

THE EMIGRANTS' JOURNEY: FROM SAILING SHIPS TO THE SECOND POST-WAR PERIOD WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON DEPARTURES FROM THE PORT OF TRIESTE

Francesco Fait

The emigrants' journey is of particular importance for the observer of the 21st century, as it has been for the millions of people who have experienced or witnessed such journeys in the past decades and centuries, as well as for earlier observers. It is by no means a coincidence that between 1871 and 1914, the period of the so-called "great transatlantic emigration", it was common to stretch a thread between the ship deck and the land: the thread broke when the ship left the dock, bringing its load of emigrants towards the ocean. The symbolism was meaningful and manifest, although not really based on reality: first of all, emigrants were often experienced and skilled travellers who had severed that thread and knotted it back multiple times (as did the seasonal migrants travelling between Europe and the Americas known as *Golondrinas* and *Birds of Passage*); secondly, travellers often boarded the ships in foreign ports, in countries they felt no connection with, meaning they had already severed that thread hundreds or thousands of miles before, possibly in some noisy and crowded railway station. Furthermore, the journey by sea, the transoceanic crossing, was just part of the emigrants' journey: they had to go through equally challenging phases when covering the stretch between home and the port of embarkation, when staying at this port and then again, after landing, at the port of arrival, as well as when travelling to their final destination. It is nevertheless undeniable that, due to its strong symbolism, the ocean crossing is usually considered as the climax and embodiment of the migratory experience.

After all, journeys, emigrants' journeys by sea, are all similar in their typical features; it would thus be possible to analyse them diachronically, from the period of sailing ships until after the Second World War, comparing both the journeys per se and the reasons why people decided to leave, the diet, the accommodation on board or at the port of arrival.

This study will examine these topics, especially with reference to the legendary period for emigrants' journeys: from the late decades of the 19th century to the early 20th century, with special focus on the port of Trieste, which, in the first decade of the 20th century, played a major role in European emigration to the Americas (the same occurred between the two World Wars, due to the number of Jews leaving for Palestine, and after the Second World War, because of the subsidized migration of Italians).

Different sources have been used: scientific literature, archive documents, analyses carried out by writers, autobiographic memories of people who crossed the ocean as emigrants. We will not analyse these sources from a historiographical point of view, but an element can be immediately noticed: the journey for emigration purposes was seen very differently by those who analysed it and by those who experienced it, not only due to the different cultural means available. This is how, for instance, Georges Guyan commented on the swarms of Italian emigrants he saw in 1898:

“Emigrants are thus sent far away, into lands to be tilled, reclaimed, and later cultivated, and the regions where they end up packed are even more uncivilized, we would say even wilder, than the remote parts of Italy where they come from; between their starting and their arrival point, these people have crossed contemporary civilization like the hasty traveller crosses an oasis when coming from regions of the furthestmost desert. These people are destined not to enjoy the civilization they swiftly glimpsed; emigrants are not initiates in it, their participation is completely passive, insofar as they are its victims.”¹

In the paragraph we have just quoted, the French writer identified at least two migration-related *topoi*: the emigrant seen as victim and the antinomy civilization/uncivilization, which it is worth discussing. As to the first *topos*, it should not be taken for granted that emigrants are by definition naive.² The second *topos*

¹ This quote is reported by Giuseppe D'Angelo, *Il viaggio, il sogno, la realtà. Per una storia dell'emigrazione italiana in Venezuela (1945-1990)*, Edizioni del Paguro, Salerno, 1995, p. 10.

² In this respect, it has been observed that the emigrants' initial choice was often more strategic than people are generally inclined to think: “their adventures after arriving in the new world almost always proved that, aside from some ‘thoughtless’ individuals who had indeed trusted their chances, most emigrants – both the ones planning to stay

reveals an inclination to prejudices as well as the haste to divide the world into geographical areas, which are then ascribed to civilization or its lack, ignoring the fact that even in the areas defined as civilized there were large areas of marginality; it is, however, true that emigrants came in touch with a civilization they just caught a “glimpse” of, with which they would have contacts only from a distance, as they were destined to be secluded into third or fourth class railway carriages, to be later transferred to cheap inns scattered throughout the city slums or to those often run-down and unhealthy structures called emigrants’ houses.

The assessments of those who actually experienced emigration can, however, be very different from what we have just outlined: they convey a more cunning and disenchanted outlook, deriving from both proximity to and distance from the recounted events (proximity, because they were the protagonists, and distance in time, as the events are recalled long after they took place), but probably also from the reflected glory of the successful emigration, if it had indeed been successful. Life aboard the ships crossing the ocean was, after all, a cross-section of what happened on the mainland. People were born, fell ill, died:

“Many women were... near their time and left nonetheless, maybe in the belief they’d save on the trip or on the childbirth, because it was free; small children under six months or one year of age did not pay, they stayed with their mum. On each trip one, two were born; one or two... well, always well, always well. No child ever died. Whereas, during each trip one or two men died, maybe old, maybe sad, I don’t know what plagued them.”³

indefinitely and those who were only staying temporarily – had their own plan; before and after leaving Europe they carried out a series of actions which were far from being naive and aimed at reaching satisfying results by making the most of the few available resources (stability of one’s small and larger family, multiethnic health institutions, interpersonal networks etc.).”

Source: E. Franzina, *Traversate. Le grandi migrazioni transatlantiche e i racconti italiani del viaggio per mare*, Editoriale umbra, Foligno, 2003, p. 27.

³ Excerpt from the memoirs of Lucia Nebbiolo Gonella, from Piedmont, who left for Argentina in 1901, still a baby in arms, and then crossed the ocean multiple times until 1960, when she went back to Italy to settle down in Genoa for good. Source: C. Lupi, “*Trenta giorni di macchina a vapore*”. *Appunti sul viaggio degli emigranti transoceanici*, “Movimento operaio e socialista, N. 3, September-December 1983, p.479.

The decision to leave

The decision to go away, to leave one's home, to start the journey usually rooted in need and straitened circumstances: poverty, unemployment, exploitation, exorbitant taxes, usury, difficult climatic or market situation. Deep-rooted circumstances, which cannot be overcome in the short run, but which suddenly appear disruptable by playing the emigration card. The decision to emigrate and the choice of the destination are strongly influenced, at least in the early stages of the "Great Emigration", by intermediaries, middlemen, emigration agents and representatives of shipping companies, who immediately become the addressees of the anti-emigration debate, in which they are depicted as sly and deceitful agitators, whereas future emigrants are presented as brainless robots:

"Everywhere there are clerks scenting poverty and dissatisfaction and offering ship tickets to those poor wretches who want to leave their country, or inciting them to sell house, chattels and land to scrape together the money for the journey. Doctors studying the power of suggestion could observe emigrants to study how an idea planted in the brain can act on a man's will with almost no participation of awareness.

Starvation, weakness, depression exalt excitability and make suggestion easier. The carrier lends a hand to these wretches to get them up to their feet and uses all the skills of his trade to impress them, to fascinate them, to plant the idea of redemption in their brain. As soon as their promise is made, he incites them to fulfil it: supporting them, when they hesitate, spurring them on, when they step back."⁴

⁴ A. Martellini, *Il commercio dell'emigrazione: intermediari e agenti*, in P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, E. Franzina (edited by), *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Partenze*, Donzelli, Roma, 2001, p. 293. Sometimes it is unexpected people who persuade someone to emigrate, as was the case for Cavenzano (Campolongo al Torre, Udine): during the Sunday sermon on November 3, 1878 the priest "said, while preaching his sermon 'about the Pharaohs', that even here there are pharaohs who try to convince the people that in America they will have to fight snakes and yellow fever. They are snakes themselves, he said, because they eat the poor people to support their wolf; and the yellow fever is here, where I have buried between 7 and 800 persons since I became parish priest, at least 600 of which died of pellagra, as I can prove with my registers. ...

Do not believe, he said, that I am advising you to emigrate, but trying America will surely be better than dying of pellagra; unless your masters change system, to avoid having to drive the oxen and use the plough themselves."

Source: F. Cecotti, D. Mattiussi, *Un'altra terra, un'altra vita. L'emigrazione isontina in Sud America tra storia e memoria (1878 - 1970)*, Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Storica e Sociale "Leopoldo Gasparini", Gorizia, 2003, pp.18-19.

The propaganda, the migration-oriented advertising, was at any rate a wide-ranging, complex and structured phenomenon, way beyond the cliché of the grim, cheating recruiter, who was just the tip of the iceberg, the chain link which emigrants noticed most conspicuously and was thus often the target of complaints and retaliations from discontented and disappointed emigrants.⁵ Starting in the third quarter of the 19th century, destination countries began to create direct communication channels with Europe, often by sending their own agents.

