of all Italian immigrants returned to Italy. Most were young men who earned some money in construction or agriculture and then went back home when their jobs ended for the winter. When several co-workers died in a work accident, Pascal's father decided to return to Italy as well. "We are not better off than when we started," he said.

Pascal, however, decided to stay in his new country. He settled in a poor Italian neighborhood in New York, one of the many "Little Italys" that sprang up in American cities. These mostly Italian neighborhoods bulged with residents who could afford only the cheapest tenement housing. Crowded together in tiny apartments, most families had no privacy. The difficulties of their new life led some immigrants to depression and despair.

Fortunately, Italian neighborhoods also offered opportunities for fun. Most Italians were Catholics who celebrated saints' days as they had in Italy. They strung colored lights, flags, and streamers along the shops and streets. Children dashed among booths that offered food and games. Fireworks, music, and dancing reminded everyone of life back home.

Above everything else, Italians valued family closeness. Some Italian parents didn't send their children to school because they feared that learning English would distance their children from the family. Besides, a child in school wasn't earning money to help the family.

As a result, many immigrant children never learned the skills they needed for better jobs.

Because many Italian newcomers were poor and uneducated, Americans tended to look down on them. When a few Italians turned to crime and became notorious gangsters, some people started thinking of all Italians as criminals. As a group, however, Italian immigrants were generally more law-abiding than average Americans.

Some Americans feared that this huge wave of immigrants from Italy would always be poor and illiterate. Pascal D'Angelo was one of many who proved them wrong. After arriving in America, Pascal bought himself a dictionary and learned to read and write English. In time, he became a well-known poet whose work was published in national magazines.

tenement buildings: crowded and usually run-down buildings with many small, cheap apartments



Italian immigrants often moved to "Little Italys" such as Mulberry Street in New York City, shown in the photograph. Here, rents were cheap and living conditions crowded.