

Battista Pezzoni, age 35, born in "Molegno,"
died at Monongahela

By Pier Luigi Milani

To return to the Cemetery of Monongahela, the little city south of Pittsburgh where about a hundred families from the Camonica Valley emigrated between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth is a truly emotional experience. The cemetery is a park on a hill immersed in green. To wander among the austere graves looking for names from our valley (the Camonica Valley) (or from our province of Brescia) induces silence and respect; it moves our thoughts, pressing them against these times, so far away and yet so close, in which about a thousand of our ancestors left the Alpine Valleys, impoverished from mortality of vine (fillossera) from the crises of the awkward transitions in the extraction (mining) industry and in ironmaking, and from the backward and suffocating socio-economic relationships to look for a way out (at times, to look for the simple possibility of eating a meal) in a wage-earning job. Some of the best paid jobs then available were in the coal mines owned by Germans, the Dutch, the Scottish, etc.



In those times, no one was selling land to the "Italians," Terry Necciai has told me (great grandson of a coal worker from Montecatini); the Italians would only be able to be manual laborers; Bob McVicker (son of a certain Dorina Turretti, surely from the Camonica Valley) has written to me from Buffalo that in that era "it was considered inappropriate for an Anglo-Saxon to marry an Italian immigrant." It really makes a mockery of the history of mankind to consider how the Italians now treat the immigrant workers [who are now immigrating into Italy to do the manual labor jobs the Italians won't take]. Many of our ancestors "left us their feathers" in that land; some in coal mining accidents (as that of the Cincinnati Coal Mine of Monongahela in which 97 persons perished, among them a Felix Donina, a Giuseppe Donati, a Maurizio Melotte, a Battiste Polanienli, a Giacomo Roncatti, and a Giacomo Zannati, all surnames that were clearly of Brescian origin), others because of diseases [Pier Luigi Milani's grandfather died at Monongahela during the Spanish Flu Epidemic; he had worked in the mines in here for several years, but his wife and children had remained in Italy], others fighting for "America" in the various wars in which the USA involved itself, others simply dying of old age. It was an era in which Francesco Venzi from Vilminore di Scalve (an immigrant into the same area [he was from near the Camonica Valley & emigrated to the Greensburg area; Pier Luigi Milani has a typescript of Venzi's letters home to his wife]) wrote to his wife that "If the fatherland closes its doors to me, I will join a family here, which is a fatherland without bloodlines, and also more civil."

Turning toward the graves brings to mind the [poem] "Sepuchres" of Ugo Fascolo "to egregious things, the urn of the strong ones ignites the strong spirits-and beautiful and sacred-they make a pilgrim of the very earth that receives them." Which is to say: to be "strong" of security, these ancestors of ours departed from villages where one speaks almost solely the dialect of that particular village (and few of them knew how to read and write) to go hunting [for jobs] in a place where they mangle all the vowels, and even the English is very different from the language spoken on the isle across the channel. A land where they all flow together-people of every type, nation, religion, habit, and custom. The twenty or so churches (of twenty different professions of faith) that still hang on in Monongahela alone (5,000 inhabitants) are living testimony of the crucible of ethnicities and cultures that has given life to the United States, "Big Brother of the West."

Battista Pezzoni [the first name is a variation on "John the Baptist"], born in Malegno and died over there at a young age (we're not sure how and why) was one of those strong and courageous ones, as were the dozens of people named Vaira, Troncatti, Partesana, Domenighini, Bellecini, Moreschi, Castagna, Corbelli, Guarinoni, etc., that jump from the gravestones of various cemeteries in Monongahela, Donora, Charleroi, Monessen, etc. (or that one finds in the Mon Valley Phone Book). The research is not all that easy. One has to consider that in the United States, the married women lose their original surnames, and therefore one doesn't find any more traces on the tombstones because their names have been replaced by those of their husband. In the city hall there is no registry of births, marriages, and deaths. The information on births you have to search for in various parishes, and that on the marriages, in the courts. Also for death certificates, you have to search in a multiplicity of agencies and funeral home records. For deeper investigations, the situation becomes extremely complicated.

One would at least like it if we could get a scholarly stipend for a systematic survey. But will the Camonica Valley fulfill this little gesture of dutiful homage to our ancestors?