Brazil and Argentina offered interesting conditions, especially to would-be immigrants from Italy and Southern Europe: free passage, immediate granting of civil rights, free repatriation of widows, orphans and disabled workers as well as a few days free lodging in hotels for emigrants plus free journey to the interior of the country. As to the United States, the propaganda and the sale of land to be cultivated targeted above all Great Britain and Northern Europe and was organized by various states, such as Texas, Virginia or California, as well as by railway companies, such as *Illinois Central*, *Kansas Pacific*, *Missouri Pacific* and *Union Pacific*. Very advanced and persuasive advertising techniques were used, especially by railway companies, which literally invaded stations, hotels for emigrants, ports of departure and arrival with all kinds of material, sometimes even with travelling exhibitions; they also organized hostels to provide immigrants with primary assistance, urged newcomers to write home, hoping more people would decide to join them.⁶

Before the law issued in 1901, emigrant recruitment in Italy was managed by large agencies, usually located in coastal towns like Genoa – Colajanni, Laurens, Gondrand – or Naples – Ciamberini, Rocco Piaggio and Raggio; said law, however, forced them to pass the business on to shipping companies. Agencies first and companies later were structured as large networks, which became increasingly larger as migration grew: in 1892 there were approximately 5,000 intermediaries, in 1895 7,000, in 1901

⁵ We refer here to the following lines, in which Francesco Sartori, a Venetian farmer, recounts the reception of the intermediaries in Marseilles in November 1877: they had promised a journey by steamer, but it turned out to be a sailing ship:

“The traitors from Marseilles have arrived. De P..., C... and T... And we, around 100 of us, surrounded them and wanted to kill all three of them. A bedlam, something extraordinary back then.”

Source: E. Franzina, *Merica! Merica! Emigrazione e colonizzazione nelle lettere dei contadini veneti e friulani in America Latina (1876-1902)*, Cierre Edizioni, Verona, 1984, p. 79.

⁶ P. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet. European Migration to the Usa*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1971, pp 76-79.

10,000 and in 1911 13,000.⁷ There is no significant difference between those who worked in the field before or after 1901, when the relevant law abolished emigration agencies and entrusted shipping companies with emigrant recruitment. These people enjoyed a certain prestige or social credibility, had a certain degree of culture as well as a variety of opportunities to use these gifts: mayors, town clerks, parish priests, primary school teachers, town authorities, retired *carabinieri* sergeants, barbers, tradesmen.⁸

It is difficult to assess now the influence and success of said propaganda on the decision to emigrate. The large amount of material available (newspaper ads, pamphlets, booklets, guides) could lead us to overestimate its importance and role; apparently however, after a first stage in which the only information about the world people dreamt of was provided by those who wanted to recruit manpower and passengers, people then began to trust above all news coming from relatives and acquaintances who had experienced or were experiencing emigration. This communication took place by means of letters, i.e. documents containing direct and fact-based information, which does not apply to advertising, often openly surreptitious or even deceitful. The authors of those letters knew the situation, both in the home country and in the new world, and their judgement could be considered sincere and honest, as they had no interest in selling tickets.⁹

⁷ A. Martellini, *Il commercio dell'emigrazione ...*, cit., p. 297.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 301.

⁹ We shall not forget, however, that there are also what we could call inspired letters, both pro emigration and against it, which tend to hide or distort inconvenient events; in the first case to cash in brokerage fees, in the second one to indulge landowners, who feared the farmers' exodus from their lands.

The journey before the journey: port choice, lodging and embarkation

After having left behind the land of their ancestors, emigrants often reached the port of departure by train, thus already experiencing on the “land steamer” the dirtiness, crowding and promiscuity which would accompany them in the following stages of the journey. In 1908, Teodorico Rosati, sea health expert, heavily criticized the Italian railway companies which “granted emigrants 50% discount on standard rates and packed them into fourth class carriages which then travelled slower than goods trains and even had to give way to cattle trains.”¹⁰ During their journey by train, emigrants often had to transfer to another train in countries with languages they did not speak; handwritten maps with the names of the towns where the transfer to another train had to take place in order to reach the port of departure can be found in historical archives, amid documents seized by the police.¹¹ At the most popular stations this information was sometimes given by representatives of the various shipping companies, who were easily identifiable as they wore badges or clothes in the company colours. Emigrants had thus already begun their adventure through unknown lands; to decipher these lands they had to rely on the advice and experience of people they had never seen before and who often turned out to be braggarts, swindlers or worse; when trusting the wrong people, things could end up badly. It was no coincidence that, in the railway terminals of coastal towns, the competent authorities were assisted by humanitarian societies, such as San Raffaele or the League Against White-Slave Traffic – the presence of which was documented in the railway station of Trieste in the early 20th century.

The port of departure chosen was not something the emigrants could decide or influence; this is clearly stated in an unsigned document (drawn up in the Chamber of Commerce of Trieste, which was then – 1913 – part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) requesting an emigration law channelling the whole of the large national emigration movement to the port of Trieste:

¹⁰ T. Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e marinai*, Vallardi, Milano, 1908, p. 69.

¹¹ A beautiful example of these maps is contained in F. Cecotti, D. Mattiussi, *Un'altra terra, un'altra vita ...*, cit., p. 25.

“Only in Austria, where the respect for individual freedoms is not too marked in other fields, is the following objected [to a law stating the obligation to use the port of Trieste for Austrian emigrants]: 1. It is not lawful to force the emigrants’ free choice of the port of departure; 2. The journey through Trieste is longer; 3. The means of transport available in Trieste are not sufficient to satisfy the emigration needs of the whole country.

These objections are easy to disprove. In truth, emigrants have no free choice as to the port of departure. The port of departure is not chosen by the emigrants, but by the shipping companies, which increase or decrease ticket prices according to the dictate of the consortium, so that the number of emigrants transported by each company meets the quota defined in the international agreements; it is chosen by the countless agents, middlemen and intermediaries who exploit ignorant and illiterate emigrants, who end up travelling blindly, often in long and vicious tours.”¹²

This is a clear outline of the international market of emigrants’ departures, which was ruled by a cartel of English, Dutch, German, French and North-American shipping companies, which practically controlled migration between Europe, Canada and the United States. The cartel divided in advance influence areas, ports of departure, call and arrival among the participants. When differences arose between planning and actual performance, a compensation was paid by the societies which had worked more than due to those which had suffered a profit loss.¹³ The percentages to be granted to the various companies in the various ports were not only influenced by the contractual power of the companies; decisions by the governments often played a crucial role as well, even when they were just announced. We can therefore assume

¹² State Archive of Trieste, Chamber of Commerce, envelope 155, position 305-05.

¹³ E. Franzina, *Traversate...*, cit., p. 40.

The building of cartels was allowed by international right and was carried out openly; cartels were used to avoid unfair competition, which had caused enormous damages to the companies in the past. The *Hamburg-Amerika Linie* had started in 1885 by signing an agreement with the British companies in order to reduce their business share in Hamburg in exchange for the German withdrawal from Goteborg. In 1888, the German companies had come to an agreement with the *Red Star Line* of Antwerp. In 1892, said companies founded with the *Holland-Amerika Linie* the so-called “North-Atlantic pool” – *North Atlantic Steamship Association* – in order to establish some rules for comparative advertising as well as the shares of future traffic based on the divisions of 1880. In 1908, a cartel was promoted by the *Cunard Line* with the other companies in order to establish fares and stagger traffic.

Source: P. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*. ..., cit., p. 95.

that, among the reasons why the company *Società Austriaca di Navigazione* (better known as *Austro Americana*) from Trieste, and therefore the port of Trieste, secured a remarkable amount of the westbound emigration to the United States, there likely was the prospective “nationalization” of Austrian emigration, which would then depart from Trieste, capital of the Austrian Coast. Trieste secured 4% of continental emigration to the United States in the early 20th century, thus being placed ninth between 1908 and 1913.¹⁴ The importance of the port of Trieste would have increased further, as even higher quotas had been established for the future (7% after May 1, 1915 and 19% between January 1, 1919 and December 31, 1929), if the First World War had not broken out, wiping out migration.

