

Early praise for *The Unknown Internment*:

"An intelligent and important study of a neglected subject."

—John Morton Blum, Yale University

"[*UnCivil Liberties*] adds fascinating new pieces to the puzzle of American wartime concentration camps. It is tragic history told by survivors in poignant anecdotes."

—John Christgau, author of *"Enemies": World War II Alien Internment*

"By utilizing interviews and widely-scattered records, Fox has brought to life the completely neglected [relocation] of an entire national group during World War II. Those of us who have written histories of Italians in America have dealt with this episode, but only in a sketchy way. Bravissimo!"

—Andrew Rolle, Occidental College

"A first-rate work of research in oral history that recaptures the poignant emotions of a people whose experience would have been forgotten had it not been for the sensitive scholarship of Stephen Fox."

—John Patrick Diggins, University of California, Irvine

Stephen Fox

***Un*Civil Liberties**

***Italian Americans Under Siege during
World War II***

*UnCivil Liberties:
Italian Americans Under Siege during World War II*

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SERIES EDITOR'S NOTE

THE *UNKNOWN INTERNMENT* [the original title of this work] powerfully demonstrates oral history's ability to challenge common assumptions. Scholars have taken for granted that the federal government, when it moved to relocate and confine thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II, took no action against German and Italian Americans. Yet through his interviews and then through archival research, Stephen Fox has discovered the existence of a government program to relocate Italian Americans in California—a program briefly implemented, quickly rescinded, and largely forgotten. In no way did government actions against Italian Americans compare in magnitude with the Japanese [relocation]s, but both resulted from the same wartime hysteria. The painful, long-suppressed memories that Fox has elicited in these interviews serve as a reminder of the fragility of the civil liberties of all people in a time of national crisis and the need for greater resolve against appeals to nativist impulses.

Historians since Herodotus have interviewed eyewitnesses to great events, but twentieth-century technology provides the opportunity for more widespread and systematic collection of oral history. First on wax cylinders, then with wire-recorders, reel-to-reel and cassette tape recorders, and video cameras, modern interviewers have captured an enormous quantity of reminiscences, from presidents to pioneers, literati to laborers.

Oral history may well be the twentieth century's substitute for the written memoir. In exchange for the immediacy of diaries or correspondence, the retrospective interview offers a dialogue between the participant and the informed interviewer. Having prepared sufficient preliminary research, interviewers can direct the discussion into areas long since "forgotten," or no longer considered of consequence. "I haven't thought about that in years," is a common response, uttered just before an interviewee commences with a surprisingly detailed description of some past incident. The quality of the interview, its candidness and depth, generally will depend as much upon the interviewer as the interviewee, and the confidence and rapport between the two adds a special dimension to the spoken memoir.

Interviewers represent a variety of disciplines, and work either as part of a collective effort or an individual enterprise. Regardless of their different interests or the variety of their subjects, all interviewers share a common imperative: to collect memories while they are still available.

Most oral historians feel an additional responsibility to make their interviews accessible for use beyond their own research needs. Still, important collections of vital, vibrant interviews lie scattered in archives throughout every state, undiscovered or underutilized.

Twayne's Oral History Series seeks to identify those resources and to publish selections of the best materials. The series lets people speak for themselves, from their own unique perspectives on people, places, and events. But to be more than a babble of voices, each volume will organize its interviews around particular situations and events and tie them together with interpretive essays that place individuals into the larger historical context. The styles and format of individual volumes will vary with the material from which they are drawn, demonstrating again the diversity of oral history and its methodology.

Whenever oral historians gather in conference they enjoy retelling experiences about unusual individuals they met, unexpected information they elicited, and unforgettable reminiscences that would otherwise have never been recorded. The result invariably reminds listeners of others who deserve to be interviewed, provides them with models of interviewing techniques, and inspires them to make their own contribution to the field. I trust that the oral historians in this series, as interviewers, editors, and interpreters, will have a similar effect upon their readers.

