

“Work in Germany, Family in Italy”

The Everyday Life of Italian Workers in Wolfsburg in the 1960s and 1970s

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Introduction

The subject of this research is the patterns of migrant identity formation using the example of labour migration from Southern Italy to the Federal Republic of Germany in the post-war years. With the help of oral sources this paper aims to explore the meaning of the migratory process for the partakers. The migration process contains three phases: leaving (e-migration); sojourn abroad (im-migration); and returning to Italy (return-migration) or choosing to live permanently in Germany. By studying life-stories, it is possible to differentiate migration patterns and define the profiles of those involved in the process. Twenty interviews were carried out – half of them with Italians who returned to live in Southern Italy, in the commune of Supersano in the province of Lecce; the other half of interviews were conducted with migrants who stayed in Germany, in Wolfsburg (the Volkswagen headquarters). The ten interviews in Southern Italy were carried out in the houses of the migrant of return, which can be regarded as a symbol of the migration process. Constructing a house and purchasing a piece of land in response to the precarious economic conditions in which the migrants had lived for so long were, in fact, central concerns for Italian workers spending a period of time abroad. The construction of a house was a symbol of the success of emigration, and it was shared with the community of origin. In Wolfsburg, interviews were carried out with friends mainly in Italian bars. These bars were, and continue to be, the main meeting places for first generation immigrants to socialize. All the interviews touched on central themes of leave-taking, living and working conditions in the city of Wolfsburg, relations with German colleagues, linkage with the place of origin, and the choice of returning to Italy or staying in Germany.

An analysis of the interviews enables us to connect important choices – such as the decision to leave, return, or stay – to the different stages of the identity process. Migrants are constantly redefining their own identity, an identity that fluctuates between the local, the regional, national, and transnational, depending on the context and conditions in which migrants find themselves.

From Italy to Germany

The Italian migration flow to the Federal Republic of Germany can be divided into two phases. The first phase was dominated by the bilateral agreements from 1955, which resulted in state-controlled emigration and were managed by Centres of Emigration. The second phase, which started with the Treaty of Rome (1957), gradually allowed free movement of workers within the European Economic Community (EEC). In the first phase, work and residence permits in foreign states were connected to work-contracts Italian workers signed before their departure; in the second phase, Italian workers could move freely within the EEC to look for jobs.¹ Contrary to the regulated phase, in the EEC workers frequently gathered information about work possibilities in the Federal Republic of Germany via non-institutional methods, especially advice from relatives and friends who had already emigrated before.

I.M.: “I was born in Supersano in 1923. I got married in 1950, and before leaving I already had five sons. Before, I went to work in Wolfsburg; I have been working hoeing beets for two years in France, starting in 1958. In 1961, I worked on a building site in Southern Germany because you were sent where you were required; wherever they wanted two or ten workers, you went there. Sometimes you arrived half naked, half barefoot, but if someone did not employ you the first day you arrived there, they gave you some food and a place to sleep. I stayed there for two years. Afterwards, I went to Wolfsburg (...). I left with a friend who was already working there. He said, ‘Let’s go to Volkswagen.’ I did not know anything about it, but he told me not to worry, and we left.”²

Most workers came from Southern Italy and went mainly to Baden-Württemberg, Nordrhein-Westfalen, and Hessen. They were particularly employed in the iron, metal, and building industries. The Italian community of Wolfsburg was one of the largest in the Federal Republic of Germany because of the Volkswagen factory employment policy. Until 1970

Italians were the only foreign workers employed. Up to the early 1970s, emigration was a male-only phenomenon. From then on, however, Italian emigration also included families.³

The decision to leave was considered inevitable, a common misfortune shared by the whole community. For those coming alone and those coming with families the goals were the same, namely earning money and building a house, but the experiences they had in Wolfsburg were different.

Those who emigrated took with them a local identity linked to their place of origin, to the tradition of the rural world, and to their dialects. The departure brought along a break with daily habits, but it did not cut off their links with their community of origin. Indeed, the values, which guided the emigrant abroad, were still those of his community of origin, and this was also true in relation to their aims.

