

SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

EDWARD L. BERNAYS FOUNDATION LECTURE SERIES
on
EUROPE'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

Address by
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is indeed a privilege to be among the distinguished speakers who have addressed this audience in this series of lectures on Europe's contribution to American civilization. The Edward L. Bernays Foundation deserves great credit for taking part, with such an important project, in the drive toward ever wider horizons for American culture. It is fitting and proper that this task should have been undertaken by such famous an institution of higher education in a city that is the hub of European civilization in the New World.

It is my pleasure to convey to you the cordial greetings of Ambassador Fencaltea who is among the honorary members of the Committee, as well as the expression of his regret for not being able to attend this gathering.

The history of Italy's contribution to American civilization does not really begin with the daring enterprises of extraordinary men such as the Italians who are celebrated among the first arrivals: Christopher Columbus who discovered this continent, Amerigo Vespucci after whom it was named, Giovanni and Sebastiano Caboto, Giovanni da Verrazzano and the others who furthered the exploration of the new world and spread its knowledge back home.

In a broad sense, inasmuch as America benefited through her early settlers from the fruits of century-old western civilization, she is indebted to ancient Greece as well as ancient Rome and, through the middle ages, to Italian Renaissance. Undoubtedly the late President

Kennedy had this in mind when, commenting on the observance of the first centennial of Italian unification in Washington, on March 16, 1961, he said "It is an extraordinary fact in history that so much of what we are and so much of what we believe had its origins in the rather small spear of land stretching into the Mediterranean. All in a great sense that we fight to preserve today had its origins in Italy and earlier than that in Greece ... From the banks of the Tiber rose western civilization as we know it -- a civilization whose traditions and spiritual values gave great significance to western life as we find it in Western Europe and in the Atlantic Community".

In a strict sense, however, Italy's contribution to American civilization must be examined quite apart from the role she sustained in the formation of the cultural patrimony of Europe. For while this contribution was indeed substantial, it reached the shores of your country mainly through other ethnic groups that had already absorbed it and made it their own.

Thus, we must start with Columbus, and mention him again, not so much as the great discoverer, but rather as the symbol of an undisputed leadership the Italians enjoyed in the XV century: the absolute primacy in the art and science of navigation, an essential factor in the discovery as well as the exploration and early colonization of the new world.

Had Italy achieved its unity and independence as did other major European countries -- like Britain, France and Spain -- three or four centuries before it actually did, then the history of colonial America and the Italian role in it would surely have been quite different. Not only navigators and explorers could have claimed and settled new lands in the name of Italy, but -- to say the least -- it would have been much easier to the contemporary historian, and to your lecturer here today,

to trace names and facts illustrating our role.

Available records are scarce and reticent about Italians. Nevertheless, it is ascertained that most of the ship captains and most of the crews under Spanish or French flags were Italians; and so were many of the soldiers accompanying the first discoverers as well as the early missionaries.

A few names stand out: Friar Marco da Nizza, who after having founded several missions in Mexico and Central America, led Coronado's advance party in Arizona. Enrico and Alfonso Tonti; the former was Robert La Salle's second in command in the exploration of the Mississippi, the latter Governor of Detroit. Father Eusebio Chino, a Jesuit missionary who spread religious beliefs and European civilization among the Indians in the south west, in the regions that now form Arizona and Colorado.

How many Italians settled in the United States before the bulk of our emigration came to these shores after the civil war is very hard to establish. They were definitely not many: most of them came through other European countries to which they had previously migrated, or serving in foreign armies, particularly the Spanish army, or as members of the crew of foreign ships. Religion and cost of transportation were among the chief reasons that discouraged a massive Italian immigration.

And yet important groups of Italian craftsmen came straight from Italy since the beginning of the XVII century to teach their trades to the colonists. Virginia was one of the first to invite Italian craftsmen, farmers and glassmakers who proved invaluable for the economic development of that colony. The same happened in Maryland and later in Georgia, where the silk industry was started from scratch by Italian skilled silk workers, as it later happened in other States.