—Donald A. Ritchie, Series Editor *Senate Historical Office*

Any strictly rational approach to history distorts it as much as a road map distorts reality. The most sophisticated theories of why what happens suffer from a flat-earth syndrome; missing are the dimensions of fear, centuries of hate gathering in poisoned pools, the darkness of bigotry, ignorance, despair. The irrational, by definition, eludes the reasoned unraveling of causal connections, slips through the mesh of logic, and locks men into its own version of the truth.

—Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka*

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FOREWORD TO THE REVISED EDITION

THIS EDITION INCORPORATES minor factual and editing changes, but the most significant alteration is the title. Inadvertently, the previous title, *The Unknown Internment* and some of the original content—clarified throughout this version—contributed to the confusion between “relocation” and “internment.” The new title, of course, *UnCivil Liberties*, plays with words and ideas that give the story its meaning in the largest sense. Although the revised edition includes a reorganized chapter on individual internment and exclusion, the book remains primarily the untold story of the *relocation* of several thousand West Coast Italian Americans for a brief period at the outset of World War II. Since 1990, the original publication date, I have looked more thoroughly at internment and exclusion, and I report those findings in *America’s Invisible Gulag* (New York, 2000).

President Bill Clinton signed the “Wartime Violations of Italian American Civil Liberties Act” (PL 106-451) on November 7, 2000. It gave the Justice Department a year to account for the government’s internment, exclusion, and other harassment of Italian Americans, which it did. But the report is far from complete. In all likelihood, we will never know the exact number of relocated Italian Americans; legally, the Justice Department did not have to count them. The best evidence is that the relocation order of February 1942 affected eight to ten thousand enemy aliens—Italians, Germans, and Japanese. The number of individual citizens and aliens of Italian ancestry whom the army *excluded* is hardly more precise. On the West Coast, according to a wartime report, exclusion orders were issued to eighty-eight naturalized Italians and an unknown number of aliens, as well as to some of the sixty-nine East Coast exclusions and some of the sixteen exclusions within the Southern Defense Command. (The government’s 2001 report, which it admits is incomplete and does not incorporate available scholarship, lists only fifty-nine Italian Americans as either excluded or arraigned before individual exclusion boards.) As for individually *interned* Italians, the Immigration and Naturalization Service says that it detained 3,278, including voluntary internees and those deported to the United States from Latin America. The Justice Department reports having interned 418 of them for varying lengths of time.

—McKinleyville, California, June 2002

FOREWORD

MARTINI BATTISTESSA. Giuseppe Mecheli. Stefano Terranova. Giovanni Sanguenetti. During five days in mid-February 1942, these elderly Italian men in the San Francisco Bay Area took their own lives. Along the north coast, near Eureka, the ocean simultaneously gave up the bodies of two Germans, Max Pohland and George Heckel. Their despair had matched that of the Italians. Why?

SOME YEARS AGO an older student in my World War II class, who had lived in the area in 1942, asked if I knew that the government had forced Italian and German aliens to move out of the waterfront areas of Arcata and Eureka, California, during the war. “No,” I said incredulously, “only that the West Coast Japanese had been relocated.” But it occurred to me that if I, a professional historian, did not know about the other removal, probably few others did either.

A quick trip to the library proved my student correct: Italian and German enemy aliens had been relocated in 1942, but with the exception of the aliens and their families, no one I spoke to in the next few years had heard of the policy. A letter to the editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the spring of 1988, from a woman who condemned the treatment of the Japanese in 1942 and supported their compensation, typified this void. “German Americans were not interned [or] restricted in any way,” she wrote. “No one suggested similar treatment [to that of the Japanese] for the German Americans because they were Caucasian.” I checked on books about the home front. One said simply, “Those [Italians and Germans] affected [by relocation or internment] found physical movement and employment opportunities limited.” Another writer wrote that the Italian Americans were the objects of a “mild loyalty scare.” And the Justice Department in 1942 described the restrictions as “irritating” but not too “confining.”¹