Work and Life in Wolfsburg

Upon their arrival in Wolfsburg in the 1960s, Italians were accommodated in shacks called *Berliner Brücke*. For many Italians the heated shacks represented an improvement on their living conditions in Italy, so did the fence which surrounded the housing and represented security and protection. For others, at the same time, the enclosure and isolation increased the sense of solitude and oppression.

B. M. “[...] You suffer because you find it difficult to adjust yourself to this closed life. Once you have finished work, what can you do? You eat, go to bed, and the following day you must go to work. [...] I stayed there only because of my father; otherwise, I would have exploded with such a change. He worked and cooked for me until I got used to it. But it was so different from what I was used to that it was like comparing day and night. The snow. The cold. The work in the factory.”⁴

The contrast between life in the villages in southern Italy and life in the “Italian village” of Wolfsburg was striking. Living outside, meeting on the piazza, meeting with relatives, and the world of work in the fields – or the world of school for the younger ones – was all in stark contrast with the restricted life of the shacks and the rigid work regime of the factory. However, the factory guaranteed the Italians what they had always desired: economic stability and offered them what they had never known: a dignified system of social welfare. The new employment situation permitted the Italians not only to overcome the extremely poor conditions, but also to fulfil their dreams of purchasing a house and a piece of land.

The first families of Italian workers arrived in Wolfsburg during the early 1970s. Although the first encounter with their new existence was traumatic, many of them started to appreciate life in Germany after the first hard years. New connections between Italian and German families developed through the children.

M.B. “The first period was horrible. I cried all the time. I was not able to understand anything. [...] I was also afraid. After some time, however, I started to like it very much. The life was quieter; the family was more united. On Saturdays and Sundays we all used to go out together. Nobody asked you where you were going, who you were, what you wanted; people minded their own business. In our complex of flats there were German women on my landing and downstairs. [...] We got along well together. The woman next to us let me taste German food and I let her taste Italian. We used to take our sons and daughters to kindergarten or to school, and, if you had no time, you could ask her for help.”⁵

In the 1970s the Italian workers started to participate in many activities: Italian political parties, regional cultural clubs and religious organisations. As it is evident from the interviews, from this time onward, a wider regional and national identity started to emerge alongside the local identity. Whereas at first, people would identify with a specific village, later they viewed themselves as part of a region such as Sardinia, Sicily, or Puglia, and at the same time as Italians.

U.T. “Before going back to Italy, I felt better there (Wolfsburg) than here (Superzano) because when I started to get a command of the language, I felt at home. I had friends; you could chat a bit at the political party meetings or at the Italian Centre. I became integrated in German life. However, the children were growing up, and if I had not come back (to Italy) at that time, I would never have come back.”⁶

To return to Italy was still considered the ultimate aim. If the aim of building a house in the place of origin was achieved, any extra time spent abroad was wasted. If the decision to leave had been unavoidable, a consequence of unsustainable economic conditions, the decision to return was also inevitable. Ties to their place of origin, where family members who had never migrated remained, together with the social pressure to prove their success abroad, were factors that strongly influenced the decision to return. Migrants’ commitment to the community of origin had to be proved through their homecoming.

But for those who returned the disillusionment was very strong and the expected financial and social improvements never materialized. Instead, the migrants of return had to re-adapt to very poor working conditions. Also, the families of workers who had migrated were viewed differently from those who had never left because of the experiences made in their period of living abroad. Therefore, it was not unusual that the returning migrants remained a separated, even isolated, group back in their place of origin.

Return to Italy or stay in Germany?

Among those Italian workers who remained in Wolfsburg, some have merely postponed their dream of returning, others “have completely forgotten” the wish to go back. The first group comprises those who had built a house in Italy and are awaiting the pension to go and live there. This group spent their lives outside the factory among Italian friends because they felt comfortable with them. They appreciate the reliability of work, the efficiency of public services, and in particular the feeling of being treated with respect in Germany. However, returning seems to be the most desirable aim, both because their family remained in Italy and because their relationship with German society was not always completely satisfying. They claim to have “adapted” to the German mentality, but they do not feel totally comfortable among Germans because they do not perceive themselves as completely accepted.