After getting off the train, emigrants had to find lodging till their departure; the situation varied in the different cities and towns where fate had brought them. In Italy, even before 1901, accommodation was by law to be paid for by the intermediaries, in order to fight the habit of letting emigrants arrive way before their date of departure, thus increasing the profit of the many businesses thriving thanks to their stay in town. As to infrastructures, there were no dedicated hotels or emigrants’ houses, only authorized inns. In 1905 there were 87 in Naples (2400 beds), 33 in Genoa (720 beds), 25 in Palermo (770 beds) and 18 in Messina (341 beds).¹⁵ In light of the huge migration movements in the years before the First World War¹⁶ – when the Italian ports gained supremacy over the Northern-European ports as to departures to the Americas, – it is thus manifest that most emigrants scattered in port cities, finding lodging in unauthorized inns. These made up a real lobby, which in 1907 managed to have an emigrants’ house with a capacity of 900 beds in Naples closed

¹⁴ G. Russo, *Emigrazione transoceanica e trasporti marittimi dal porto di Trieste*, “Bollettino dell’emigrazione”, N. 2, 1919, p. 4. The ranking is as follows: Naples 156,125 passengers a year on average; Bremen 150,249; Genoa 126,897; Hamburg 115,676; Havre 73,752 (the average, however, refers to the period 1908-1912); Antwerp 69,697; Rotterdam 47,229, Rijeka 25,616, Trieste 25,391.

¹⁵ A. Molinari, *Porti, trasporti e compagnie*, in P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi, E. Franzina (edited by), *Storia dell’emigrazione italiana. Partenze, cit.*, p. 251.

¹⁶ The traffic volumes in 1913, when the traffic reached its peak, were: NA 209,835; GE 138,166; PA 62,745; ME 6,367.

Source: A. Molinari, *Porti, trasporti e compagnie*, cit., p. 247.

down¹⁷ as well as to organize a general strike four years later, when the health authorities set up a shelter for emigrants in order to withstand a cholera epidemic.¹⁸ Italian ports were lacking in other facilities needed in embarkation operations: during most of the 19th century, Genoa used a dock, Ponte Calvi, with no buildings or shelters; only between 1877 and 1890, during the works to enlarge the port facilities, was the dock Ponte Federico Guglielmo (expressly built) destined exclusively to passenger traffic; the Maritime Station was also erected, with two buildings for checks and services (customs, health check, shop, lavatory), separated by a canopy protecting the waiting passengers from sun and bad weather.¹⁹

The situation in the German ports was very different: in Hamburg there was a village for emigrants covering “an area of 25,000 square metres, made available for free for 25 years to the Hamburg-Amerika Linie by the State”, with shops, places of worship and entertainment. People’s concentration was avoided in Bremen, where inns were used instead: “50 inns for 3775 emigrants, or for over 5000, if need be”, each of which offers “good lodging, in every respect, and works flawlessly”.²⁰

The company controlling the local emigration market in Trieste, the *Austro Americana*,²¹ decided, as opposed to its competitors, to follow the example of Hamburg: an emigrants’ house²² was erected, which was at various times visited by

¹⁷ G. Rosoli, *L’assistenza sanitaria all’emigrazione di massa verso le Americhe (1880-1915)*, in “Sanità, scienza e storia”, N. 2, 1986, p. 187.

¹⁸ A. Molinari, *Porti, trasporti e compagnie*, cit., p. 252.

¹⁹ A. Gibelli, *Emigranti, bastimenti, transatlantici. Genova e la grande ondata migratoria*, in P. Campodonico, M. Fochessati, P. Piccione (edited by), *Transatlantici. Scenari e sogni di mare*, Skira, Milano, 2004, p. 200.

²⁰ T. Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e dei marinai*, cit., pp. 47-48.

²¹ From 1903, when the emigrants’ overseas transportation service was started by the *Cunard Line* in the port of Trieste, to 1914, when the service stopped because of the outbreak of the First World War, the *Austro Americana* transported 83%, while its competitors *Cunard Line* and *Canadian Pacific Railway* 14.7 and 2.3% respectively, of the 220,312 third-class passengers towards the following destinations: 73.5 % of them to the United States, 22.1 % to South America and 4.4 % to Canada.

Source: A. Kalc, *Prekooceansko izseljevanje skozi Trst 1903–1914*, in “Zgodovinski časopis”, year 46, 1992, no. 4, pp. 484 and 489.

²² To this end, the company acquired a building which had been designed in 1890 and immediately built. It was located in the suburban district of Servola, facing the sea, and was a beautiful building in the middle of a green area. It measured 38x50 metres and was made up of a basement, two floors and a garret. It was owned by the Society of the Friends of Childhood and was used as accommodation for colonies of children who usually suffered from lung diseases, so that they could enjoy the benefits of sea-bathing. In 1893 the building contained four large rooms used as dormitories, two of which could accommodate “15 children” and two “15 paying guests”. In August 1894, the technicians of the Society planned the erection of three more dormitories in the garret. In 1913, the Emigrants’ House underwent remarkable changes: three storeys were added to the old building, which was to be used exclusively as dormitory to accommodate approximately 3000 emigrants; two independent buildings were also added, one functioning as isolation block, the other one as refectory. The new Emigrants’ House performed its tasks for few months only, first because of the outbreak of the war, which caused the migration flux to stop, and then because in 1916 it was

health and police authorities, who often drew up frightened and frightening documents.

In March 1905 a health officer of the Trieste Town Council began his report stating that there were not enough mattresses for the one thousand and two hundred persons leaving with the steamer *Gerty*, as there were “600 new mattresses and 300 mattresses used on steamers”. He then continued the list of irregularities: “Some of the emigrants are not even given blankets for the night [...] Emigrants cut their hair or shave in the dormitories [...] Due to the amount of people, the amassed waste, the mud everywhere, without anyone taking care that part of the windows stay open during the day, there is an unbearable stench in the dormitories [...] 2 or 3 so-called beds are joined together, so as to accommodate 5-6 persons [...] Lavatories are in terrible conditions”.²³

In April 1906, a case of smallpox was recorded, which was used as an excuse for a doctor of the Civil Hospital to write a report stating, among other things, that:

“... there is only room for 700 emigrants to the utmost, and the brothers Cosulich place 1000 or more. The camp beds are very close to each other; there are some even in the corridors. The refectories also leave much to be desired, there are no stable rubbish bins, waste is just piled up in the courtyard, where it remains for days, and is then given to the farmers (!).

Considering the extraordinary number of emigrants (100 newcomers a day), all this represents a constant danger. This smallpox episode proves it – the disease could infect who knows how many people, crowded as they are in that environment. There is furthermore no chance to carry out the necessary disinfestation. The hospice has no steam disinfection device; in some cities with high emigrant influx, everything is better organized: Marseilles, Genoa, Naples, etc.!”²⁴

transformed into an auxiliary hospital. The building still exists, although it has been recently restructured. It is located in Via Italo Svevo 15 and houses a school.

Sources: Trieste Town Hall, Area Town Planning, Technical Archive of Drawings, Drawing 6536 and General Archive of the City of Trieste, Civic Magistrate, Section IV, 566/13.

²³ General Archive of the City of Trieste, Civic Magistrate, exhibit 22.502/1905, 1/9-2/1905.

²⁴ General Archive of the City of Trieste, Civic Magistrate, exhibit 25.129/1906, 4/4-1/1906. Other smallpox cases were registered in the Emigrants' House of the *Austro Americana* in 1913.

The health problem kept being brought up, so that the *Austro Americana* had to give up the habit of packing the Emigrants' House beyond measure and had to provide for additional room using "even its own ships, functioning as temporary hotels at sea: a floating hotel preventing the city from being swarmed with emigrants lodging in the centre, which would endanger our public health".²⁵

The fact remains that the health problem connected to the presence in town of thousands of emigrants a year was extremely urgent, especially in a place like Trieste, which suffered enormously in the fields of health and hygiene. The city had grown disproportionately in the decade between the censuses in 1900 and 1910, registering a population growth of over 50,000 inhabitants, i.e. around 28.5%; the sewer and water supply systems, however, had remained completely inadequate. The housing situation was appalling and only partly mitigated by the building of council houses carried out by the Istituto Comunale Abitazioni Minime. Consumption, alcoholism, privation and degradation reigned among lower classes. Epidemics spread, too, like typhus or smallpox, which led to 15 deaths in 1913.²⁶ It is not difficult to understand the fear that among third-class passengers there might be carriers of diseases who could trigger epidemics and infect popular lodgings, rented beds or the Emigrants' House. Historical documents about health-related bureaucracy as well as historians dealing with that period usually describe emigrants' accommodations as awful, conveying a high degree of disapproval. It is definitely possible to identify "concentration-like" features in these accommodations: they were located as close as possible to railway stations to avoid, or at least minimize, relations and contacts with the residents until the ship left. We shall nonetheless remember that the situation was far worse for those emigrants who arrived in ports without expressly built facilities, as they were

²⁵ General Archive of the City of Trieste, Minutes of the Town Council of Trieste, meeting of May 13, 1913.

