

# EMIGRATION FROM FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA TO BELGIUM

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## Introduction

Emigration from Friuli Venezia Giulia has never attracted the interest of Friulian scholars of local history. The only relevant study was that carried out by Guglielmo Pitzalis in 1989 on the return to the valley of the River Natisone of those suffering from lung diseases and in particular, silicosis. It is useless at this point to conjecture on the reasons for this omission: it is more useful to plan a new research and to try to understand, for example, how the large Italian minority in the area of Charleroi live today. Emigration controlled by the State concerned and the emigration of those who decided to do so themselves, social integration and work in the mines, national feelings and cosmopolitan habits: these, in our opinion, are the problems to be faced. The methods of recruitment, the contract clauses, the hardship of the work, the risk to their lives that our emigrants faced have at least already been noted. It is necessary to retrace the life of an emigrant in its entirety and for a period of time that is longer than the time he spent in the mines. The reasons many stayed in the host country were not only economic, the flows to and from Italy are not completely over. A similar prospect needs an approach which is not constrained to regional or national ties but rather coherent with the need to be cosmopolitan, European, Italian and Friulian, so that it will never be necessary again to lay a memorial stone (however noble that may be) to those who fell at Marcinelle where an Italian province remembers its fallen, in order to study all the mixed marriages and to understand the feelings of the latest generations. To listen to stories about permanent stays or returns to the homeland, questionnaires and life histories had to be researched as much in Italy as in Belgium to find out memories of the post war period and the reasons for subsequent choices. Too much attention to one's identity risks – as

has already happened – closing rather than widening one’s horizons, while a systematic comparison of migrant groups, of their nostalgia and expectations could better clarify the complexity of migratory movements.

### **1. Bricklayers and Builders: emigration just after the First World War**

The end of the First World War ushered in a new migratory phase for Belgium. The reconstruction of the country needed a lot of manpower. The survivors of the war were well organised in unions, particularly in Wallonia and they turned down the more dangerous, heavier or worst paid jobs. The underground coalmines, the construction sites and the marble quarries, for example, all had difficulty finding workers locally. The Belgian authorities therefore began recruiting abroad. Italians, particularly from the north, responded willingly to the call. In the early 1920s about 20,000 Italians arrived in Belgium: in 1910 the community had numbered less than 4,500 but by August 1924 it had risen to about 23,000. The increase in the number of Italian emigrants was marked by a different way of migration. Whilst before Italian emigrants to Belgium had chosen individually to go, in the early years after the First World War the Italian and Belgium authorities tried to organise the departures. The Belgian employers generally transmitted the recruitment forms to the Italian emigration authorities through the Bonomelli Organisation which had offices in Brussels and Milan. Even the Provincial Employment Office of Udine, opened in 1908, acted as an employment agency for overseas jobs. In 1923, on the occasion of the publication of the pamphlet on “Activity performed during the years 1922-1923 until the closing of the office on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1923” (*L’attività svolta negli anni 1922-1923 fino alla soppressione dell’Ufficio 30 giugno 1923*), the Provincial Employment Office stated that “the most sought after job market in the year [1922] was France followed by Belgium. And it was precisely by sending our workforce to those countries that the office was able to carry out its most effective and worthwhile activity.

In this it had the invaluable help of the Royal Commissariat General of Emigration which on many occasions, for collective recruitment in the Province of Udine, availed itself of the Provincial Employment Office". In 1922, with 8,306 reservations, the office managed to place 4,843 workers abroad, an increase of 3,411 compared to 1921. In the same year the Provincial Office published a pamphlet for the leavers "Special guidelines for those leaving for Belgium" (*Avvertenze speciali per gli emigranti che si recano in Belgio*), a confirmation of the importance Belgium represented for the Friulians<sup>1</sup>. The Secretariat for Emigration in Pordenone, for their part, admitted to having received in 1922 about 3,223 offers of work from abroad: "Many came from the *Bourse Officielle du Travail* in Brussels, others from the "*Bourses Libres*" of the Belgian Christian Trade Unions, which had employment branches in all major towns. We were in contact with 145 French firms and many of their branches, with employers' associations of the Belgian mines. Some of the secretariats of the Bonomelli organisation helped too, especially those of Paris and Grenoble" while "the Belgian Consul in Venice an honorary Italian citizen helped enormously." The Secretariat of Pordenone noted that some of the specialised workers sent "did not know the language, or to earn more, passed from Belgium to France, particularly attracted by news of workers who were working 12 hours a day, bringing prejudice to the discipline of work and of the organisation"<sup>2</sup>.