While the Americans fought and won their struggle for independence,

Italy was still divided in many small States. One could, therefore, hardly expect to find any evidence of governmental support to the cause of American revolution, although patriots and thinkers hailed the Declaration of Independence as a source of inspiration and encouragement. Recorded history has but a few Italian names among those who actually fought in the revolutionary ranks: Capt. Richard Tagliaferro distinguished himself in the opening stage of the campaign and was killed on the southern front. In the crucial years of the Revolution, an Italian political philosopher, Filippo Mazzei became a powerful source of inspiration and guidance for the American leaders. A former doctor in the Balkans and a merchant in London, Mazzei had come to Virginia in 1773 to assist his friend Thomas Jefferson in conducting some experiments in agriculture. In Italy and in other countries of Europe, mainly England, he had acquired a solid knowledge of political institutions and developed a strong belief in equality and democratic principles. Mazzei's thought, translated in English by Jefferson, was expounded in a number of articles in the Virginia Gazette, published under the pseudonym of "Furioso". Mazzei rationalized the emotional motivation of the movement of liberation and stirred up the colonists against the British rule, paving the way for the great change. After the revolution broke out, Mazzei returned to Europe to help its cause by propagandizing the ideals and goals of the American struggle for independence. His was undoubtedly a substantial contribution to the successful achievement of your fight for freedom, and Mazzei's name could well be associated with those of the founding fathers of this nation.

Mazzei's contribution of ideas and enthusiasm was matched in the frontier territories by the material contribution of another Italian, Joseph Vigo, a successful fur trader and one of the leading merchants

of the north west. Vigo sacrificed his huge fortune to help support George Rogers Clark's makeshift army against the British, and risked his own life to gather vital intelligence for the American forces.

By the outbreak of the civil war, a little over ten thousand Italians, according to official immigration records, had come to this country settling in many States. How many more were here listed under different nationality status is again difficult to say. Undoubtedly there were numerous political refugees who had sought shelter in this safe haven of freedom. From among these exiles came most of the volunteers who formed an Italian legion that joined the Garibaldi Guard in the fight for the preservation of the Union and the cause of liberty. The Guard, named after our famous hero who at one time found shelter in this country, included officers and soldiers of other nationalities, but its entire command, Colonel Utassi, Lieutenant Colonel Repetti, Major Tinelli, was Italian. Bull Run, Harper's Ferry and Gettysburg are among the battles in which the Garibaldi Guard fought with distinction, suffering a high number of casualties.

Over two hundred officers in the Union army were Italian. Among them, some deserve special mention: Count Luigi Palma di Cesnola (1832-1904), a Piemontese officer and archeologist who became a colonel of the New York Cavalry regiment and a few years later Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Edoardo Ferrero of the 51st New York Regiment, also raised to the rank of Brigadier General and later Major General; Francis Spinola who also became a General during the Civil War and helped to swing the State and the City of New York to the northern cause.

The previous remarks about Italian contribution to the discovery, exploration, colonization and early settlement of the new world, to the birth of this nation and the strengthening of its unity in freedom, had

one simple purpose; that of showing that by the time their massive immigration to the United States began, the Italians could already claim an important, albeit not substantial, role in the life and development of this country.

In the century since the outbreak of your civil war, which corresponds to the first century of our life as a united and independent nation, United States immigration officials have registered five million arrivals of Italian immigrants to your shores. The bulk of them came between 1901 and 1914. The new wave that started after World War II was cut short by the McCarran-Walter act of 1952 and since then there has been an average flow of twenty thousand newcomers per year, which is dwindling now, pending a long overdue liberalization of your immigration laws which would enable a limited number of applicants to reunite themselves with their relative here. However, the economic stimulus to emigrate overseas has lost momentum and what is left is mostly a sentimental drive. Conservative estimates today number to well over ten millions the American of Italian origin, which makes them the third strongest minority group in the United States, after the German and the Irish.

Though relatively newcomers, the Italians managed to overcome huge obstacles and prejudices and quickly adjusted themselves to the new environment, rapidly climbing the economic and social ladder, so that their second generation, thoroughly Americanized, already held leading positions in all sectors of American life, both public and private.

Some traits of their personality were easily generalized by the native Americans who accepted them in their fold. It is generally stated that the Italians come from a land of beauty and fame, song and sunshine, and therefore bring a sunny temperament not easily soured by hardship and disappointments. They do not restrain themselves, but

express their emotion and their quick and lively imagination. Quick of wit and intuition, with good humor and gusto, they get a little honest fun where others see only gloom. This rather oversimplified cliché has been variously completed by other characteristics that American society is inclined to attribute to the Italian elements in its midst: such as native politeness, an innate tendency to logic and realism, a strong sense of family bonds, and so forth. I shall naturally skip the negative qualities, for there is no consensus about them.