²⁶ In December 1913, the city government commissioned a scientist expressly summoned from another city to carry out a research about the causes of the spreading of typhus. The results were far from being reassuring, as the city lacked or had an insufficient number of those "institutions which are usually summed up as 'Sanitary Care'. These being: a good canalisation system, a waste dump at a safe distance, an unexceptionable water supply, the monitoring of the foodstuff market, the improvement of bad housing conditions". Some circumstances were particularly worrying, such as "the fact that the water arriving to the fish shop comes not only from the Aurisina [i.e. the city waterworks], but also from the port after a simple water clarification process. Now, this sea water is collected only 150 metres away from the outlet of some of the city channels and is also exposed to continuous pollution due to the moving ships". Source: W. Prausnitz, *Parere del Prof. Prausnitz sulle condizioni igieniche di Trieste in nesso all'epidemia di tifo*, Graz, 1913, General Archive of the Town Council of Trieste, Civic Magistrate, Section V, 1913/2-3697.

obliged to swarm through usually unknown cities, end up in the poorest, unhealthiest and most dangerous districts, exposed to diseases and ill-intentioned persons, and finally camp on the quays, waiting for the ship: this is the genesis of the pictures of helpless and desperate crowds which have been so often handed down to us.

The time to board the ship arrived, at last, after the ship had been prepared, certainly a mysterious process for those who saw it for the first time: workers going back and forth to service and fit out the ship, dockers pouring coal from their huge baskets into the hoppers. And, at last, people could go aboard on the gangway ladder, symbol and foreboding of the “liquid reality” which would be the supporting element of the ship during the crossing from the old to the new world.²⁷

The crossing

Before steamers, emigrants travelled on sailing ships. These journeys often turned into odysseys; it is no coincidence that, halfway through the 19th century, sailing ships were called *coffin ships*. These ships transported a mixed cargo of people and goods (as steamers would do for decades as well). When travelling from Europe to North America, they transported passengers, iron, textiles, glass, bricks and chemical products; on the way back cotton, tobacco, wheat, cattle and pigs.²⁸ Emigrants left Havre for New Orleans, Bremen for Baltimore, Liverpool for New York, Quebec and Boston and shared their ships with cows, sheep and pigs, at the mercy of winds, currents and ice.

The length of the journey being uncertain, it was very difficult for passengers to work out how much food and money they would need, which exposed them to hunger and fraud, as the crew knew this mechanism all too well and exploited it, by sometimes even giving false information when the tickets were sold.²⁹

²⁷ G. Carosio, *Navi da emigranti*, in *Lamerica! 1892-1914 Da Genova a Ellis Island: il viaggio per mare negli anni dell'emigrazione italiana*, Sagep, Genova, 2008, p. 80.

²⁸ P. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, cit., p. 107.

²⁹ M. A. Jones, *Transatlantic Steerage Conditions. From Sail to Steam, 1819-1920*, in B. Flemming Larsen, H. Bender, K. Veien (Eds.), *On distant shores. Proceedings of Marcus Lee Hansen Immigration Conference, Aalborg, Denmark, June 29 – July 1, 1992*, The Danes Worldwide Archives, 1993, p 68.

Back in the sailing days, it was not hard to play carriers for emigrants, all one needed was a medium-sized sailing ship; the investment was low, the charter fees however very high: in 1851 the individual transport fee equalled the ton-cost of a sailing ship.³⁰

Improvisation often led to critical situations. One of these, concerning Trieste, was recorded in the archives because its seriousness called for the intervention of the judicial authorities and the police of the city, then capital of the Austrian Coast. In 1888 two bankers from Trieste, Isacco and Giuseppe Morpurgo, hired three steamers of the *Lloyd Austriaco*, the *Helios*, the *Orion* and the *Medusa*, which left Trieste for Brazil, respectively on October 25, November 25 and December 27, with their load of emigrants from the territory of Trieste and of the Reign of Italy.³¹ The Morpurgo brothers were trying to start a continuous business with emigrants, but their attempt was thwarted by various concurrent factors, first of all a lawsuit against them by the Austrian police and the prohibition by the Coastal Deputyship in 1889 to set up emigration agencies in Trieste. Their attempt was nonetheless remarkable, although the first journey had a very interesting ending: approximately two hundred people from Trieste landed in a place which was not the one they had agreed on; the disappointment due to the gap between promises and reality led them to protests and demands, such as the signing of contracts, the intervention of the Austrian consul and finally the repatriation to Trieste through Genoa on an English vessel, which enabled them to go back home on January 14, 1889, two and a half months after they had originally left. The rebellious and non-submissive reaction of these emigrants in Brazil should induce some considerations as to the stereotypes about the emigrants, seen as passive subjects abandoned to a flow they cannot control.

Andrea Gagliardo was a farmer from Genoa who sailed for America 14 times between 1847 and 1888: he very well embodies the transition from sailing ships to steamers. Some of his 14 journeys have been recorded in the Ligurian Archive of Popular Writing at the University of Genoa, allowing for interesting comparisons. In

³⁰ A. Molinari, *Porti, trasporti e compagnie*, cit., p. 242.

³¹ The story of the repatriated people from Trieste is to be found in the State Archive of Trieste, Coastal Deputyship, General Acts, b. 481, f. 1.604.

Gagliardo's autobiographic manuscript there are two notes, lying a little more than a decade apart, which clearly identify epoch-making changes in the history of international migration. "1847. Brigantine Bettuglia from Genoa to New York. 57 days. 1861. Steamer Etna from Liverpool to New York. 17 days."³² It is nothing short of a revolution, which affected the main variables of the emigrants' journey: the port of departure, the ship type and the length of the journey.

As soon as steamers replaced sailing ships,³³ a new era began, which soon became epic: the large shipping companies (*Cunard Line*, *White Star Line*, *Hamburg-Amerika Linie*, *Norddeutscher Lloyd*..., the same companies which strategically decided how to share out migration market shares creating cartels) faced technological and constructional challenges and used all their resources and energies to build the biggest, fastest and most sumptuous ships. The so-called sea giants date back to this period, as well as the challenges to win the Blue Riband and the enormous resources used to improve the marine. It is, however, necessary to point out that great ocean liners were exceptions for emigrants, as the large majority kept travelling on old, slow and unpretentious ships.

Emigrants had thus to travel next to "class passengers", where class means first class. This classification is so strong that it is still used nowadays to define something refined, classy. A dichotomy based on oppositions had arisen: a lot of passengers in the third class, few in the first one; little room for necessities, a lot of room for luxury; fascination with the destination, vague or non-existing awareness these places even exist;³⁴ the journey as an end in itself or leisure as opposed to the journey as the only chance of survival...

³² A. Molinari, *Porti, trasporti e compagnie*, cit., p. 237.

³³ This change took place with a certain degree of caution: ships were first made of iron, then of steel (15% lighter) in the 1880s. They had just one propeller, still had masts and sails in case of failure; this measure became redundant when ships with two propellers spread. Electricity appeared on board almost at the same time, which allowed the presence of fridges on the ships, thus making it unnecessary to transport live cattle to be slaughtered during the journey, improving the sanitary conditions.

Source: P. Campodonico, *Dal Great Eastern al Queen Mary. Nascita di un mito moderno*, in P. Campodonico, M. Fochessati, P. Piccione (edited by), *Transatlantici. Scenari e sogni di mare*, cit., pp. 26 and 30.

³⁴ The awareness about the destination often varied depending on the relatives' nationality: "[...] the Germans have maps in their pockets and point out just the place of their several destination" while "the Polish emigrants [...] do not understand where they are going [...] because it is all 'America'."

Source: P. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, cit., p. 66.

