

Marta Tardio

Italian migration to Switzerland: the forgotten history of the “hidden children”

The topic of my presentation is the Italian migration to Switzerland after the Second World War, especially between the late 40's and the 80's. The aim is to analyse the reasons behind this massive exodus from Italy to Switzerland, the impact it had on these two countries, in an economical and political way, on the Italian workers and on their families.

To understand what happened during those 40 years and why, it's useful to make mention to the previous history. Surely, it was not starting to '40s that Italian workers went to Switzerland looking for a job. In effect, we can find traces of Italian emigration to Switzerland since the medieval age, but not in a massive way. The effective mass exodus started at the end of the nineteenth century, which was the time of the Large European Tunnels (the most important were the San Gottardo tunnel, which signed the beginning of this period, and the Sempione tunnel). So, Switzerland, as some other countries, needed workers, in particular foreign workers who were the perfect arms they could use and underpay, at the same moment. This made the so-called Foreigners Industry. Even between the two world conflicts, Switzerland was the homeland for the exiles of the fascism. Finally, after the Second World War all the countries had to react to the effects of the conflict and to the crisis it brought. Italy needed to reform itself from all points of view but especially the economy and the political system to rebirth and to overcome the fascism. Italian government saw emigration of its own workers as the only thing which could help them to not fall in the hunger trap. That's why Italy concluded an agreement with Belgium first in 1946 and immediately after with Switzerland in 1948 on the emigration of Italian workers. This agreement gave to Switzerland the possibility to experiment the rotation model thanks to the fact that, already in the article one, was expressly provided that it concerned the emigration of Italian labour, a type of manpower which was seasonal or on a temporary basis.

For the foreign workers, or the Italian ones, were provided the same wages and labour conditions at least on paper but not any type of social or political assurance. Substantially the models of residency permit were 3:

- Type A: or seasonal residency permit, whereby the worker could stay in the country for nine months.
- Type B: or the annual residency permit which was renewable.
- Type C: or dwelling permit, which could be obtained only after the overcome of some requirements.

In other words, Italian male and female workers who stayed regularly in Switzerland for at least five years (45 months, 9 months a year) should have renewed their permit twice for the period of 2 years and lastly a third time until they received their dwelling permit. In essence, they needed almost 10 years to be able to establish in Switzerland definitively.

This model of agreement and its extreme stiffness surely did not allow any improvement of the social, political and economic conditions of the labour bringing them to an extreme precariousness. Another article, which was far all a news, was the 15 one: the introduction of the visit to the border between the two countries. For the Italians it meant that every time they moved towards Switzerland from Italy, so every time they needed to pass the border, they had to be subjected to a medical check and to a careful control of the documents, in particular the permits.

The real transom of this agreement was the article 4. This article subtitled the essentially individual nature of those permits. Another part of it provided that the employers could choose freely any single male or female worker.

It meant that only who had that permit could entry in the country and stayed there for the indicated period. So only the workers. If they had a wife or children, it didn't matter. They could not entry until it was given to them the dwelling permit and so the possibility to establish there.

In large numbers, male workers had to leave their wives and children in Italy or if both the parents had a job only the children, hoping to see them again during the three months of the expiration of the contract. It was possible if they had families who could take care of them. The other only possibility was to bring with them children until the border and there leave them in the so-called border orphanages for nine months, take them back at the end of the permit and again and again for the following years. We can surely understand the brutality of this impositions on the Italian families, especially for children. Or better, these were the legal ways to follow.

But what were the reasons behind the signature of this accord for Switzerland and Italy? Why didn't Switzerland want to accept anyone except the employees? And why Italy accepted these terms of the agreement without any hesitation?

For Italy the agreement had two principal advantages. The first one was that it allowed Cristian Democracy the first political elections of the new Italy, the republican one, thanks to the consents of workers. They suffered hunger and extreme poverty before the accord, but when they found a real job in Switzerland due to the commitment of the party, they surely wanted to vote it. Indeed, to encourage them and facilitate the moving, the Italian government organized for workers who went to Switzerland free travels by train to consent them to return to Italy to vote.

The other very important reason was that the sending of many workers from every part of the countries to Switzerland, consented to Italy to calm down social tensions brought by the communist threat. From this point of view the Helvetic government was happy to help the Italian one, to avoid the spread of the communism on its own border.

For Switzerland they were essentially two.