For its part, the America I have seen is in certain ways reassuring and in others alarming. In provincial America (the thing they call "Main Street"), life is surely more tranquil and relaxed than ours here. Almost no one lives for the cell phone, or rather, almost no one has one. The houses are well-cared-for but simple. (My pocket electronic translator was looked at as a surprising novelty, in spite of the fact that it was made in America). The people greeted each other intimately in the streets. Everyone respects the rigorous speed limits, the stop signs, and the traffic lights. When the school bus stops for a pick-up, or when it is letting out students, all the automobiles stop and no one dreams of "fighting it out on the sidewalk" as they see us doing here. But Middle America is "impoverishing" to the eye. It seems like a paradox, but it is so. The small towns and the suburbs of the city are an in terminable chain of closed and abandoned stores, "killed" by mega-shopping-centers that, sooner or later, are arriving here among us (if someone doesn't come up with a more intelligent solution). Also, the dominant floors of the office buildings are "available," offered wherever for sale or rent (with signs that say "For Rent" or "For Sale"), but in many cases, apparently without success. The prices collapse, but what's the sense in opening an office where no one comes by any more. On the other hand, in the malls (now open 24 hours) one finds everything and at reduced prices. Everything is therefore made (and we could only hope with America's "permission") outside the United States: "Made in China," Made in Thailand, Indonesia, The Phillipines, Haiti, Mexico-even in Italy.

Thus disappears the manufacturing industry, and one can hardly understand how these people live. The strong dollar makes buying possible. Gasoline costs 700 lire per liter [in Italy, gasoline costs about four times as much as it does in America]. But if the situation changes? Deena Alansky, daughter of a Polish Jew and a Russian refugee (whose family was exterminated at Auschwitz), with one German grandmother and one Hungarian grandmother, a webmaster by profession, tells there's little work and that she will probably move away from Pittsburgh, the city she loves, because "it's very depressing." Jeff Guarinoni (great grandson of a Severo Guarinoni) instead wanted to know about Italy and about how they live in the land of his ancestors. Jeff works in a steel mill. He wanted to know what happens to us when the company wants to get rid of someone. I am more than a little exhausted from (trying to) explain that in Italy, as opposed to the United States, there is a law that prevents firing someone in the absence of just cause. (in response to him, I was wondering therefore if I would know how to stay that way [employed] by the time I get back home). The streets, the houses, even the inhabitants are full of flags with the stars and stripes. (It's a genuine obsession). But none of the people with whom I have spoken have more than vaguely indicated anything to me about the imminent September 11th anniversary. I have noted in everything a sort of removal of the subject. "God Bless America" one reads a little everywhere, but which America will God protect? That of the liberty of cohabitation and of civil rights, or that of multi-nationals and of global warfare, preventive and permanent, theorized by President Bush?

The United States (above all the other states across the Atlantic Ocean) are full of Italians, but few of them know much of anything about their origins. Many have visited Rome, Sorrento, Capri, Venice, etc., and have a (rosy?) idea of Italy: they eat well, simple people, beautiful monuments. Luigi Guarinoni (85 years old) is moved every time he repeats to me in English that his father Severo did not want him to learn to speak Italian. In that day, the Italians were discriminated against, and many of them changed their surnames. Dominic Pesognelli seemed amused as he told me that he knows a family whose surname was "Bianchi" and that they changed it to "White" (which is what Bianchi means in Italian). He instead clings to his rediscovered roots, and at eighty years has learned to speak our language again and also a little bit of dialect. Lucy Vaira, ninety-four-year-old sister of John Moreschi (who was mayor of Monongahela for about 20 years), instead still speaks the "Camuno" dialect, and to have filmed her represents a real find, a piece of the culture of the Camonica Valley that stands up against the breaking waves of restless America.

The Historical Society of Monongahela makes a good showing of itself along the main thoroughfare of the city, but it is closed and idle as it was two years ago. Maybe there among the bookcases and old armoirs, photographs and documents survive on a historical period from which precious little information has come to us, tattered by the events of two world wars and the ravages of time. There will be someone who will find time and passion for investigation of the whole field of this story.

Questo testo, tradotto (così come il titolo) da Terry Necciai a beneficio dei lettori americani del libro, è stato scritto Pier Luigi Milani (e già pubblicato sul periodico "Graffiti") come riassunto e riflessione sui suoi recenti viaggi in America.