



Museu da Imigração

Ways and lives of Italian migrants in Brazil at the end of the 19th century

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Introduction

The so-called “great immigration” was a process that took place from Europe to America between 1880 and 1915 (see Vaifas 2000, 161). Brazil came fourth amongst the destinations in the New World, after the USA, Argentina and Canada. At that time, the immigration of Italians was the most significant in this country and virtually restricted to a single territory in the hinterlands of the Federal State of São Paulo—the coffee plantations. Further colonial settlements sprang up in other states in the south and south-east. This generally subsidised immigration intensified in the years from 1889 to 1902.¹ It not only promoted the growth of São Paulo, but also instilled the Brazilians with specific notions about Italy (see Carneiro et al. 2010; Lesser 2015).

Herbert S. Klein sees a combination of three factors leading to the increasing Italian immigration in Brazil during the 19th century: “The first factor was access to land and hence food; the second were the various yields of the Brazilian crop-lands; and the third the number of family members needing to be fed” (Klein 1999, 14). According to this author, the “population growth (put) enormous pressure on the country’s agrarian sector at the time. The traditional leasing, farming and production methods were beginning to change to meet the food cultivation requirements.” (Klein 1999, 15). In other words, many farmers were losing their land rights at the very same time as the European industrialization and introduction of new technologies led to unemployment in farming. In this context, many rural families viewed migration as an opportunity for improving their lives. Brazil was one of the destination countries and welcomed many Italian immigrants, most of whom came from the Veneto region (see Klein 1999; Alvim 1999, 387). The country of Brazil was in turn undergoing a period where the arrival of foreign labour, mostly from Europe, stimulated the cultivation in the large coffee plantations. The main reason for this was the abolition of slavery. But such an initiative and the search for workers “were additionally warranted by other reasons such as a ‘bleaching of races’ and the necessity of building a ‘more civilised’ country where the still prevailing, slavery-based social structure was to be dismantled by promoting smallholders.” (Alvim 1999, 384).

Italian immigrants in the Brás Immigrant Hostelry and the current Immigration Museum of São Paulo

Their moment of arrival in Brazil, for example by way of the Brás Immigrant Hostelry (Hospedaria de Imigrantes do Brás), must have surely been impressive for the immigrants. Santos, the port of their disembarkation, was not only a place of arrival, but also a meeting place: This is where all migrants, most of them Italians, came into their first direct contact with people from Brazil, with their customs, their language, and their food. This experience was generally as striking as the boat passage, particularly for the adults.



Fig. 1 Museu da Imigração of the district São Paulo, São Paulo José | Pedro Viviani, CC BY-SA 4.0²

The Brás Immigrant Hostelery in São Paulo was strategically placed between two main railway lines crossing the federal state of São Paulo: The São Paulo Railway (1867) and the Estrada de Ferro Central do Brasil (1875). The premises of this Hostelery provided accommodation for a sum total of circa 2.5 million immigrants and even up to 8,000 people in a day. After disembarking in the harbour of Santos, they were transported to the trains and then accommodated in the Hostelery, where they would stay for a brief period. As soon as they had been provided with a job, they got on another train to the interior. This on-site support for their integration in the labour market, for example by employment in the coffee plantations, was provided by an institution working on the shelter's premises: the official authority for placement and employment was responsible for helping the immigrants with employment contracts.

After being listed as a historic, archaeological, artistic and touristic heritage by the Council for Monument Conservation (CONDEPHAAT), the building of the former Hostelery was repurposed and has since accommodated the Immigration Museum of São Paulo (Museu da Imigração do Estado de São Paulo), to this day. ▶ Fig. 1 This museum owns an oral history collection of 17 interviews with Italian immigrants coming from the provinces of Padua, Potenza, Salerno and Benevento, amongst others. These interviews help to understand how immigrant families or individuals adjusted to life in Brazil. Some persons recount successful cases in the countryside where immigrants managed to adjust to the various seasonal ways of life and establish themselves in diverse towns, even if that was linked with difficulties. But they also report cases where the adjustment was unsuccessful,

so that the immigrants returned to the “big city”, São Paulo, to start a small business there, or to benefit from its successful industrial development.