The coal and iron and steel companies also sent their agents directly to the Veneto and Friuli country side, with the task of enlisting as many workers as possible. Individuals who went to Belgium without a contract in the hope of finding work therefore can be added to those organised by the *Fédération charbonniere de Belgique (Fédéchar)* which in 1922 signed an agreement with the Italian authorities. A year later, the *Société Civile de Charbonnages*

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<sup>1</sup> See Ufficio Provinciale del Lavoro di Udine, *L'attività svolta negli anni 1922-1923 fino alla soppressione dell'Ufficio (30 giugno 1923)*, Udine, Arti Grafiche Cooperative Friulane, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> See Segretariato di Emigrazione di Pordenone (Ufficio intermandamentale di collocamento), *Relazione del 1922*, Pordenone, Arti Grafiche già F.lli Gatti, 1923, pp. 5-6.

*du Lac* (at Houdeng-Aimeries in Wallonia) asked the Secretariat for Emigration in Udine to send workers to work in its underground coal mines. In the letter which the Director of the Belgian company sent to don Luigi Ridolfi on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1923, Monsieur Léon André lists the conditions of the contract and the benefits offered to the aspiring miners:

1. Le logement et la nourriture dans ses phalanstères aux prix actuels de 7,50 francs par jour; 2. a travail égal, des salaires absolument équivalents à ceux des ouvriers belges. Ces salaires sont actuellement de 28 à 34 francs belges par jour pour ouvriers à la pierre, 30 à 35 francs belges pour ouvriers au charbon. Il n’y a pas de travail à la surface; 3. du travail dans ses chantiers souterrains pour plusieurs années; 4. les frais de rapatriement ne dépassant pas 100 francs belges pour autant que la récupération de cette somme ait été faite moyennant une retenue de 5 francs belges par semaine sur le salaire du second nommé; 5. l’assurance contre les accidents, et les soins médicaux au même titre que les ouvriers belges et suivant la législation belge à ce sujet”.

The manager of the *Société Civile des Charbonnages di Bois du Luc*, who added that “l’ouvrier engagé doit être âgé de 45 ans maximum et de bonne constitution”, didn’t manage, in the end, to persuade the Friulian priest, who refused the conditions proposed by the Belgian Company maintaining that they were not very favourable. Léon André did not hide his disappointment regarding the demands put forward by don Ridolfi. On May 22<sup>nd</sup> he wrote to Joseph Goorissens, the agent of the Belgian company charged with recruiting foreign workers:

Les prétentions de l'Abbé Rudolfi [Ridolfi] son excessives, et nous ne pouvons nous engager à payer les salaires maximum à des ouvriers se prétendant qualifiés alors qu'ils ne le sont pas. C'est à nous à les classer et à les payer suivant leurs capacités et dans le mêmes conditions que les belges. Les départs sont motivés par la question de salaire et de traitement. Ces gens sont d'une exigence sans pareille pour la nourriture; ils n'en ont jamais assez, mais ils n'entendent pas payer en proportion. Les Hollandais sont beaucoup plus raisonnables et, pour ce que nous avons pour les juger, il donnent plus de satisfaction; aussi nous les préférons aux Italiens. Si possible, veuillez donc en augmenter le nombre; nous avons place pour loger 150 hommes encore<sup>3</sup>.

The adverse conditions of work did not dissuade the potential emigrants and Italians and Friulians, who went in large numbers to work down the mines in Belgium. The priest Luigi Ridolfi observed how, in the immediate post-war period everybody wanted to go to France and how all roads led them there: "Belgium and Luxemburg served as an intermediate period to get to France. Hundreds left for little Luxemburg and thousands signed up as pseudo-miners for the "*charbonnages*" of Belgium"<sup>4</sup>. There was a group of Friulian miners at Winterslag in Limburg. Primo Vittorelli, born in Winterslag in June 1928, remembers that his father had arrived in Belgium in November 1922 "and he wasn't among the first to arrive. There were already Italian, and above all Friulian, emigrants in the area". He further adds that "My father did not want to remain in Italy under the Fascists, he had other ideas, he came to Belgium but even here he found himself with hostile people. Then, of course, working in the mines he made friends. He worked in various mines in the area,

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<sup>3</sup> See Maria Laura Franciosi (edited by), ... *per un sacco di carbone ... pour un sac de charbon ... voor een zak kolen*, seconda edizione, Liège, Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Internazionali, 1997, pages 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> See Segretariato del Popolo di Udine, *L'emigrante friulano*, Udine, Arti Grafiche Cooperative Friulane, 1926, pages 16-17.