A.R. “German friends? At work yes, outside? I don’t think so! At work I get along, both with Germans and with Italians. [...] I feel comfortable here, but I always have in mind to go back to Italy because, even if I got used to their mentality, I will always keep my Italian one. [...] At the beginning here, we were treated quite badly; the old Germans always looked at us sideways, with suspicion. For example, we had the habit of speaking loudly with each other, but this was something that irritated them. [...] The work makes us feel at home, and then sometimes we meet our friends at the restaurant and we have a great meal together. I would never go to a German bar on my own.”⁷

Italy is idealized: the geographical beauty, the generosity of the people, the possibility to live with little money. Although, as workers, they are included in the German economic and welfare system, they remain socially and culturally linked to the value system of their places of origin.

In the second group are the Italians who have decided to settle in Wolfsburg. None of these people have built a house in their place of origin. Instead, many of them have built one in Wolfsburg. They are mostly married to German women. Some have brothers and sisters who permanently live in Germany. They are conscious of not being part of their community of origin any longer. Moreover, after the deaths of parents, who represented the last strong link with the place of origin, the visits of these emigrants became less frequent.

C.V.: “Wolfsburg became my city, even if am not German. I am always a foreigner because, when you do not have the same rights, you always feel different. I believe that I am a foreigner also in Italy because in my head now, there is a mixture and I have also absorbed some things from this mentality here, after many years, after thirty-five years. After thirty-five years, you see things differently; I don’t think there is any nostalgia to go back home any more. It is because this became my city. [...] The family helps; and it helps to know that when you arrive home, there is your wife and your children and you are not alone any more. This is not integration, but you feel more stable, you think of the future, you don’t think any more as you used to think. [...] Maybe integration is when the politicians understand that there is no need any longer to have to ask or to pay for a German passport. A passport should be given to you because you have behaved well, because you have worked hard, because you have made your contribution to the development of this country.”⁸

The identity of these Italians is a complex hybrid according to Faist’s definition, a result of fusion and reprocessing of past and present elements.⁹ This identity permits them to share common values with the culture of the destination country.¹⁰ This sharing of values has greatly influenced the decision of these Italians to live permanently in Germany.

However, on the one hand, the migrants develop a transnational identity; on the other hand the national states have negative effects on this process because of different exclusion mechanisms, of which the limitation of political participation is one.¹¹ Their Italian and European citizenship, in fact, does not suffice to guarantee them the same political rights which German citizens enjoy.

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Notes

- 1 Romero, Federico: *Emigrazione e integrazione europea 1945–1973* [European Emigration and Integration 1945–1973]. Roma: Edizioni Lavoro 1991, pp. 102-111.
- 2 I.M. worked abroad from 1958 to 1975.
- 3 Cf. Prontera, Grazia: *Partire, tornare, restare? L’esperienza migratoria dei lavoratori italiani nella Repubblica Federale Tedesca* [Emigrating, Returning, Staying? The Hope of Italian Migrant Labourers to the BRD]. Milano: Guerini e Associati 2009.
- 4 B.M. worked at the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg from 1970 to 1981.
- 5 M.B. lived in Wolfsburg from 1981 to 1993.
- 6 U.T. worked at the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg from 1970 to 1993.
- 7 A.R. has been working at the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg since 1973.
- 8 C.V. has been working at the Volkswagen factory in Wolfsburg since 1971.
- 9 Faist, Thomas: *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Space*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2000, p. 171.
- 10 Devoto, Fernando J.: *Le migrazioni italiane in Argentina* [The Italian Migration to Argentina]. In: Tirabassi, Maddalena (Eds.): *Itinera*. Torino: Edizioni Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli 2005, p. 325.
- 11 Cf. e.g., Sassen, Saskia: *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization*. New York: Columbia UP 1996; Bommes, Michael: *Der Mythos des transnationalen Raumes*. In: Thränhardt, Dietrich (ed.): *Migration im Spannungsfeld von Globalisierung und Nationalstaat*. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag 2003, pp. 90-116.