Why was it done? West Coast Italians and Germans faced nothing like the racial animosity borne by the Japanese, and Italy and Germany posed no realistic military threat to that coast. Did the government seriously believe that moving European enemy aliens a few blocks from the waterfront would lessen the danger to strategic areas and defense installations? Were they relocated because some Italians still professed a love for their homeland, spoke only Italian, read only Italian newspapers, listened

to Italian short-wave broadcasts, had never become American citizens, or bragged that “Mussolini made the trains run on time”? Yes, in part. For a brief time, such indiscretions were taken seriously in California, where many people distrusted the Italians and Germans as much as they did the Japanese. But more fundamentally, officials panicked, and when they came to their senses they reached the practical conclusion that they could not possibly finish what they had started without doing irreparable harm to the war effort.

Before the American naval victory at Midway in June 1942, authorities in California and Washington, D.C., were under intense pressure to do something to prevent alien sabotage and espionage. These demands came from every level of officialdom and every corner of California. Contrary to opinion today, Italian and German aliens and their families were viewed as genuine threats to American security, a fact that soon moved politicians and the military to relocate them away from designated strategic locations along the West Coast. Later, the military came very close to relocating the European aliens on the East Coast as well. Additionally, several hundred Italians and Germans—including American citizens—found themselves either interned in guarded army camps in the interior of the country or excluded from all U.S. coastlines at least 150 miles. Policy-makers had been stampeded by a combination of bad news from the war front and the public’s—as well as their own—worst instincts. At the White House, the war and electoral politics took priority over humanistic concerns. But to be fair, with their army and navy on the run across the Pacific, those in Washington acted instinctively rather than reasonably.

Some authorities panicked more than others. In the War Department, which eventually wrested control of the alien program from an unenthusiastic Justice Department, a contest of wills developed between the men around Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and army officers in California whose primary responsibility, as they saw it, was to defend the Pacific Coast. Once convinced that going beyond alien relocation would be a disaster, it took Stimson’s men three additional months to bring the reluctant soldiers around. If they interned hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of Italians and Germans, it would tax the army’s over-extended logistical network, threaten the country’s defense industries, and lower civilian morale to a dangerous level. Why only the Japanese were relocated is one of the most important questions answered in this book. There is compelling evidence that when the size of the Italian and German populations nationwide were reckoned, the Japanese aliens by default became the only available scapegoats for a policy that

originally the public demanded—and the government intended—be applied to *all* enemy aliens.

While this bureaucratic debate raged, the relocation of the Italians and Germans began—unrecorded and little noticed outside the affected communities—two months *before* the well-known roundup of all Japanese Americans began. Relocation broke up families, interrupted education, forced bread winners to find new employment and new homes (in many cases families had to maintain two residences), resulted in individual internment for petty violations, lowered the aliens' self esteem, and, in general, heightened their anxiety about what lay ahead.

In marked contrast to the government's meticulous and voluminous record keeping in the case of internees and the relocated Japanese, the archives are eerily silent about the experiences of Italian and German aliens during the four to eight months they were kept away from their homes and jobs. While the decision to relocate the Italians and Germans is recorded in cold, impersonal detail, the documents report nothing about the effects of the policy on its victims. Apparently, the authorities hoped no one was looking. From government records we learn only that on February 15 and 24, 1942, for reasons of "military necessity," approximately ten thousand enemy aliens were prohibited residence and work in, or travel to, specified restricted zones along the coast. That on June 27, 1942, the government, realizing that what it had done in February was a mistake, permitted Italian and German aliens to return to their homes and jobs in the restricted zones. And that finally, on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, as the Americans readied their fateful plunge into the Mediterranean and the country honored its most famous Genoese citizen, Italian aliens were removed from the enemy alien category.