Winterslag, Waterschei etc. He retired after 20 years of service”<sup>5</sup>. In 1922, for example, the following labourers left for Belgium: Luigi Zorzit, born in 1877, Azzano Decimo; Giuseppe Covre, born in Sacile on 19th December 1890; Giovanni Masutti, born in 1887, from Caneva; Angelo Viel, born in Caneva on 15th August 1881; Luigi Santin, born in 1898, from Caneva and Domenico Poletto, born in Caneva on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1899.

Between 1922 and 1930 39,507 arrivals were registered, with an annual average of 4,930 persons. Of these about 72% settled in the province of Hainaut and Lieges. In the same years, from 10,000 to 15,000 returned to Italy from Belgium. In 1922 the periodical “*La Nation Belge*” published a photograph of the arrival of 235 aspiring miners at the *Gare du Midi* who had arrived in the country to work in the region of Charleroi. They had left from Verona and came from the Veneto, Trentino and Friuli. They were workers who had worked on the openings of the tunnels through the Alps, in French mines or they had not managed to find work in the mines of Germany or Austria.<sup>6</sup> During the 1920s and 30s Friulians and Northern Italians in general formed the biggest group. In 1925, for example, out of a contingent of 129 Italian emigrants 44 were from Friuli and the Veneto, 18 from Trentino, and 17 each respectively from Tuscany and Lombardy, 12 from Emilia and 5 from Piedmont. In the industrial area of Monceaux-sur-Sambre, not far from Charleroi, of the 1,363 immigrants registered between 1922 and 1929, almost 70% said they were from Friuli and 13% from the Veneto. The majority of Friulians came from Valcellina, and especially from Montereale.

Before 1939 the participation of Italians in the mines was important, but not excessively consistent: in March 1932, for example, the Belgian mines declared that they gave work to 5,524 Italians, and, out of 127 Italians who repatriated after a stay in Belgium, only a quarter of them said they had

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<sup>5</sup> See Maria Laura Franciosi (edited by), ... *per un sacco di carbone...* op. cit., pages 75-76.

<sup>6</sup> See Jean-Louis Delaet, *Les Belges ne veulent plus descendre. Recours à la main-d'œuvre italienne de 1922 à 1946*, in Jeanne Vercheval-Vervoort – Jean-Louis Delaet (edited by), *Italiens de Wallonie*, Charleroi, Archives de Wallonie, 1996, p. 19.

worked as miners. This percentage would increase during the following years and particularly after the Second World War. Together with those who worked in the coal mines and stone quarries, Italians and Friulians worked in the building trade, in cement factories, in coking plants, in iron and steel works (blast furnaces) and in the construction of railways. The working conditions were often difficult and there were many abuses and discrimination compared to local workers. The Italian press, especially that with communist leanings, criticised the difference in pay between Italian and Belgian workers. The frequent violation of the law which restricted workers to an 8-hour day was also strongly criticised. In the iron and steel works “Providence” at Marchienne-au-Pont where many Friulians from Montereale Valcellina worked, “the eight hour shifts were practically abolished” and those who refused to do overtime were threatened with the sack.<sup>7</sup> There were also many accidents at work resulting from the lack of any safety measures.

**Table 1 – Entries, exits and balance of Italian migrants in Belgium (1919 – 1939)**

	<b>Entries</b>	<b>Exits</b>	<b>Balance</b>
<b>1919</b>	473	253	220
<b>1920</b>	997	465	532
<b>1921</b>	612	170	442
<b>1922</b>	2.178	523	1.655
<b>1923</b>	3.523	1.132	2.391
<b>1924</b>	7.505	1.602	5.903
<b>1925</b>	5.432	2.098	3.334
<b>1926</b>	3.905	1.776	2.129
<b>1927</b>	2.809	1.180	1.629
<b>1928</b>	2.965	969	1.996

<sup>7</sup> See “Drapeau rouge. Bandiera rossa”, 16-17 August 1925.