The fear of foreigner workers, the fear of the so-called "inforestierimento". Italians during those years continued to grow rapidly, becoming a large part of the Swiss. Rather, we can say that the number of the foreigners constituted almost a half of the Helvetic population. Especially the workers who came from the central and southern Italy had a very poor instruction and the fact that they couldn't change their working sector (a possibility which was prohibited by the agreement. In effect we can say that that accord was, at the same time, a sort of workers' statute), which was an obstacle to the job growth, didn't help them to came out from that condition of marginality. It was of different types: a cultural marginality, which pushed them towards disqualified jobs; economic, due to the high inclination to save. In effect, workers sent almost the 90% of their salary to the components of the family who remained in Italy; housing, expressed by the worst conditions of houses and shacks; political, because the fear of communists brought the Helvetic government to accept Italian workers only on condition of prohibiting them the freedom of expression and political association; last but not least, a familiar and social marginality, due to the fact that they were forced to separate from their families nine months a year.

The second important reason was that the Helvetic government surely wanted a rapid growth of the country, in an economical way, so they recognized the need of workers, included Italian ones, but they didn't want any other social cost. Bringing families with them, workers implicitly asked to Switzerland to spend their resources in education and health also for their children and wives. Swiss only interest was to reach the maximum economic boom without any cost for those who weren't either Helvetic. This explains the individual nature of the permits.

The scandal of the so-called "hidden children" exploded and began a known thing only during the 80's, but really those directly involved knew better what was happening in their country. In effect, as early as 1971 the «Tribune de Lausanne» made an investigation dedicated to the "children in the shade". No one succeeded to precisely define the exact number of those children. There is who says

almost 30 thousand children. Others said that only in the decade of 70's the number went around 15 thousand. What is sure is the typical phrase children grew up with: «Stay good and silent, or the policemen arrive and they ship you alone in Italy». The fear and the oppression those children lived every day during their childhood marked their daily and future lives. The hidden children couldn't play, sing, dance and cry. They couldn't be children. They were forced to a non-childhood, to a non-existence. Those children didn't receive an instruction in Switzerland like neither in Italy. They were part of a floating community, without its own roots. If their parents were discovered they risked losing their permits but, at the same time, they couldn't stay away from their children for a long time. That's why the clandestinity way the only viable way. This was, without any doubt, one of the darkest, saddest and the most inhuman chapter of the history of the Italian emigration. Finally, in the mid-70's we can see the birth of the first initiative in the politic to abolish the seasonal statute and the birth of a special committee. This event opened the way for the first referendum initiative for the foreigners few years later, the «Mitenand». Really the workers statute was abolished only in 2002, but already in the 80's thanks to the large number of pro-foreigners and to the oil crisis, which involved Europe, the phenomenon of emigration to Switzerland decreased significantly.

The questions we can try to answer, after the analysis of these events, are: Why the history of the emigration to Switzerland and the consequent phenomenon of the hidden children is a forgotten history? What bring us to say “drive them out” to the current immigrants in Italy when we were the first to be migrants?

Bibliografia e sitografia

- 1) Bortolotti N., *Chiamami Sottovoce*, 2018, HarperCollins Editor.
- 2) Brando M., *Quando migliaia di bambini italiani erano clandestini in Svizzera*, in Striscia Rossa, 19/11/2018. <http://www.strisciarossa.it/quando-migliaia-di-bambini-italiani-erano-clandestini-in-svizzera/>
- 3) Lambruschi P., *Il caso. Bambini rubati, un'ombra sulla Svizzera*, in Avvenire, 17/07/2019. <https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/bambini-rubati-unombra-sulla-svizzera>
- 4) Ricciardi T., *Associazionismo ed emigrazione. Storia delle Colonie libere e degli italiani in Svizzera*, 2018, Laterza Editori.
- 5) Ricciardi T., *Breve storia dell'emigrazione italiana in Svizzera. Dall'esodo di massa alle nuove mobilità*, 2018, Donzelli Editore.
- 6) Rossi A., *Non far rumore*, documentario in Rai3, 18/10/2019. <https://www.altreitalie.it/pubblicazioni/rivista/n-60/rassegna/film-e-documentari/non-far-rumore-la-storia-dimenticata-dei-bambini-nascosti-regia-di-alessandra-rossi-diretto-da-mario-mallearo-.kl>
- 7) Sacchi M., *Quei bambini ombra nascosti nella Svizzera degli anni Settanta*, in Il Giornale, 31/05/2018. <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/spettacoli/quei-bambini-ombra-nascosti-nella-svizzera-degli-anni-1534645.html>
- 8) Scarcelli R., *Quei figli di immigrati costretti a vivere sottovoce*, documentario in Tv Svizzera, 11/06/2018. <https://www.tvsvizzera.it/tvs/-bambini-proibiti-quei-figli-di-immigrati-costretti-a-vivere-sottovoce/44139960>