Government documents do not even reveal that the aliens actually moved. Were they told where to go, and by whom? Did they return home when the restrictions were lifted or months later? Was any effort made to let them know they could return? How did they make it economically? Did the government accept any financial responsibility? What *was* the human cost of panic? And what about the cost to the nation's self image?

It seemed clear that to answer such questions I would have to ask the victims: "What did you do?" "What did relocation mean to your life, to your family, to your future?" "What did you *feel*?" Surprisingly, their attitudes were not uniformly negative. For those who had sons in the armed forces, those who were interned, those whose family responsibilities increased as a result of the relocation, or those who lost property, the experience was difficult and has left a legacy of bitterness. But they endured—most of them. For others, it was a matter of adjusting to a new

way of life, or a better life. Most—crying and laughing at the same time—accepted their fate as the consequence of a war that threatened their adopted homeland. But they understood—some admitted: “It was necessary.”

Still, nearly all thought it was silly—“crazy”—for anyone to believe that they were saboteurs or spies, or that moving only the aliens and not naturalized Italians and Germans across the street—as regulations in some cities required—could possibly deflect the destructive intent of dedicated Fascists or Nazis. As one non-Italian explained: if the Italians really wanted to raise hell, the best way to do it would be for them to become citizens and thereby gain access to the waterfront. Apparently, the government believed that people who had lived peaceably and productively for twenty or thirty years, raised their children, educated them, and sent them off to places like Pearl Harbor and Wake Island would be deterred from sabotage by their oath to a piece of one 150-year-old parchment. It was, as they say, “the times.”

“We’re the ‘aliens’ now,” one Italian told his son in 1942, “but the Russians will be next.” What happened to the Italians and Germans in 1942 was part of the dress rehearsal for the McCarthy purges of the 1950s, precisely because in this case the aliens were targeted not for racial but for ideological reasons. In the fifties the FBI and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) found it easier to compile lists of aliens, and the army, similarly, to build concentration camps for domestic enemies because it had all been done before—in 1942. At what cost to the democratic spirit, this obsession with national security?

What gives this story poignancy and irony, and elevates it beyond locale is its theme: betrayal. But it is not simply about aliens who might betray their adopted country or nativists who betrayed the aliens’ trust. It is also that native-born Americans betrayed themselves and their professed values. They turned their backs on perhaps the most central of their country’s democratic faiths: faith in the idea of America itself. It is one of the ironies of World War II that the patriots who championed the country’s entry into the war had so little confidence in the promise of the America, which they were prepared to defend with American blood in every corner of the globe. Not so, however, the editors of *Colliers* magazine, who refused to go along with the wildly popular Fifth Column fantasy, and instead lectured their panicky countrymen and women that “our Italians” were not about to “carve up our government and hand it to Mussolini on a spaghetti-with-meatballs platter.”³² It is time to retire the notion of a Fifth Column in the United States during World War II. None of the anxiety widely reported in the popular and academic presses and gobbled up by gullible government officials and the citizenry was

justified by any reality. The imagined legions of dedicated domestic enemies of democracy simply did not exist.

THE STORY OF the wartime relocation and internment of civilians on the West Coast, which to date (1988) has focused entirely on the Japanese, cannot be completed without adding to it the trials faced by the Italians and Germans. But it should not be thought that what happened to Italians and Germans on the West Coast was comparable to what happened to the Japanese; relocated Italian and German aliens and their families knew no Manzanar, no Heart Mountain, no Tule Lake, and no so-called fire sales. Certainly, nothing in the pages that follow is intended in any way to brush aside the severity and cruelty of what the Japanese faced. But this work is frankly revisionist in its analysis of the rationale behind relocation, and in *principle* there was no difference in policy. Were the authorities more principled, for example, because they relocated the Italians and Germans a few blocks or a few miles instead of putting all of them in camps? Or, to put it another way, did the authorities adhere more rigorously to the rights of Italians and Germans whom they relocated because of their nationality than they did to the rights of the Japanese who were relocated because of theirs? Were the authorities acting on principle when they stopped short of putting Italians and Germans in relocation camps simply because they discovered there were more of them than there were Japanese? What if the situation had been reversed? What if there had been millions of Japanese scattered throughout the country and only a few thousand Italians and Germans clustered in California, and they were put away instead? Could it then be argued that the Italians and Germans were treated differently, in principle? In compensating the Japanese financially, have Americans resorted to principle? To conscience? Or to political expediency? What price can be put on one's dignity and pride? Were the psyches of loyal Italians and Germans seared any less than those of the Japanese by the label "enemy alien"?