<b>1929</b>	4.973	1.296	3.677
<b>1930</b>	6.217	1.306	4.911
<b>1931</b>	3.884	1.276	2.608
<b>1932</b>	1.670	1.512	158
<b>1933</b>	1.051	894	157
<b>1934</b>	952	993	-41
<b>1935</b>	494	609	-115
<b>1936</b>	408	583	-175
<b>1937</b>	548	329	219
<b>1938</b>	500	314	186
<b>1939</b>	238	519	-281

Source: National Institute of Statistics

In December 1934 a royal decree established a percentage quota of foreign workers for every sector of activity. This caused protests and strikes were organised. For the Italians the decree had little effect because a few days after its approval the two governments started talks about the coal trade. An agreement between the two countries was reached on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1935: in return for the guarantee of work in Belgian mines for 4,700 Italians, Italy pledged to buy a million tons of coal. The possibility of work for the Italians anywhere but in the mines thus became extremely difficult.

## **2. Post Second World War and the miners**

There were about 30,000 Italians in Belgium at the outbreak of World War II. According to the census in 1961, twenty years later, the number of Italians had increased tenfold. In a country of less than ten million inhabitants the 300,000 Italians represented a large part. The large community of Italians was the result of a series of migratory waves which had already begun as soon as the war had ended.



On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1946 the Italian and Belgian governments signed the first bilateral agreement on emigration. Italy pledged to send 50,000 workers to the Belgian mines at a possible rate of 2,000 a week. Belgium, for its part, would guarantee Italy 200 kg of coal a day per emigrant. Young men, 35 years old at the most, and in good health, were “deported” to work down mines that had never been modernised, so that Italy could acquire energy and ease unemployment and social tension. Recruitment in Italy enlisted workers recommended by the Catholic Church and therefore Christians “regarded as more submissive and less demanding” said Anne Morelli. She added

From the announcement of the agreement in 1946 the Belgian Catholic Trade Union (*Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens*) contacted the Italian Workers Christian Associations (*Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani - Acli*) to organise the new arrivals. An agreement was signed between the two organisations “so that the Italian emigrants would not be attracted to foreign union organisations”. *Acli* and the Italian missionaries were the only organisations to be authorised to recruit Italian miners by the Belgian authorities. In 1947 a weekly Catholic magazine “Sun of Italy” (*Sole d’Italia*) was published which was extremely anti-communist; it was financed by *Acli*, the Belgian Catholic trade union, the Belgian and Italian governments and by benefactors who had already realised the political importance of supporting such an initiative [...] About thirty Italian missionaries were sent to Belgium to organise the emigrants into Italian parishes, separate from the Belgian ones, in close collaboration with Italian diplomats and the Christian Democrats<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See Anne Morelli, *Gli italiani del Belgio. Storia e storie di due secoli di migrazioni*, Foligno, Editoriale Umbra – Museo Regionale dell’Emigrazione “Pietro Conti”, 2004, pages 119-120. Sulla nascita e sull’attività belga

Among the more active priests in the Italian community was the Scalabrini missionary Giacomo Sartori. Born in Possagno on April 17<sup>th</sup> 1922, he was ordained in July 1945. He insisted on becoming a missionary and was sent to Belgium, first to La Louvière, Maurage and then to Marchienne-au-Pont where he built the first Italian Church in Belgium, dedicated to Saint Maria Goretti. He was an active contributor to the weekly journal “*Sole d’Italia*”, and was *Acli*’s national representative in Belgium from 1956 to 1961, the year in which he left Belgium to begin his mission in France, first at Hayange in the Moselle and then in Paris where he died on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1967<sup>9</sup>.

**Table 2 – Entries, exits and balance of Italian emigrants in Belgium (1946 – 1971)**

	<b>Entries</b>	<b>Exits</b>	<b>Balance</b>
<b>1946</b>	19.959		
<b>1947</b>	39.310		
<b>1948</b>	49.677	13.141	36.536
<b>1949</b>	9.269	15.254	-5.985
<b>1950</b>	7.093	11.384	-4.291
<b>1951</b>	38.284	11.200	27.084
<b>1952</b>	29.143	13.168	15.975
<b>1953</b>	14.513	12.445	2.068
<b>1954</b>	9.576	11.353	-1.777
<b>1955</b>	22.978	10.141	12.837
<b>1956</b>	20.721	9.660	11.061
<b>1957</b>	21.903	9.376	12.527
<b>1958</b>	12.111	10.533	1.578

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dell’Associazione italiana lavoratori italiani (Acli) See Antonio Rubattu, *La baracca. 50 anni di Acli in Belgio*, Bruxelles, Editrice Acli Belgio, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> For an accurate profile of Giacomo Sartori and his works see Abramo Seghetto (edited by), *Giacomo Sartori. La lanterna magica di Astarotte. Fatti di emigrazione ed altro visti da un arguto osservatore e giornalista*, Cremona, l’emigrato, 2001.