Like in the sailing days, emigrants could travel on steamers transporting goods as well (which meant that stops in the harbours were remarkably wearisome, because dormitories had to be built as modular structures which had to be dismantled and mounted every time) or they could travel aboard ocean liners with second and third-class passengers. According to contemporary observers, the best solution was neither one, but a third one: building steamers to transport emigrants only. Ships with mixed cargo were not ideal, as they had been readapted in the light of a “speculative ingenuousness, observant of the regulations”; nor were the liners ideal, due to the drawback that “too much had to be given to the classes, for their comfort and luxury, preventing the due care to be given to the ragged emigrant population.”³⁵

The guides for emigrants are very useful to reconstruct life on board during the journey: they were full of advice and warnings.³⁶ There are, however, other sources reaching the same purpose in a less paternalistic way, but with more affection and sympathy: letters sent home by those who had already emigrated, for the benefit of relatives and friends who were about to leave. Here an example from a letter dated 1902, written by Konstanty Butkowski to his parents; referring to his brother Antoni’s arrival in America, the young man wrote:

“My dear parents... I inform you that I sent Antoni a ship ticket... Expect to receive it soon... And remember, Antoni, don’t show your papers to anyone, except in the ports in which you have to... And if you receive the ticket soon, don’t wait, come immediately... And send me a telegram from Castle Garden. You won’t pay much, and I will come to the railway station. Bring fifteen roubles with you, it will be enough, and change them at once into Prussian money. As to clothes, bring the worst you have, about three old shirts, so that you can get changed on the ship. And when you have happily crossed the water, throw away those rugs. Don’t bring anything else

³⁵ T. Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e marinai*, cit., p. 72.

³⁶ Here an example: “On board [the emigrant] shall not make noises, shall have a serious and considerate demeanour towards everybody, especially women; he shall not bother the others, dirty the floor by throwing peels, he shall take care of himself, wash, comb his hair, often change clothes, he shall not play, nor buy food other than what is provided aboard; he shall be respectful, well-mannered and shall read some instructive and agreeable book to avoid idleness, and if he cannot read well, he shall exercise to improve. In days of rough sea, he shall not go on deck, on the ladders, near the hatches, to prevent accidents. If there are children, he shall keep a close eye on them and care for their cleanliness. In case of complaints, he shall address the Royal Commissioner who travels aboard the steamer; in case there is none, the ship’s doctor acting as his deputy.”

Source: *Manuale per l’istruzione degli emigranti*, Commissariato Generale dell’Emigrazione, Roma, 1925, p.126.

with you, only what you're wearing. Don't bring good shoes, either, only your worst things. As to food, bring some dry bread and a lot of sugar, around a quarter of alcohol and some dried meat. You can bring some onions, but no cheese... And be careful with money in every port. Don't talk to any girl on the ship. ..."³⁷

The warnings given in the letter are very interesting: don't wear good clothes (which would be useless at the end of the journey for having been worn day and night, for the contamination with organic fluids – one's and one's fellow travellers' faeces, urine and vomit – as well as for the effect of coal dust which hovered like a cloud around moving ships)³⁸; don't wear good shoes (which would be stolen during the night); bring caloric and easily preservable food (to complement the meals or substitute them in case of seasickness); be careful with money in every port and don't talk to girls (to avoid being caught up in scams and frauds, which were obviously sometimes intertwined with romantic adventures).

The emigrants' letters often warn to take care of one's hand luggage.³⁹ As to the property transported in the store room of the ship, one could only hope there would be no thefts during the various handovers, which was not uncommon at all. Here an emigrant's complaints in a letter written from Brazil in 1889:

It is not uncommon that [...] emigrants end up without the amount of luggage they left Europe with, as luggage was happily delivered to the Colony very few times. Not a long time ago someone was complaining he had lost all his cases; in reply to this, he was told he could do without them, that clothes are available here as well. Two wives, who had gotten married short before coming here, had hidden their things in

³⁷ W. I. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, *Il contadino polacco in Europa e in America*, Edizioni di comunità, Milano, 1968, Vol I, p. 616 (the dots are in the original).

³⁸ Coal dust created a sort of fog, this is why the paint chosen for steamers by the design engineers of the time was black. Another text about the effects of coal: "I cannot describe you the coal-induced fog surrounding us. We were all so black and as it was hot, because it is a warm land, I don't know, all in a sweat and white drops running on the black skin."

Source: *Trenta giorni di macchina a vapore...*, cit., p. 477.

³⁹ Karl Rossmann, Kafka's emigrant travelling to New York on a ship of the *Hamburg-Amerika Linie*, was also very fond of his luggage, so that during the journey in the dormitory he had "for five nights... incessantly suspected the little Slovak, who was sleeping a couple of places to his left, of having intentions on his suitcase. That Slovak had just been waiting for Karl, finally, sapped by exhaustion, to drop off for one instant, so that he could pull the suitcase over to himself by means of a long rod which he spent his days endlessly playing or practising with."

Source: Franz Kafka, *Il fochista* [The Man who Disappeared], in *Racconti. Descrizione della tragedia dell'uomo moderno*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1991.

the dresser; on their arrival in São Paulo they found it full of coal. Incredible thefts on the emigrants' luggage are committed scot-free in the ports of Santos and Rio de Janeiro; I'd need five sheets of paper to describe them all in detail."⁴⁰

As to the hand luggage, the archives often contain documents describing them. These are usually list-like records written by the captain or by some high-ranking officer in case the owner died.⁴¹

In the case mentioned in the footnote, we can tell that the unlucky Austro-Hungarian subject was a regular traveller, as she had dishes and cutlery with her to take meals. Emigrants who did not know better or had not been far-sighted rented what they needed at the first meal, under the obligation they would pay back for any damaged or lost object. Meals took place differently on ships with or without refectories. The ships of the Italian companies had none (a refectory was experimented for the first time in 1906 on the steamer Roma travelling between Genoa and Buenos Aires; they became widespread much later and had to overcome strong resistance because they meant less room for berths),⁴² and meals were distributed like rations: there were groups of six people, one of whom was the chief of the mess, drew the rations for his group and had to distribute them equally.⁴³ An example of how this system worked: "Well, we went on board, we immediately met a group of men who were looking for friends to build a group of five to eat. As there were no tables or chairs, we ate sitting on the floor. So we said: "Yes, there's two of us", "We are here", "If you want us, we

⁴⁰ Letter by Francesco Costantin, Colony Angelica, São Paulo, Brazil, June 8, 1889, in E. Franzina, *Merica! Merica! ...*, cit., p. 174.

⁴¹ Here is one of these records, written at the quarantine station San Bartolomeo, Muggia, on July 3, 1911 to list the belongings of the deceased Maria Soldan, from Galizia, who died of Asian cholera. This woman was 28 years old, lived in New York and was travelling with her four children, who were taken in by a charitable institution in Trieste. Her emigrant luggage contained:

"5 common spoons; 3 common forks; 1 pocket-knife; 1 tin dish; 1 hand-mirror; 3 combs; 9 assorted glasses; 1 pack of tea; 1 clothes brush; 43 clothing items for children; 23 clothing items for ladies; 3 handkerchiefs; 4 colourful ribbons; 1 towel; 3 baby's caps; 5 assorted fabric cloths; 1 lady's belt; 2 pairs of children shoes; 4 pairs of lady shoes; 3 pieces of soap; 1 small cloak; 38 cloths; 1 box; 1 suitcase; 1 sack; 3 luggage keys; 1 purse containing 2 luggage tickets, 1 ticket New York-Trieste, 2 golden rings, 35 ¼ dollars."

Source: State Archive of Trieste, Maritime Government, b. 860, file 5.494 of the year 1913.

⁴² G. Rosoli, *L'assistenza sanitaria all'emigrazione di massa ...*, cit., p. 204.

⁴³ These criteria often remained virtual, did not transfer to the actual behaviour, as obviously those passengers would prevail who had money and would bribe the crew, as well as young women who agreed to use their beauty or strong and bossy men.

Source: P. Taylor, *The Distant Magnet*, cit., p. 138.

are happy”. They were happy and blissful, too, and gave us what we needed to eat, that is to say a sort of bowl for soup or pasta, a lower bowl for the main course, a tin dish for everybody (all tin, huh?), a spoon and a fork, no knives. Men had pocket-knives, they were common, so they did the cutting. And to drink... obviously a tin cup with a handle, otherwise it burned... That coffee was good! Maybe it was because I had never had coffee, well... coffee, no milk... milk only for children around ten o'clock, I still received it. And soup in the afternoon... the nurse passed by with... Well, you had to queue up at the kitchen door. The kitchen was there above, on deck. The man in charge of the wine, the one in charge of the soup and of the main course, they queued up for a while, took the food, then came back to us, and each of us had found a spot. Some had found a spot on the ropes, on a bench, many brought deckchairs, not many, but well, many.”⁴⁴

As to the food given to emigrants, we already mentioned the frequent behaviour of the crew who gave smaller rations than planned, so that they could sell rations they had either stolen from the ship cargo or expressly and illegitimately brought on board.