If history provides any lesson in this case, it is that patriotism must have something to do with faith in the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights—principles that native Americans expected the aliens to learn, and yes, to die for in 1942. This story shows again—and the repetition seems necessary—that it is possible for a nation like the United States, proud of its traditions of democracy, individual liberty, and fair play, to come near to losing its soul in a time of crisis, even during a "good war." This, of course, does not mean that the virtues of the United States go unappreciated among its critics. But Americans must always be conscious of the gap between history and myth, ever vigilant in defense of liberty while continuing to build on

and to strengthen the foundations of freedom. It also means that Americans, as they have in the past, will continue to face difficult choices in moments of crisis when the temptation to run with the mob will doubtless be overpowering. There, it seems to me, is a role for history, to serve as a national conscience, to give us pause, not during the heady days of summer, sunshine patriotism, but during the cold, dark winter of national crises.

THERE ARE THREE principal sources for the information in this book: government documents, newspapers, and interviews with the Italians or their surviving family members, from Humboldt Bay in northern California to Monterey Bay in mid state. I tape-recorded each interview, then obtained an approval from subjects for a final edited draft. Two years after our conversation, one man chose to rewrite those portions of his interview that appear here. Alfredo Ciopolato, whom I could not visit personally, answered my questions in a detailed letter. I asked each person a few standard questions having to do with their background and experience, but for the most part our conversations were free-flowing rather than structured so that the interviewees could relax and express themselves spontaneously and candidly. Researchers can find the tape-recorded interviews on deposit at the Bancroft Library on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley.

I began this project intending to document the experiences of the Italians *and* Germans, but limitations of time and money forced me to choose between them. Moreover, for reasons that are not entirely clear, though most likely having to do with the strong sense of community among California's Italians, they proved easier to locate than the Germans. I do not believe that interviews with Germans—were they possible—would alter my conclusions appreciably. I have provided documentary evidence and newspaper reports about the Germans—particularly the political refugees—as a basis for comparing their experiences with those of the Italians. I believe that what happened to these Italians and their families, varied as they are, accurately mirror those of the 10,000 persons relocated. Nothing in official records or newspapers suggests otherwise.

The documents come largely from the microfilmed collection of government files gathered from scattered locations after 1981 by the U.S. Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, and from congressional hearings and reports.

There was a fourth source: luck. I got the name of my first interviewee from our department secretary, whose mother happened to be Italian. Interviewees, in turn, added other names. I scanned newspaper obituaries and contacted surviving relatives of deceased relocatees. One phone

call to a man of Irish descent in Monterey, whose name came from another Monterey man, whose name I got in Arcata from a friend who knew someone at the Monterey County Board of Education, opened some doors there. I learned the names of other potential interviewees after the campus student newspaper did a story on one of our maintenance men, who happened to be an Italian American from Monterey. And so it went. But for every door that opened, three were politely shut. People said they did not want to see me because, "That thing happened a long time ago. Let sleeping dogs lie." But the curious historian doesn't let sleeping dogs lie. So I dedicate this book to those who opened their doors, and I hope that readers will share vicariously the warmth of feeling and wealth of experience that I discovered in that community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY THANKS TO the Humboldt Foundation, whose financial assistance permitted me to transcribe some of the interviews. Erich Schimps shepherded me through our library's labyrinthine document section. Sherry Gordon of the interlibrary loan office tracked down all the sources that could not be found locally. The staffs of the Pittsburg and Monterey Public Libraries, the California State Library, the California State Archives, and the Doe and Bancroft libraries on the campus at the University of California, Berkeley provided professional assistance.