<b>1959</b>	6.204	10.264	-4.060
<b>1960</b>	5.604	10.024	-4.420
<b>1961</b>	6.157	8.953	-2.796
<b>1962</b>	8.745	7.216	1.529
<b>1963</b>	9.452	7.214	2.238
<b>1964</b>	11.373	6.958	4.415
<b>1965</b>	15.087	5.460	9.627
<b>1966</b>	12.426	6.629	5.797
<b>1967</b>	8.683	6.433	2.250
<b>1968</b>	8.148	6.591	1.557
<b>1969</b>	8.918	6.164	2.754
<b>1970</b>	10.496	7.718	2.778
<b>1971</b>	10.931	6.334	4.597

Source: National Institute of Statistics

From 1946 to 1957 140,469 workers moved to Belgium and 46,364 members of their families. Among the regions which contributed the largest numbers were, in order, Abruzzo, Veneto, Puglia and Sicily. Among the provinces which contributed the largest numbers were Udine, Lecce and Chieti. In Friuli the miners came mainly from the valley of the River Natisone (from Drenchia, Grimacco, Pulfero, San Leonardo, San Pietro al Natisone, Savogna and Stregna) and from the valley of the River Torre (Tarcento, Lusevera and Taipana).

The aspiring miners from all over Italy gathered in the three underground levels of the station in Milan where, after a health check, they were sent to Belgium. After a train journey that could last up to 52 hours, they reached the mining area of Charleroi and Limburg. Working conditions were hard, the quality of their lodgings (the *cantine*) very poor; they had to live in wooden or tin shacks, with a cast-iron stove, metal cupboards and bunk beds which had

been previously used by Russian and German prisoners of war. Of the “economical” lodgings, furnished and at a moderate price as provided for in the contract, there was no trace. The contract, however, did not provide for any period of training, which was only introduced in 1952.

**Table 3 – Underground miners present in Belgium between 1945 e 1971**

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Belgian</b>	<b>Italian</b>	<b>Other nationalities</b>	<b>% of Italians of the total</b>
<b>1945</b>	115.513	58.652	1.729	55.132	<b>1%</b>
<b>1946</b>	118.671	54.567	18.030	46.074	<b>15%</b>
<b>1947</b>	114.334	54.188	28.241	31.905	<b>25%</b>
<b>1948</b>	128.454	56.202	40.948	31.304	<b>32%</b>
<b>1949</b>	116.318	57.803	33.232	25.283	<b>29%</b>
<b>1950</b>	108.677	55.889	28.996	23.792	<b>27%</b>
<b>1951</b>	119.770	52.081	47.553	20.136	<b>40%</b>
<b>1952</b>	119.578	51.963	48.598	19.017	<b>41%</b>
<b>1953</b>	115.224	53.008	43.120	19.096	<b>37%</b>
<b>1954</b>	109.766	53.701	38.293	17.772	<b>35%</b>
<b>1955</b>	114.452	49.917	45.646	18.889	<b>40%</b>
<b>1956</b>	107.099	46.281	42.150	18.668	<b>39%</b>
<b>1957</b>	115.889	45.498	43.995	26.396	<b>38%</b>
<b>1958</b>	105.588	44.284	39.989	21.315	<b>38%</b>
<b>1959</b>	90.934	39.163	34.140	17.631	<b>38%</b>
<b>1960</b>	77.333	34.106	28.545	14.682	<b>37%</b>
<b>1961</b>	66.459	29.833	23.986	12.640	<b>36%</b>
<b>1962</b>	64.097	27.255	21.100	15.742	<b>33%</b>
<b>1963</b>	64.327	27.892	18.166	21.269	<b>28%</b>
<b>1964</b>	65.646	23.423	15.601	26.622	<b>24%</b>