The food quality was generally perceived as questionable. In this regard, it is interesting to note the astonishment of some observers who noticed how picky emigrants were as to food. Even Robert Louis Stevenson wrote about it: in 1879 he had travelled aboard the *Devonia* from Glasgow to New York, often mingling with the emigrants during the day (but always sleeping in a second-class cabin):

“One or two had been so near famine that you may say they had run into the ship with the devil at their heels; and to these all seemed for the best in the best of possible steamers. But the majority were hugely discontented. Coming as they did from a country in so low a state as Great Britain, many of them from Glasgow, which commercially speaking was as good as dead, and many having long been out of work, I was surprised to find them so dainty in their notions. I myself lived almost exclusively on bread, porridge, and soup, precisely as it was supplied to them, and

⁴⁴ Trenta giorni di macchina a vapore.” ..., cit., p. 476.

found it, if not luxurious, at least sufficient. But these working men were loud in their outcries. It was not ‘food for human beings’, it was ‘only fit for pigs’, it was ‘a disgrace’. Many of them lived almost entirely upon biscuit, others on their own private supplies, and some paid extra for better rations from the ship.”⁴⁵

On board people slept in dormitories, large rooms which could accommodate various hundreds of people, real hell-pits, perpetually dirty, damp, infested with germs, bacteria and parasites, filled with a stink described by the ship’s doctors with a neologism: “emigrant stench”.⁴⁶ The air in the dormitories was really unbreathable, due to a series of factors such as the temperature, the carbonic acid and the water vapour generated by breathing, the volatile toxic products generated by bodily secretions, the presence of faeces, urine and vomit, which could not be held back because of sea-sickness and which no one cared to remove from floors and clothes.⁴⁷

Emigrants’ dormitories were divided according to the gender: up to a certain age boys could stay with their mothers in the female dormitories, after that they had to sleep in the male ones. The separation took place at dawn and in the logbooks of the steamers it is sometimes recorded that this was a cause for headaches among the crew. Often families did not like the separation, preferring to be close to their relatives – even if of the opposite sex – than to be close to strangers of the same sex.⁴⁸

The situation of girls travelling alone was very delicate, as they were often seduced, molested or even sexually assaulted by other emigrants, but above all by members of

⁴⁵ R. L. Stevenson, *Emigrante per diletto* [The Amateur Emigrant], Einaudi, Torino, 1987, p.15.

The topic of the emigrant complaining disproportionately to the actual inconveniences is also highlighted by Amy Allemand Bernardy, colleague of the Scottish writer, who in 1913 wrote *L’Italia randagia attraverso gli Stati Uniti* and noted: “It is not always true that emigrants are victims on board. Despite their complaints, seventy-five percent of the times they were worse off at home and will be worse off in the new home.”

Source: E. Franzina, *Traversate. Le grandi migrazioni transatlantiche ...*, cit., p. 64.

⁴⁶ A. Molinari, *Le navi di Lazzaro ...*, cit., p. 157.

Other authors agree, like the already quoted Teodorico Rosati: “Well, those who have not seen an emigrants’ dormitory in use, let’s say, have no idea what that bed turns into after a few days. Emigrants lie down fully dressed and with shoes, store bundles and suitcases there, children leave urine and faeces there; most vomit; after a few days all transform it, one way or the other, into a dog’s bed.”

Source: T. Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e marinai*, cit., p. 91.

⁴⁷ A. Molinari, *Le navi di Lazzaro ...*, cit., p. 17-18.

⁴⁸ M. A. Jones, *Transatlantic Steerage Conditions ...*, cit., p 67.

the crew.⁴⁹ Ship captains often had to take action against their subordinates, as was the case on the steamer *Argentina*, travelling from Trieste to New York in 1925, whose captain in the logbook called for “adequate measures from Port Authorities” of Trieste against 5 stokers and 4 coal shovellers who were guilty of having knocked down a door during the night to have access to the emigrants’ dormitories.⁵⁰

It was not easy for the captain or the person in charge to manage the ship, as they had to monitor the activities of hundreds, sometimes thousands of emigrants and, at the same time, keep at bay the excesses of the crew. It was not uncommon that the crew stirred up the passengers with pretexts; this happened aboard the steamer *Sofia* travelling between Trieste and Brazil in 1923: some members of the crew incited the emigrants to an organized protest against the quality of the food, a pasta defined “inedible”.⁵¹ Stokers were especially difficult and hard to manage: they often kept the boiler pressure low to slow down the speed and thus affect the captain, who was thus obliged – we assume through clenched teeth – to accept their requests and demands in order to avoid delays.

It was so frequent for some crew members to mingle with the crowd on the quay and thus become unavailable as soon as the port of arrival was reached, that it is suspected they were not deserters, as they were defined in the logbook of the ships they had arbitrarily abandoned, but emigrants who had chosen a less uncomfortable, promiscuous but more wearisome way to travel than their “colleagues”. It cannot be ruled out that this behaviour might originate from a contract with the captain, who might be inclined to turn a blind eye due to the difficulty in hiring manpower and also to the fact that the last salary of each deserter was not cashed in, thus becoming a

⁴⁹ The phenomenon was so widespread that the Congress of the United States voted for a law sentencing to one year and to the payment of a substantial fine those captains and officers who, as often happened, seduced female passengers with promises of marriage and abandoned them at the port of arrival.

In 1908, Anna Herkner, inspector of a US Commission on Immigration, crossed the Atlantic Ocean three times as a common emigrant and reported about the total lack of lawfulness and respect for women. From the moment they left, unaccompanied women lost any trace of privacy and kept being molested by the crew: when they got dressed or undressed in the dormitories, to which everybody had access; in the open, on the decks, where stewards, firemen, seamen and other crew members addressed them with vulgar remarks and often put those words into action.

Source: M. A. Jones, *Transatlantic Steerage Conditions ...*, cit., pp. 70 and 75-76.

⁵⁰ State Archive of Trieste, Logbook of the steamer *Argentina*, first book, Giornale generale e di contabilità, N. 1.611, p. 15, October 22, 1922.

⁵¹ State Archive of Trieste, Logbook of the steamer *Sofia*, first book, Giornale generale e di contabilità, N.1.361, pp. 69-70, August 22, 1923.

non-cost for the company and maybe – if we want to think ill – a profit for the captain himself.⁵²

As to health, ships were pathogenic places per se, as highlighted in the Italian statistics processed by the General Emigration Commission between 1903 and 1925. The frequency and acuteness of the diseases spreading on board varied according to whether the journey was to or from North or South America. On journeys to South America there were mainly measles, malaria and scabies, on the journeys back trachoma, consumption and measles. On journeys to the United States there were mainly measles, malaria and pneumonia, on the journeys back consumption, measles and mental derangements. The occurrence of different diseases on the outbound journey based on the place of destination is due to the control systems of the various countries, which were more or less strict according to the different legislations. The United States were very strict, especially after the institution of the American doctor examining emigrants at the port of departure, so as to limit as much as possible rejections for health reasons at the port of arrival and the following painful repatriation.⁵³

The statistics of the General Emigration Commission show the mortality rate during the journeys between 1903 and 1935. In this case as well, it is necessary to differentiate between journeys to and from as well as destination and origin, in addition to the reference year. The highest rates in journeys to North America were registered in 1918, 1917 and 1922 (respectively 1.2, 0.7 and 0.6 permil); for South America the highest rates were in 1920, 1921 and 1922 (respectively 0.7, 0.6 and 0.6 permil). The highest among the increasingly higher rates on the way back were registered for North America in 1918, 1917 and 1916 (respectively 3.15, 2.9 and 2.1

⁵² In some cases there was a remarkably high number of crew members abandoning the ship. An example is the steamer *President Wilson*, which was “deserted” by as many as 83 crew members in the stops in Naples, Algiers, New York and Boston during the journey which started in Trieste on December 22, 1923.

Source: State Archive of Trieste, Logbook of the steamer *President Wilson*, first book, Giornale generale e di contabilità, N. 1.014.

⁵³ The American doctor was sort of a bogeyman for emigrants: “This medical watchdog is standing next to a door leading to the embarkation pier, between two policemen, chewing on a cigar and some snuff, he watches, touches, pushes and rejects the emigrants parading in front of him one by one, as eye diseases are looked for with the utmost care; one by one he turns eyelids inside out, there in the open, among the dust, alternating this finger-eye exercise and the squeezing of his cigar, which draws badly.”

T. Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e marinai*, cit., p 47.

pernil) and for South America in 1919, 1921 and 1902 (respectively 1.8, 1.8 and 1.7 pernil).⁵⁴ The most likely to fall victims to diseases on board were children, who mostly died of measles because of overcrowding, of the lack of confinement spaces, of the poor sanitary assistance; babies died because their mothers lost their milk due to the stress of the journey.

Already severe health conditions were often worsened by seasickness, which is frequently mentioned by emigrants.

“When the weather is nice, everything is ok, but it is difficult to cover such a long journey with constant nice weather. I cannot find the words to fully describe the shock aboard the steamer, the crying, the prayers and the curses of those who unintentionally set out for the journey during a storm. Dreadful waves rise towards the sky and then form deep hollows and the steamer is battered from stem to stern and on the sides. I won’t describe the spasms, the vomit (with all due respect) and the contortions of the poor passengers, not yet accustomed to such adverse conditions. When the sea is stormy, few go fetch their rations, the chief cook could neglect to ring the bell.”⁵⁵

Gales and storms are very frequently described in the logbooks written by the captains, who indulged in detailed descriptions, with special regard to sea conditions and to the repercussions on the ship cargo. There was a precise reason for such a great interest in climatic conditions: these notes were written in order to relieve the carrier’s responsibility in case the goods had been damaged, because they would prove that everything had been done to avoid it.⁵⁶

During the journey the risk of accidents and even shipwrecks was constant. There are well-known shipwrecks, some are even world-renowned, so famous that it would not be necessary to dwell on them. We will, however, make an exception for the most

⁵⁴ Data from the graphs in A. Molinari, *Le navi di Lazzaro ...*, cit., pp. 143-144.

⁵⁵ Letter by Francesco Costantin, Colony Angelica, São Paulo, Brazil, June 8, 1889, in E. Franzina, *Merica! Merica! ...*, cit., p. 174.

⁵⁶ Here an example: “In the afternoon the sea rises remarkably, causing the steamer to pitch considerably. Heavy sea often hits the ship from the stem. The propeller often comes out of the water and the machine is subjected to strong jolts, so is the ship.”

Source: State Archive of Trieste, Logbook of the steamer *Belvedere*, first book, *Giornale generale e di contabilità*, N.1.361, p. 75, September 26, 1922

notorious one, the *Titanic*, to note that very few emigrants were rescued, although they made up the vast majority of the passengers. Fierce debates broke out in those days, some said it was because of their aversion to abandoning the ship, because they could not believe it was not unsinkable, because they did not want to leave their suitcases on board, because the location of their lodgings prevented them from reaching the upper decks on time.⁵⁷

The survivors of the flagship of the *White Star Line* were rescued by a rival steamer, the old and battered *Carpathia* of the *Cunard Line*, which was travelling from Rijeka (and Trieste) to New York; being approximately 40 miles from the location, with its 740 emigrants and 325 hands on board, it picked up the SOS of the *Titanic*. Captain Rostron had no hesitation in pushing his ship to over 17 knots (a speed which had apparently been reached only during trials) and, after four hours rushing madly through an ocean full of icebergs, he reached and rescued the 712 survivors, one of whom froze to death on board.⁵⁸

The crossing was, however, not only disease, mourning, tragedy, deception, abuse and misery. Sometimes time flew by quietly or even merrily, thanks to organized entertainment, such as the fireworks described by De Amicis,⁵⁹ or the traditional parodies at the crossing of the Equator, when emigrants who found themselves in the other hemisphere for the first time were baptized, or spontaneous fun, like dancing following the music of impromptu bands.

⁵⁷ P. Campodonico, *Dal Great Eastern al Queen Mary. Nascita di un mito moderno*, in P. Campodonico, M. Fochessati, P. Piccione (edited by), *Transatlantici. Scenari e sogni di mare*, cit., p. 51.

⁵⁸ In one of his books, Carlo Gerolimich, captain of the *Austro Americana*, wrote his recipe to hope to avoid catastrophes like the *Titanic* disaster:

“Various suggestions were made to defend ships against the icebergs drifting in the sea on the way to New York: none of them has been carried out yet. ... But, in the meantime, the only way to avoid drifting ice is to keep careful, constant watch: and when the fog envelops the ship, there’s nothing better than placing one’s trust in God and reduce speed as much as possible. Those who are no fatalists won’t settle for the first remedy, those who are in a hurry will never consider the second one...”

Source: C. Gerolimich, *Manuale pratico del capitano e armatore*, Ettore Vram, Trieste, 1915, pp. 395-396.

⁵⁹ “When the first Bengal light went off, cheering was heard, and one thousand six hundred faces were lit by the fireworks, a large crowd standing on the hatches and on the bulwarks, crouching down on the inn roof and on the cages, holding tight to the backstays, climbing on the shrouds, standing on chairs, bollards, barrels, sinks; no inch of the planking was free, even the outlines of the ship were hidden by the people, so that the large crowd seemed to be floating in mid-air, or flying slowly on the sea, like a swarm of ghosts.”

Source: E. De Amicis, *Sull’Oceano*, Oscar Mondatori, Milano, 2004, cit., p. 153.

An emigrant we quoted earlier shared her vivid memories on how, when she was a child, the fish and birds accompanying the steamer represented a distraction for the little passengers:

“Ah, the seagulls, so many seagulls! Never seen before, obviously. They flew around and pieces of something came down, because we gave them little. It’s not like now, that you can leave the dining room with a basket full of bread. We had no bread to spare, you know? But, well, children... because cooks, waiters threw the leftovers away, and so, those seagulls! And then those flying fish, for us little ones! Shoals of small fish flew by, they looked like they were silver and followed us. And then small fish... what were they, good, they are good... dolphins. And once I was with the *Mafalda*, we bumped into that whale calf, 14 or 15 metres long, we split it in half. Poor thing! Everybody was crying: it was in shreds. The captain could have spared its life... well, I don’t know.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ “*Trenta giorni di macchina a vapore.*” ..., cit., pp. 477.

Land oh!, landing, hotels for emigrants, the journey after the crossing

The sighting of land was a magic moment on a ship, it was the sign that something was going to change, that the future would be for the best, and was indeed greeted with shouts of joy:

“And when, after a long crossing, after 30 days, at last, on the morning of January 11, we spotted the mountains of Brazil, we all burst out shouting hooray, long live America...”⁶¹

It was America, at last, emigrants thronged in front of the railings, children were lifted on the adults' shoulders, everybody washed, men shaved, children were dressed by their mothers in their best attires because they were going to meet their fathers, people were wondering what they would be asked at landing and those who had already been on such journeys gave advice. The journey, however, was not over, other tests awaited the emigrants, especially strict for those who were about to land in the United States through the port of New York. Until 1892, emigrants who had just arrived in New York were welcomed and examined at *Castle Garden*, but *Ellis Island* was opened the following year: a huge, very efficient and merciless organization which thoroughly examined hundreds of thousands of immigrants every year. In 1907, a record year, over a million emigrants were examined; 11,747 on a single day of that year.⁶²

This structure was located on an islet in the New York bay, at the mouth of the Hudson river, two miles away from Manhattan; it had been designed in 1897 and was made up of 36 buildings, where over 500 people worked; in 1901 the *General Hospital Building* was erected as well. The three-storey *Main Building* overlooked everything and was divided into, from bottom to top: storage area, check-in room,

⁶¹ Letter by Gio Batta Mizzan to his brother, Santa Maria Boca do Monte, Rio Grande do Sul – Brazil, March 17, 1878, in E. Franzina, *Merica! Merica! ...*, cit., p. 81.

Another memory in this regard is from a literary work, *Ocean* by Alessandro Baricco: “The first one to spot America. There is one on every ship. And do not think that some things happen by chance, no... and not even by good eyesight, that is destiny. Those people have always been destined to that moment in their life. And when they were children, you could look them in the eyes, and if you looked carefully, you could already spot it, America, ready to spring, to slide down their nerves and blood and what do I know, to the brain and from there to the tongue, into that shout (SHOUTING), America, it was already there, in those children eyes, the whole of America.”