Dee McBroom typed scores of letters and handled the details of obtaining permissions from the interviewees. Jackie Mottaz transcribed the interviews, shortening the project by months, perhaps years. Several of the people I interviewed, as well as friends, provided valuable leads and encouragement: Santo Alioto, John Anderson, Alessandro Baccari, Jr., Frank Buccellato, Stephanie Cincotta, Peter Coniglio, Joe Dolan, Anita Maiorana Ferrante, Mario Flores, Murl Harpham, Lee Hawkins, Lawrence Lazio, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Lazio, Al Massei, Bill McClendon, Peter McNair, Judy Satterlee, Vitina Spadaro, and Fr. Gabriel Zavattaro. John Hennessy, Sam Oliner, Rod Sievers, and Roy Sundstrom read the entire manuscript at a time when it was least convenient for them, and I am grateful for their suggested improvements. John Gimbel, a true scholar-teacher, inspired and encouraged by example.

Each of my sons showed interest in the project in different ways, Kevin by asking from time to time, "How's the book coming, Dad?" and by giving invaluable computer assistance. Chris, a bit more practical, approached it this way: "How much money will you make?" Françoise knows how important her support has been throughout, not the least being that she took a leave from her job to assist me on a research trip after I had a serious accident. This book simply would not be without her encouragement when my energy flagged, her patience and confidence in the absence of my own, and her sound editorial advice.

ONE

“One does not melt souls” Italian American Assimilation

If present-day America does not seem to present the picture of a happily integrated humanity that she might, blame the hasty and mechanical concept of the melting pot. A day will come when the American people will fuse together spiritually and culturally, and isolated groups of Italians, Germans, and Irish within the commonwealth will be only a memory. But this will be, not because these groups have repudiated their origins, but because they have felt the supreme moral beauty of a new nationality whose aim is to guide the world toward a life without hatred and without egoism. On that day—and not before—the last barrier between Mayflower Americans and Ellis Island Americans will have gone down.

—Carlo Sforza, *The Real Italians*, 1942³

THE LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEER probably never saw the object that lay ahead of him on the tracks that cold February night. Nor would he have known why it was there. The next morning’s newspaper gave only a brief, impersonal account of the incident: sixty-five-year-old Martini Battistessa, an Italian alien, could not understand why he should give up his locksmith and saw-filing business of twenty years. Unable to complete his naturalization before being declared an enemy alien by his adopted country and expelled from his home, he went to a bar and offered a friend fifty dollars to shoot him in the head. The friend laughed and Battistessa left. A short time later he threw himself in front of the southbound passenger train as it passed through Richmond, California.⁴

When authorities told Giuseppe Mecheli that he could not live in his Vallejo home after February 24, the fifty-seven-year-old fisherman cut his throat with a butcher knife. And before sixty-five-year-old Stefano Terranova leaped to his death from a building, having refused to leave his home as ordered by the Justice Department, he left a note that read in part: “I believe myself to be good, but find myself deceived. I don’t know why.... It is my fault for blaming others. My brain is no good.”

Near Stockton, Giovanni Sanguenetti, sixty-two, unable to live with the stigma of being called an enemy alien, hanged himself.⁵

Probably few readers of the morning newspaper around San Francisco Bay paid much attention to the two or three lines reporting these last desperate acts, dwarfed as they were, literally and figuratively, by the news from global war fronts. The Japanese were overwhelming the western Pacific, adding Bataan to the American pantheon of bloodied shrines. Closer to home, a Japanese submarine would, in a few days, boldly lob a few shells near Santa Barbara, inflicting minor damage. But the aliens' deaths, incidental as they might have seemed in the rush of world events in 1942, were important pieces in a larger mosaic of human tragedy, a tragedy for the country as well as the aliens, a tragedy that could have been avoided.