Industry was naturally the first target of the newcomers, who accepted hardship and low pay and, irrelevant of their skills, filled jobs whenever unskilled labor was needed. Their contribution proved vital to the implementation of great projects throughout the country at a time when manpower for such heavy jobs was short. They helped the United States industry to maintain its high rate of growth and laid the solid foundations of today's prosperity.

The number of Italians who settled on farm land was comparatively small, even though the majority of immigrants had a peasant background. Yet, their contribution to American agriculture was of great value, not only in specialized sectors like vineyards and orchards, but also in showing that hard work, perseverance and patience could achieve sizeable results also in barren lands.

Business and banking afforded interesting fields for the development of Italian ingenuity and courage to the benefit of their new American fatherland. May I just mention one instance, the Bank of America, founded by Amedeo P. Giannini, son of an Italian immigrant. Started as "that little Dago Bank" on San Francisco's North Beach, today it has become the largest financial institution in the United States.

Quite obviously, Italian inventiveness and quick intuition were

sometimes in the past turned to evil purposes, favored by the environment they found in some large American cities, undergoing a process of sophistication which was completely alien to our national traits. In this connection, however, it is fitting to stress that the number of Americans of Italian extraction engaged in law enforcement agencies and serving in the courts of law exceeds by far the proportion of the Italian element in the American population as a whole. The same applies with regard to public service and the armed forces. Nearly six hundred thousand American of Italian descent fought in World War II and in Korea.

It is certain that in the field of artistic endeavor the Italian impact on American civilization has been felt very keenly. Directly or indirectly, it contributed to a large degree to shape the aesthetic taste of the nation. In music and painting, in sculpture and in the performing arts, the Italian influence found fertile ground in this country. Last, but not least, I will mention the field of science where the Italians have made a substantial contribution to the progress and prestige of America, particularly in the last three decades.

"The Italian Navigator has safely landed in the new world and the natives are friendly". With these words, corresponding to a prearranged code, on December 2, 1942, Professor Compton announced from Chicago by telephone to the President of Harvard that the first man made and man controlled self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction had been successfully completed. The man who had achieved such an accomplishment was an Italian scientist, Enrico Fermi, Nobel prize winner in 1938, the year in which he left Italy to seek here security for his Jewish wife. His achievement was by far the greatest individual contribution ever made to human progress and to American civilization. That experiment was the necessary premise to the construction of the atom bomb at Los Alamos

where Fermi was also working, even though the Manhattan project itself was under the direction of another scientist. I hardly need stressing that, even though the war effort demanded at that time the swift utilization of Fermi's discovery for the construction of a fearful instrument of war, his controlled chain reaction has laid the foundations for all future production of clean nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Other outstanding scientists of Italian extraction have been working here since the war and among them I should like to mention another Nobel prize for physics, Emilio Segre.

From Columbus to Fermi, over a span of exactly four and a half centuries, Italy and the United States have been brought closer together by an increasingly intense exchange of men and ideas.

The Atlantic Ocean, conquered by the daring enterprise of the Great Navigator, has soon ceased to be a barrier between the old and the new world to become a bridge. Long before Italy took its place among the free and independent nations of the Western family, thousands of Italians, famous and obscure, crossed that bridge to these shores. They helped to build a strong and prosperous America and made it their home. Today they represent a living and solid pledge of friendship that our countries hold as the best guarantee of their future cooperation in the world arena. Bound as they are by the Atlantic Alliance, Italy and the United States are engaged in building a true community of Atlantic nations, based upon an equal partnership between America on the one side, and a united democratic Europe on the other. This determination was solemnly reaffirmed three weeks ago, on the occasion of the official visit of our President in Washington.

As I said at the start of this talk, the history of Italy's contribution to the new world did not start with Columbus, nor did it

come to an end with Fermi. In paying tribute to the Italian Prime Minister visiting New York in June 1961, the then Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson said:

"Three times has Italy shown mankind the way to greatness. For long centuries men looked to Rome for the blessings of law and order. For even longer centuries men looked to Rome, as they still do, for the consolation and inspiration of religious faith. In the last century, when national independence became the great ideal, it was Italy once again that provided the leadership"... "Italy is not a monument to the past; it is a glory to the present and a guide to the future."