⁶² G. Rocchi, *La selezione degli emigranti a Ellis Island*, in *Lamerica! ...*, cit., p. 112.

health check and interviews, dormitory. Steamers were too big to dock and third-class passengers were brought to *Ellis Island* on tenders, often after waiting for whole days and only after a doctor from the *Immigration Service* had checked that there were no epidemics on board and that the norms pertaining maritime and navigation law were observed.⁶³

After a short interview, first and second-class passengers could land with no further formalities, while emigrants had to land carrying their hand luggage, which they had to hand in after having put their name on it, or a symbol, if they were illiterate. Then they had to go through the *Line Inspection*, which in 1905 replaced the health check, which was not feasible anymore due to the high number of passengers. Immigrants had to walk in line in front of doctors, who could thus spot obvious physical anomalies. Then the *Eyeman* checked that the newcomers did not suffer from trachoma using a special device, a sort of forceps to lift the eyelids, which was very annoying and painful. If anyone was suspected to be ill, they were marked with chalk on their clothes: every letter stood for a pathology or a body part. They would undergo further visits which,⁶⁴ in case an infective disease or mental deficiency was diagnosed, would lead to forcible repatriation at the expense of the shipping company with which the rejected emigrant had arrived.⁶⁵ When the health check was over, the legal check began: the questions aimed at verifying that, according to the immigration law of 1907, the immigrants had enough money (at least 25 dollars or a name and address of a friend or relative who would offer assistance in case of need) and that they were not going to areas in which, according to the American authorities, there was no need for manpower. The permit was denied to those who declared, often out

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Here the list of the letters with the relevant diseases: B – backache, C – conjunctivitis, CT – trachoma, E – eyes, F – face, FT – feet, G – goitre, H – heart, K – hernia, L – lame, N – neck, P – physical and lungs, PG – pregnancy, SC – scalp, S – arteriosclerosis, X – suspected mental illness, an encircled X – confirmed mental illness.

Source: N. Di Paolo, *Ellis Island. Storia, versi, immagini dello sradicamento*, ISLA – Istituto di Studi Latinoamericani Pagani, La Città del Sole, Napoli, 2001.

⁶⁵ To confirm the diagnosis of mental illness, the candidates were asked very simple logic questions in the *Mental Rooms*, such as “is it morning or afternoon, how many legs does a dog have, how many legs do a dog and a cow have together”, and usually they were asked to insert some geometric figures into a frame. Little details were enough to arouse the examiners’ suspicions: whimsical clothes, being too kind, impatient, careless, nervous, overactive, laughing or smiling too much, being vulgar, shouting or yelling, speaking in a low or trembling voice, crying, being puzzled... Source: G. Rocchi, *La selezione degli emigranti a Ellis Island*, in *Lamerica!* ..., cit., p. 116.

of the naive thought they would favourably impress the examiners, that they already had a job waiting for them or that they had already signed a contract.⁶⁶

For immigrants in Latin America, the checks upon landing were much less strict; immigrants were welcomed in inns or hotels for emigrants, not dissimilar to those they had already experienced in the ports of departure: the immigration houses or *Hospedarias de Imigrantes*. Here an opinion about the *Hospedaria* in Santos, Brazil, in the early 20th century:

“[...] a large establishment made up of large dormitories, divided by courtyards and joined by roofed passages, where emigrants spend three or four days before moving inland. Labour contracts with the famous fazenderos are signed here. Emigrants have free board and lodging in the Hospedaria, but what kind of board and lodging! Beds are mostly mats on the floor and food is bread with soup. The sanitary conditions of this place are so far from flattering, that they are mentioned even in the country’s official papers.”⁶⁷

After landing and finding this temporary accommodation, the immigrants covered the last part of their journey, usually on foot, by coach, boat or ship, depending on the final destination, on the conditions of the roads, on the amount of money available. Often the journey, probably perceived as never-ending, lasted days and days:

“... at last at 12 we arrived at the Port of Rio Zanero, 3 were born 7 died...

After Rio zanero we turned towards Santa Caterina and then Rio Grande and then we went to porto alegre and Rio Pardo we landed but for all the journey by ship it took 42 days here in Rio Pardo we stayed 6 days and then we mounted carriages, luggage and women and children on carriages and we walked those who wanted, but dario pardo in Santa Maria Bocca di Monti we crossed grasslands forests and woods cooked in the field slept in tents but our crossing on carriages lasted 15 days food was enough for everybody we killed a cow a day enough soup and bread and plenty of coffee, at last we are all brought to a forest where you can see wood and sky

⁶⁶ A. Molinari, *Le navi di Lazzaro ...*, cit., p. 54

⁶⁷ T. Rosati, *Assistenza sanitaria degli emigranti e marinai*, cit., p. 154.

everybody was desperate and didn't know what to do and me and other three friends from Belluno began to walk to Santa Maria that was 6 hours away to ask at the Colony if there was available land at last after walking many days we went to various spots but I thought it was too expensive but walking around and asking we at last found a good Colony...”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Letter by Gio Batta Mizzan to his brother, Santa Maria Boca do Monte, Rio Grande do Sul – Brazil, March 17, 1878, in E. Franzina, *Merica! Merica!* ..., cit., pp. 81-82.

Emigrants departing from the port of Trieste between the two wars and in the second post-war period

The “great migration” ended in 1914, when the First World War broke out. After the war, emigration began again and the city of Trieste seemed to have all it took to resume a vital role thanks to the carrier used before the war, the *Austro Americana*, which in the meantime had taken on a new corporate name: *Cosulich Società Triestina di Navigazione*. *Cosulich* seemed blessed by its resources, among which a considerable fleet and an excellent commercial network, which could easily be restored; another favourable factor was the exclusion from the market of two leading companies, *Hamburg-Amerika Linie* and *Norddeutscher Lloyd*, as their ships had been requisitioned. The international situation, however, had tremendously changed due to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the appearance of the successor states; there were now new and dangerous competitors like the port of Danzig, in a very favourable geographical position and under the protection of the Polish government, which according to some sources even made its consulate in New York deny visa applications by emigrants who declared they wanted to return home via Trieste.⁶⁹

In the Twenties, Trieste became a port of departure for the *aliyà*, a Jewish term meaning ascent: it stood for the Diaspora Jews’ will to emigrate to the ancient land of Israel and settle down there permanently. The migration flux was anyway substantial, amounting, according to some estimates, to 150,000 persons.⁷⁰ The migration took place in two stages: mainly Polish Zionist Jews left during the first one, mainly German Jews or Jews from other countries under Nazi rule left during the second one.⁷¹

The journeys were organized and managed by *Lloyd Triestino*; in some cases the ship’s health logs depict situations similar to those dating back to the period in which

⁶⁹ State Archive of Trieste, Maritime Government, b. 876, f. IV.

⁷⁰ A. Ancona, S. Bon (edited by), *Trieste la porta di Sion. Storia dell’emigrazione ebraica verso la terra di Israele (1921-1940)*, Alinari, Firenze, 1998, p. 29.

⁷¹ M. Bercich, *Il Comitato di assistenza agli emigranti ebrei di Trieste (1920-1940): flussi migratori e normative*, in “Qualistoria”, N. 2, December 2006, p. 23.

emigrants left by sailing ship or with the first steamers, before there were refrigeration systems for food on board:

“It is deplorable that these companies, travelling in the Black Sea or to the coasts of Asia Minor, always load cattle. [...] The shipping company gains the highest profit, as the charter fees for cattle are high, the ship captain obtains a percentage for every animal, so that the animals are loaded onto every available space, not only in the hold, but also on deck.”⁷²

Trieste played a considerable role in emigrants' departures in the second post-war period as well, with a remarkable difference: the emigrants were now subsidized by the state, paid to leave. They left from the Maritime Station, practically from Piazza Unità, the main square; there were no more anonymous departures from Servola, seen with indifference or relief as was the case before 1914: the emigrants left behind a crowd of relatives and friends saying goodbye, crying, waving their handkerchiefs on the quay. This time it was people from Trieste and Istria who left, mainly for Australia, but also for the United States and Canada. And it was the first time. Here the description of these departures by Giani Stuparich, writing for “Il Lavoratore”:

“The heart of the city was all there, in those goodbyes, in those warnings, in those farewells: the whole nature of the inhabitants of Trieste was voiced in those displays of a people who can be funny even among tears, lively even in misfortune. *‘They leave, they leave and we are staying... always happy and no hard feelings’*, said a young worker with glistening eyes and a bitter mouth. *‘Go ahead, sons, let Trieste be proud of you!’*, was another older worker's wish. And an old grandma! She was there, held up by her relatives, and she kept asking whether Rico was on board, where he was, whether he was wearing his red scarf, whether he was waving, smiling, whether the crossing to that distant place would go well; she didn't want to move, not even when the ship left and put out to sea; people began to disperse among comments and

⁷² Op. cit., p. 50.

regrets; ‘*grandma, move on*’, but the old lady wouldn’t move and, with tears running down her face, kept repeating: ‘*What do I have to witness!*’⁷³

⁷³ Giani Stuparich, *Trieste emigra*, “il Lavoratore”, August 1, 1955.