<b>1965</b>	57.467	20.073	13.909	23.485	<b>24%</b>
<b>1966</b>	47.503	17.327	11.968	18.208	<b>25%</b>
<b>1967</b>	42.067	16.100	10.492	15.475	<b>25%</b>
<b>1968</b>	37.114	14.678	8.790	13.646	<b>24%</b>
<b>1969</b>	30.875	12.900	7.023	10.942	<b>23%</b>
<b>1970</b>	27.720	11.550	5.726	10.444	<b>21%</b>
<b>1971</b>	26.098	10.659	4.804	10.644	<b>18%</b>

Source: Jeanne Vercheval-Vervoort – Jean-Louis Delaet (edited by), *Italiens de Wallonie*, op. cit., p. 239.

For the unprepared miners going down the pit was a traumatic experience. And still the convoys continued to transfer thousands of Italian emigrants, most of them unaware of the risks that mining held for their health and their lungs. The *high performance* of the miners (such was the term used by the Belgian authorities to define the Italian workers) could not hide the high human cost that the aspiring miners had to face; apart from the dead, the 7,300 pensioned off as invalids must also be remembered; almost the same number for accidents; the 1,500 invalids on social assistance because they were unable to reach pensionable age; the 220 deranged, some of whom ended up in mental institutions and some who were brought home to Italy; and finally the imprecise but not inconsiderable number affected by silicosis which the Belgian authorities only recognised as an illness caused by working conditions in 1964. The list of victims of cave-ins or explosions at the bottom of the mines reads like a war bulletin, especially in the Walloon mines, which were more dangerous than the Flemish ones because they had been used for centuries, they had antiquated equipment and imperfect roof supports; with the fall in the price of coal on the world markets in the years 1957/58 they even became uneconomic. Between 1946 and 1961 there

were 820 Italian victims in the mines, including the tragedy at Bois du Cazier (Marcinelle) on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1956 in which 262 miners perished of which 136 were Italian. A member of the Italian rescue team declared they were “all corpses” after 15 days of effort and anxious waiting. Seven Friulians died in the tragedy at Marcinelle: Ferruccio Pegorer, born in Azzano Decimo on 8th January 1930; Pietro Basso, born in Fiume Veneto on 25th September 1925; Lorenzo De Santis, born in Flaibano on 27th September 1927; Ciro Natale Piccoli, born in Povoletto on 20th December 1919; Ruggero Castellani, born in Ronchis on 8th March 1915; Armando Zanelli, born in San Giorgio di Nogaro on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1921 and Mario Buiatti born in Udine on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1925<sup>10</sup>. The trial which followed the catastrophe of Marcinelle did not bring to light who was responsible among those in charge of the mine<sup>11</sup>. “Everything possible was put into action by the owners of the coal companies and the administrators of the Belgian mines to prevent the court from finding anyone guilty” observed Anne Morelli<sup>12</sup>. The exploitation of the mine workers had already been reported some years earlier by the Friulian miner Gastone Lodolo from Udine. He arrived in Belgium on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1953 and had been recruited as an unskilled worker to work down the mines. He enrolled as a member of the *Syndacat Unique* which had communist leanings; he was put in charge of the Italian workers at Charleroi and became a member of the executive committee of the unions of the city. After having reported the lack of safety measures in the Belgian mines a number of times, he was deported from the country on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1955 on the orders of the Minister for Justice without any intervention from the Italian consular authorities on his behalf. On 25<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a complete list of the names of the dead, see Paola Cecchini, *fumo nero. Martinelle 1956 – 2006*, Jesi, Regione Marche – Servizio attività e beni culturali, sport, marchigiani nel mondo, 2006, pages 165-177.

<sup>11</sup> On the Marcinelle trial, see Marie Louise De Roeck – Julie Urbain – Paul Lootens, *Tutti cadaveri. Le procès de la catastrophe du Bois du Cazier à Marcinelle*, Bruxelles, Editions Aden, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See Anne Morelli, *Gli italiani del Belgio* op. cit., p. 122.

