

EXILES

Thibault Bechini – When you cross the Val d’Arno between Pisa and Florence by train, taking the Leopolda that is one of the oldest railways in Italy, you see in passing the names of the communes that border the river Arno. Nowadays these stations support the back and forth traffic of inhabitants on their way to work in Florence or Pisa. We have rather forgotten that at the end of the 19th century and in the first years of the 20th, the stations allowed men, women and sometimes entire families to head abroad, abandoning their houses and villages and Italy itself, perhaps temporarily, perhaps forever. Nevertheless in the early 1900s about a thousand people would leave this part of central Tuscany each year. A thousand people: that equates to 2% of the local population at the dawn of the 20th century. Not all that remarkable on a superficial level. Even so, it’s hard to imagine that these departures had no effect on those who stayed, who passed their time waiting for news from their children, their brothers and their sisters.

Hard to imagine above all that these departures left no trace on the material life of the inhabitants of these big rural districts, now linked to the region round Marseilles, to Buenos Aires the capital of Argentina and in a lesser measure to the United States. Indeed in the space of a few years, the families of these emigrants had their conditions of life transformed by the presence abroad of one or other parent. There would of course be the payments made by the migrants to their families left behind in the home country. But we need to realise the novelty of these transfers in the early 1900s. Behind the expanding horizons of the families there would be a universe of documents. The letters that came from the other end of the world thanks to the considerable progress of steam shipping but also the postal orders that might change the daily pattern of activity. We need to realise the revolutionary aspect of an agreement made between France and Italy in 1904 that allowed Italian emigrants to France have their families in their village in Italy receive sums of money deposited in savings accounts opened in France. Furthermore, this was done simply by turning up at their post office thanks to an exchange of telegrams between the administrators of the Italian post office and the French savings outlets. The letters, postal orders and savings account booklets along with supporting documents in this universe of paper link a fragment of Italy, like the Val d’Arno, to the rest of the world and have a direct effect on the conditions of existence of men and women who have not crossed any frontier.

What to do with the family home held in toto and this plot of land encumbered by mortgages, how to settle an inheritance when one member of the family lives far away? This is where proxies come into play. Emigrants from the kingdom of Italy flood into Italian consulates abroad in order to draft powers of attorney that

will be sent to their parents left behind in the Peninsula. These powers are legalised by the ministry of foreign affairs in Rome that becomes the beating heart of the globalisation of Italian family matters. And that's how in the Val d'Arno in the hamlet of Staffoli within the commune of Santa Croce, a woman called Giuseppa Tognetti who is just a seamstress buys the holding of her brother-in-law who has gone to live in Buenos Aires. She has a new house built that she sells a few years later to one of her neighbours in Staffoli who has also gone to try his luck in Argentina and who puts his savings into the village where he was born. It's not a fortune but for Giuseppa this new link between Staffoli and the River Plata becomes by virtue of proxies the promise of an existence that may not be better but is at least different.

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