WHEN FISHERMAN PIETRO ("Pete") Maiorana left the island of Marettimo off the coast of Sicily for the United States in 1920, he had never heard of Benito Mussolini or of Fascism. It would have been inconceivable to him that the same ship that would carry his family to the United States in 1934 would shortly thereafter transport America's first handful of Italian "volunteers" back across the Atlantic to fight Il Duce's aggressive war in Ethiopia. Nor could he have imagined that only seven years after the fall of Ethiopia, his native land and his adopted country would be at war with each other. Nor that his wife Giuseppa and thousands of other Italian emigrants who had left Italy seeking a better life for themselves and their families would suddenly be considered enemies of the country they had come to love.

As unlikely as this possibility might have seemed to Italian Americans in 1920, it did not to millions of native-born Americans twenty years later. With each advance of Nazism across Europe in the 1930s, Americans in and out of government became convinced that the greatest threat to American security would come from within. They believed that Hitler's successful aggression was attributable in part to his supporters inside countries like Austria and Czechoslovakia, who had paved the way for the Nazi legions with campaigns of propaganda, sabotage, and espionage. The man exercising near-dictatorial power over aliens of enemy nationalities after Pearl Harbor, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, who headed the Fourth Army and Western Defense Command in San Francisco, believed that Fifth Columnists lurked along the West Coast, waiting to strike on orders from Rome or Berlin.

WHAT WAS THERE about the conduct of Italians in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century that made them candidates

for relocation, internment, exclusion—and suicide? Italians came to the United States for the same reasons that other European immigrants had come: a combination of depressing social, economic, and political conditions at home. But Italy's standard of living, particularly in the South, was among the lowest in Europe. Over 80 percent of Italians depended on agriculture for their livelihoods. Many of their homes were one-room, earthen-floored hovels with no windows or chimneys, which they often shared with domestic animals. Their furnishings were simple; perhaps a bed, a chair, a bench, a wooden chest for their meager possessions. They ate mostly potatoes and corn. Italians were, as one historian describes them, "a peasant-proletariat," driven out of Italy by the squeeze of economic necessity. They had endured periodic famines, high taxation, and widespread unemployment. Land ownership was restricted; in overpopulated provinces the soil belonged to the nobility, who put little of their profits back into the soil. Rain fell heavily during the wrong seasons (usually autumn and winter), carrying the precious topsoil downstream. Tenants were leaseholders or landless agricultural workers, who paid high rents and turned over a large portion of their crops to landlords. Sons and daughters of such peasants had little reason to be optimistic about the future. There was in Italy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a "psychology of scarcity." In 1913, one person in fifty left the country.⁶

Indeed, before the Great War almost one quarter of Italy's people had left. Most Italian immigrants to the United States arrived between 1880 and 1924. Five hundred thousand came in 1901 alone. Nine years later the U.S. federal census showed that 1,343,000 Italians had arrived; the next decade brought another 1,109,524.⁷

Preliminary census tabulations provided to Congress in 1942 by the Alien Registration Division in the Justice Department detailed the boom in Italian emigration to California from 1900 to 1924. Before 1899, only 3,610 Italian aliens lived in California, but after that, and before the new immigration law of 1924 cut the flow of immigrants to a trickle, 36,910 took up residence in the Golden State. Only 6,452 were added between 1925 and 1942.⁸

Eighty percent of Italian emigrants before the First World War were males. It is not difficult to understand why. Young men were drawn by the adventure of travel and life in a new land, by the urgent need for labor in the United States, and by the promise of higher wages. They fled military conscription, parental authority, and rural immobility. As for women, conditions abroad were unknown and the necessary financial resources were hard to come by. But, after the war, a growing familiarity with life overseas gleaned from relatives' letters, the firsthand accounts of those who returned either permanently or to visit, and the desire to be