A topic that all interviews have in common is the immigrants’ concerns about maintaining the cultural practices and dialects of their families and homelands. In several cases, religious festivals and the establishment of cultural societies provided an opportunity for bringing a piece of Italy – if only imaginary or newly invented – along to their new home. Where the language is concerned, one can understand that such strategies were seen as an opportunity for building a bridge between the two countries and for creating a network of solidarity.

The anxiousness of the Italian immigrants to preserve such memories is not only reflected in the wish to have these life stories documented. The concerns of the Italian immigrants are also confirmed by the museum collection, which includes items donated as a sign of the wish to preserve personal and collective memories. As Ulpiano Teixeira Bezerra de Menezes emphasises, donations reflect the self-image of the donors. But he also adds that they often have a meaning that is not even known to the museum. Such an attribute would suffice, however, to render the use of objects as documents in a museum institution obsolete. And that this could indeed happen in practice where the institution is unable to document the historic, social and cultural environment on even a minimal level.

The Immigration Museum of São Paulo has listed 328 items as coming from “Italy”. These include a wide range of objects such as men’s hats, ties, caps, gloves, typical dancing costumes, white children’s garments, Italian brochures, vinyl records with Italian music, tablecloths, medals, coins, various household objects, toys, books, travel chests, accordions, carpentry tools, etc. It is a universe of everyday things that enables us to reflect on the various interpretations of these peoples’ lives and the reasons why these objects were donated to the museum.

Italian settlement in the federal state of São Paulo

The Italians were the first group of immigrants to settle, mostly in the state of São Paulo, as substitute for slave labour in the coffee plantations. Although they arrived as farm labourers – even if unqualified³ – they still managed to buy a piece of land with the money they had saved in a short period, thus accomplishing a considerable social mobility (see Klein 1999, 28).

The employment contracts were based on a family labour model that was in the interest of the big landowners as much as that of the Italians who were trying to support their families. These contracts changed after the coffee cultivation period as the immigrants were allowed to grow corn and beans between the coffee plants for their own consumption (see Alvim 1999, 397–398). With their various activities, they created a “little Italy” in the federal state of São Paulo, one that consisted of smallholders, revolved around coffee cultivation and that was linked with industry as well as urban construction, albeit to a lesser extent (see Alvim 1999).

The massive influx of labour for the expanding agricultural sector and bad working conditions left many immigrants unsatisfied with the circumstances of their lives, so that great numbers of them migrated to the cities at the end of their annual contracts⁴ (see Hall 2010). For this reason, the history of the development of an urban and industrial proletariat in São Paulo is most of all linked with the Italian immigration.

Perspectives on identity

Some researchers are debating the idea that the Italians who had been forced to emigrate to Brazil entertained no great feelings of loyalty to the Italian Peninsula. The class divide and dispersal of the immigrants to various regions of Brazil are only two of the factors that hampered the development of a true Italian identity. Michael Hall, who regards ethnicity as a social construct that is based on its historic context, maintains:

“It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the rapid assimilation and social advancement of a considerable part of the immigrants further weakened these institutions—which had never been very robust. They may have strengthened the relationships between the Italians and contributed to the development of a network of social relationships that created a feeling of belonging to the same ethnic group. Without structures for maintaining a collective community, the ethnic group will hardly be more than a political fiction.” (Hall 2010, 62).

The Italian language was thus very quickly adopted in São Paulo in the space of a few generations, albeit unevenly and often in a complex manner. Oswaldo Truzzi on the other hand maintains that the feeling of an Italian identity in Brazil, i.e. of belonging to the same ethnic and cultural group, arose from the migration experience and the experiences in São Paulo. He sees the reason for this in the recent unification of Italy, that happened shortly before these immigrants had left their country, with many regions of the peninsula experiencing great socio-economic, cultural and political divides. They therefore tended to understand themselves as specific regional groups, rather than an “Italian nation”.

This is why they developed their identity in a “relational fashion”, i.e. by differentiation from other groups (see Truzzi 2016, 124). This cultural experience consisted of family experiences where traditions would be kept alive and continued with respect to food, religion, etc., but counted for very little in the social and political lives of these people. The sociologist Herbert Gans refers to this state of affairs as a “symbolic ethnicity (entity)” (Gans quoted after Truzzi 2016, 126).