August 1956 Gastone Lodolo wrote in the pages of the newspaper “*L’Unità*”:

After having worked down the mines and gained experience from coming into continuous contact with miners from other companies, I have been able to observe that at Marcinelle, as in the rest of Belgium, there are inhumane conditions of exploitation and systematic violation of the fundamental principles of safety, like for example the laying of explosives by unqualified personnel, classified as labourers; setting off the explosives in the coal faces without moving the personnel away; making the personnel continue to work even when there were unexploded cartridges in the ceilings of the coal seams; a lack of red signal lamps for the travelling mine-cars; rubber belts sliding over stone, with a serious risk of self combustion and therefore of fire because there are always firedamp residues in the tunnels; simple labourers are handed iron cartridges charged with dynamite and as they are so heavy they are pulled along the ground with ropes (all you need is one spark to set the whole lot off); a lack of caution on the part of the bosses (*porions*) in the use of the lamps for signalling the presence of gas; the dry drilling of rocks ,with a serious risk of silicosis; a refusal on the part of the *porions* to stop the motors which drive the rubber belts and the other engines which cause a lot of coal- and rock-dust during the short break of 20 minutes the miners get to eat; a refusal on the part of the *porions* to give a note to allow a miner who says he is sick to visit a doctor; in the dispensaries doctors treat the injured in a way that is unheard of: miners are sent back to work with injuries that have hardly healed and in some cases

are still bleeding [...] What I have just described - in brief – are the conditions of life and work for the Italian miners in Belgium. The tragedy of Marcinelle, which cost the lives of many workers, among whom were eight Friulians, was the logical outcome of an inhumane system of exploitation. The disaster happened in August of this year, but it could have happened at any time in the past and it could happen again at any mine even today”<sup>13</sup>.

Very few avoid getting silicosis “the silent death”: inhaling the dust from the coal and the rock (*la pussiera*) impregnates the miners’ bronchial tubes causing serious respiratory problems and leading to partial or total invalidity for those affected, and in most cases leads to death<sup>14</sup>.

A propos we must mention an important conference on diseases caused by working conditions which was organised in September 1980 in Cividale del Friuli by Ado Cont, head of INAC (*Istituto Nazionale Assistenza ai Cittadini*) in Cividale and secretary of the Slovenian Emigrants Union of Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Guglielmo Pitzalis, a young doctor from the Department of Pneumology at Udine hospital. In the proceedings of the conference Pitzalis reported the results of an enquiry into 300 miners from the valley of the River Natisone: 159 of them were affected with silicosis and tuberculosis contracted in the mines of Belgium whilst 200 were affected with chronic bronchitis. As he clarified in the proceedings he wasn’t able to verify other illnesses such as arthrosis due to vibrations and a reduction in hearing due to the use of the hammer-pick. The only chapter on the history of Friulian emigration to Belgium remains this research which he conducted with doctors and health workers who interviewed those who had returned to their homeland. The problem of silicosis has been put forward as a social problem

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<sup>13</sup> See Gastone Lodolo, *Denunciai l’inferno di Marcinelle ma fui arrestato ed espulso dal Belgio*, in “L’Unità”, 25 August 1956, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> See Daniele Rossini, *L’altra Marcinelle. Dalle grandi tragedie sul lavoro alla lunga catena di vittime della silicosi*, Bruxelles, Acli Belgio – Patronato Acli, 2006.



which involved and involves not only emigrants but also concerns the safeguarding of health in the work place and also at the place where the emigrants returned to: it therefore involves both the Italian and the Belgian governments. In this case social history and emigration coincide perfectly: the local example is proof of an even bigger problem, especially as we are now past the social emergency, in another century, in the now cosmopolitan dimension of the European Union<sup>15</sup>.

In 2005 the Superintendent of the Archives in Friuli Venezia Giulia published the proceedings of the conference dedicated to “The papers of Hippocrates. The health archives of Friuli Venezia Giulia” (*Le carte di Ippocrate. Gli archivi della sanità nel Friuli Venezia Giulia.*) Pitzalis presented “The archive of the former dispensary of the province of Udine. A history of public health” (*L’Archivio dell’ex-dispensario provinciale di Udine. Una storia di sanità pubblica*). A whole page dedicated to the annual register of the medical examinations made on the Friulian emigrants and an explicit invitation to save the archives and reopen the enquiry of 25 years before. It would be wrong to once again ignore this proposal. The economic commitment which this enquiry would involve, even just to transcribe and compare the thousands of records, would be considerable, but it is easy to see the benefits such an enquiry could bring at various levels. The importance that should be given to this research could depend on this enquiry: the research was, in any case, correctly carried out, and included photographs and direct evidence about emigration, sometimes in the naïve belief that they can speak for themselves<sup>16</sup>.