Researching in the collections of the Immigration Museum of São Paulo, the authors of this essay came upon two cases that can render the Italian integration processes in the Federal State of São Paulo a little more understandable: ▶ Fig. 2 The first case involves Luigi Torezan (whose surname was later adapted to “Torrezani”). Luigi was born in 1864 in the Italian municipality of San Giorgi in Bosco in the province of Padua. He worked as a carpenter there. To evade the compulsory

military service of three years, he decided to emigrate to Brazil, where he started a new life with a number of obstacles. He arrived in Brazil on February 8th, 1889, aged 25, with the ship Cachar, and entered the former Brás Immigration Hostel immediately.⁵ He had brought little luggage, but one object is remarkable: his wooden chest with carpentry tools, guaranteeing his pursuit of the carpentry trade in foreign countries. He was sent to work on a coffee plantation in the municipality of Descalvado in the border area between the federal states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. As he was skilled in a trade and knew nothing about living and working in the countryside, the foreman allowed him to stay at the estate for a few days. Shortly thereafter, when it turned out that Luigi really was unsuitable, he was sent back to the city of São Paulo. He settled down in the Cambuci neighbourhood, where he lived in a small rented room and worked freelance in housing construction, most of all the production of wooden roofs and window frames. He later started working for a stonemason, where he also met his future wife, Elisa, also Italian and the daughter of his boss. After their wedding, Luigi became a partner of his father in law and moved to the Mooca neighbourhood in the east of the city. ▶ Fig. 3



Fig.3 Scratch gauge: tool of the carpenter Luigi Torrezani, before 1889 | Museu da Imigração do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo; photo: Conrado Secassi



Fig. 2 Luigi Torrezani in his 50s, 1914
| Torrezani family, São Paulo

There, he continued to work in the construction business, started a family and set up his life around the carpentry profession. He also worked in the production of wooden looms for the textile manufacturer Crespi whose owner, Rodolfo Crespi, was an Italian, too. In the course of his life he visited places that were connected with immigrants from Italy at the time, such as the São José do Belém church in the Belém district. At home he tried to talk Italian with his children and grandchildren, and wanted to stick to certain routines with his wife, such as making their own wine and preparing items of food like bread and polenta, for example, because they reminded him of home. But Luigi Torrezani

never voiced the wish of returning to Italy to his family, and was able to see himself as a Brazilian. The wooden box he had brought along when he entered the country and whose utensils he used in the course of his life was passed on from one generation to the next, until it was donated to the Museu da Imigração. A number of the exhibited objects are linked to the memories of Italian immigrants.

► Fig. 4

Another case worth mentioning is that of Gregório Rombolá,⁶ whose life in Brazil started earlier than hoped for. Thanks to the current immigration policy it started with his assimilation to the world of coffee plantations. Gregório was born in 1873 in the southern Italian province of Catanzaro in Calabria. He embarked on his journey to America in the year 1888, Buenos Aires being his first destination. He arrived in Brazil on 28 August 1890 with the ship Napoli, only 18 years old and alone. He stayed at the Brás Immigration Hostel, was identified as a “farmer” and sent to work at a coffee plantation in São Carlos do Pinhal, where he stayed for 30 days. Then he went to the municipality of Araraquara and later to Jaboticabal, where he settled down and married the Brazilian Virgílima Ferreira da Silva in the year 1897, with whom he had 13 children. ► Fig. 5

Gregório spent a long period working at several country estates, as was customary at the time. The Rombolá family also donated objects to the Museu da Imigração that belonged to him, including a logbook which contains much of the information related here, as well as the photograph taken in the year 1936.

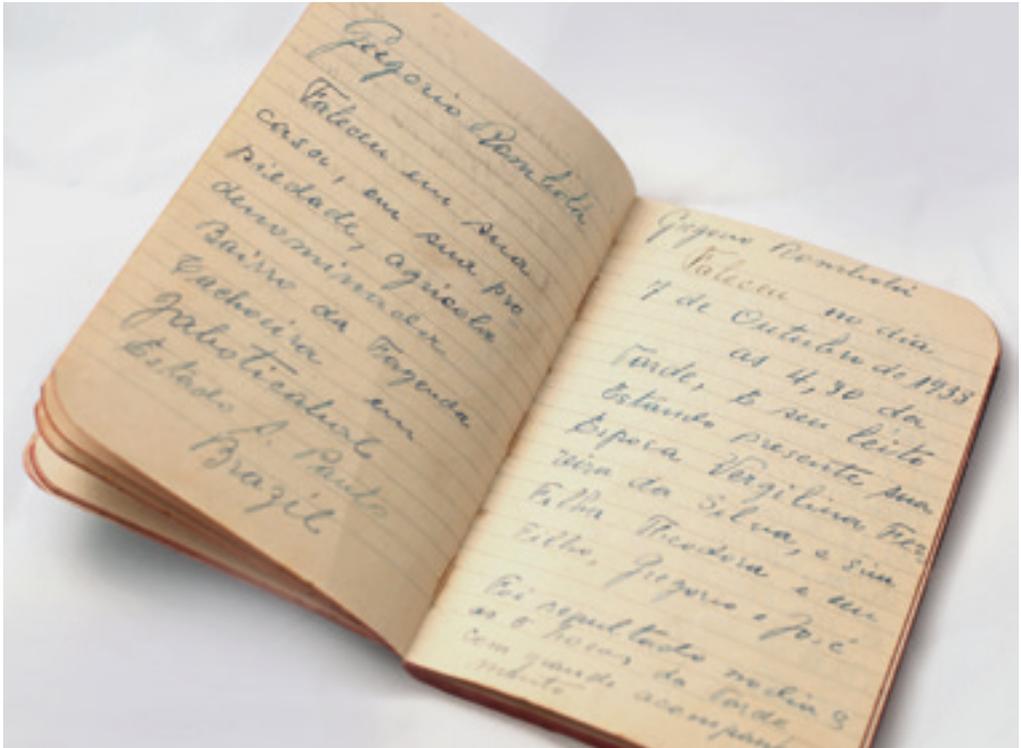


Fig. 4 Diary of Gregorio Rombola | Museu da Imigração do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo; photo: Rodrigo Antonio



Fig. 5 Gregório Rombola, 65, and his wife, 57, with their children, 1936, Jaboticabal in the state of São Paulo
| Museu da Imigração do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo

As already mentioned, biographies of this kind can help us understand the different experiences of the Italian immigrants as they arrived in Brazil. From the perspective of the Immigration Museum of São Paulo, such experiences also serve to address questions and issues of identity. The research into the cultural possessions of these people in the museum's holdings is helpful for this in many cases.

Nowadays, the Immigration Museum of São Paulo assumes the responsibility for the selection of cultural assets and the attendant research, cognisant of the importance of maintaining a critical stance in this respect. The search for other-historical, social, cultural—perspectives on what is known as the “great immigration” in Brazil is based on the institution's wish to problematise notions of identity and thereby reach its main objective: discussing the diversity of migration experiences and the memories they are tied to.

- 1 Interestingly enough, Italy prohibited the Brazil-sponsored emigration of Italians in the 1902 Prinetti decree because of the bad living conditions of the immigrants in São Paulo (see Bassanezi 1995, 5–6).
- 2 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=48574949>.

- 3 The fact that the European workers were preferred over the existing workforce of “black slaves” despite being unskilled, affirmed the calls of the Brazilian elite for a policy of “white labour” (see Schwarcz 2015).
- 4 In 1896, Italians accounted for 35 % of the population of

the state of São Paulo's capital (see Hall 2010, 53).

- 5 Interview with Angelo Torrezani and Egdio Torrezani on 10/03/1997 (Museu da Imigração; documentation: oral history no. 102).
- 6 Story of the Virgilina Aparecida Rombolá Fonseca family

(object donation SC 122441/2009) and registration date of Gregório Rombolá at the Hos-

pedaria do Brás (see <http://museudaimigracao.org.br/acervodigital/livrodetalhe.php?>

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