The life stories of the miners are the last voices of an era lived in suffering, without any ostentatious heroism. Their sacrifice is one of the blackest pages in the history of Italian emigration, the other side of an economic “miracle” the other side of the Common Market.

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<sup>15</sup> See Ado Cont - Guglielmo Pitzalis, *Convegno. Indagine sulle malattie professionali*, Cividale 1983.

<sup>16</sup> See G. Pitzalis, *L’Archivio dell’ex-dispensario provinciale di Udine. Una storia di sanità pubblica*, in ANAI, *Le carte di Ippocrate. Gli archivi per la sanità nel Friuli Venezia Giulia*, Udine 2005, pages 117-124.

The decision by the Italian government to suspend emigration to Belgium immediately after 7 Italian workers were killed in a firedamp explosion in the mine at Rien du Coeur at Quaregnon on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1956, and the impression caused in Italy by the catastrophe at Marcinelle, did not completely stop people leaving to work in the Belgian mines. From the end of 1956 to the end of 1957 about 10,000 workers from Italy and numerous Italians who were working in the mines of Lorraine hit by the devaluation of the French franc flocked to the Belgian mines and were immediately recruited, without the formalities prescribed by contractual agreements, which were practically ignored. Workers stopped at nothing to find a job, to improve their life style, to get out of a personal and family situation which was intolerable, even at the risk of their health. Anne Morelli observed:

Even if, officially, after the disaster direct emigration from Italy to Belgium was suspended, there were still plenty of people who wanted to go. If after the Second World War there had been more emigration from the north (and particularly from the Veneto), those arriving in Belgium in the 1960s came from the south and the islands.<sup>17</sup>

Friulians and Italians not only went to Belgium to work down the mines but also to work in the iron and steel industry which is closely connected to the coal industry. There had been a number of industries in Wallonia since the 19<sup>th</sup> century which used coal to produce energy to work iron imported from nearby countries. Many Italians worked in one of these huge industries, *Tôleries Delloye-Matthieu* in Marchin near Huy, about 30 km from Liege: in 1945 there were 10 Italians out of a total of 512; in 1946, 26 out of 803; in 1947, 108 out of 1,002; in 1948, 160 out of 1,302; in 1949, 155 out of 1,234;

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<sup>17</sup> See Anne Morelli, *Gli italiani del Belgio* op cit., p. 125.

in 1950, 176 out of 1,471. In 1951 out of 1,556 workers at Tôleries Delloye-Matthieu there were 242 Italians coming mainly from the North and in particular from the provinces of Belluno (81), Udine (55); Padua (28), Venice (5), Reggio Emilia (6), Bergamo (7), Vicenza (5), Treviso (6) and the biggest group from one town was a group of 9 from Campobasso. Among those from the Veneto and Friuli the municipalities of Mel, Andreis and Belluno were the most represented with 67, 42 and 21 respectively.<sup>18</sup>

In the recent history of Belgium the movement of migrants is an experience which has left a deep impression on the country. And it was the Italian migration movement which contributed most to a change in the Belgian material culture. As Anne Morelli observed “it is still the most important migratory movement that Belgium has ever seen and the number of Italian immigrants the largest, more by far than the immigrants from Morocco or the Belgian Congo, a former Belgian colony”<sup>19</sup>. For better or for worse, Belgium left its imprint not only on those who decided to stay but also on the many Italians who, after a short or longer stay, decided to return to their homeland or to move to other countries such as, for example, Argentina or Canada<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> See Riccardo Pasquini, *Un siècle de vie industrielle aux Tôleries Delloye-Matthieu 1896 – 1996. Depuis 1946, la communauté italienne est présente parmi nous*, Marchin, Comité Italo Belge, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> See Anne Morelli, *Gli italiani del Belgio* op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>20</sup> Concerning the Italians in Belgium who emigrated to Canada, see Anne Morelli, *Des Italo-belges au Canada: résultats d'une première enquête*, in Serge Jaumain (ed.), *Les Immigrants Préférés. Les Belges*, Ottawa, Presses Universitaires d'Ottawa, 1999, pages 159-171; Marina Maccari, *From 'watchdog' to 'salesman': Italian re-emigration from Belgium to Canada after the Second World War*, paper presented at the Social Science History Association annual meeting, Minneapolis 2-5 November 2006 (unpublished).