IASA | Italian American Studies Association

WESTERN REGIONAL CHAPTER

A people without a past is a people without a future

Bolinas, California www.aiha-wrc.org Summer 2014

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Tanti e calorosi auguri a tutti e tutte! It is a pleasure to return again to this column to greet you as IASA-WRC president, and to introduce the other officers who were elected in February of this year to guide the work of our chapter for the 2014-15 term of office. They are: **Maria Protti**, Vice-President: **Elizabeth Vasile**, Secretary; **Teri Ann Bengiveno**, Treasurer (continuing); **Lawrence DiStasi,** Curator/Newsletter Editor (continuing). Although not an officer, **Jennifer Lagier Fellguth** has again agreed to extend to the chapter her invaluable assistance as WRC website administrator, a post she has held throughout numerous terms of office.

I also wish to warmly thank immediate past President Laura Ruberto and VP Richard Dunbar for their many and long-standing contributions to the work of the IASA-WRC.

After the recent hiatus in our chapter activities, during which time we assessed and refocused our work, I am very glad to announce that we are back in action with a lively schedule of events. (Please see the rest of this newsletter for details.)

Regarding active membership in the chapter, some of you will have noticed that the requirement has changed: In order to be a WRC member, it is now required that you join the National IASA. We have given this serious thought, particularly since many of our long-standing WRC members are not academics, and so might not benefit from national membership. Thus, with the help of the National, we have originated a new category—"Friends of the WRC." This would provide those of you interested in the history that we are unique in promoting here in the West the opportunity to join the WRC alone. "Friends" would receive our newsletter, notification of and free attendance at all our programs, and the opportunity, via the modest dues, to signal their support for, and encouragement of, the work we do. "Friends" would not enjoy the right to be voting members or be eligible for office, but would be welcome at all meetings and encouraged to comment on or suggest new programs.

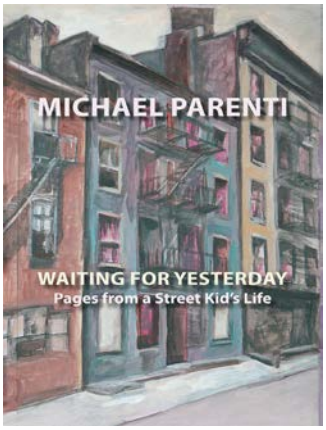
It should go without saying that, without such support, we could not long endure. We hope that all who receive this newsletter will agree that the "Friends" membership category fills a great need at a bargain price. I would welcome all comments about this, or any other topic of interest, at: adele.negro@gmail.com.

Distinti saluti e ci vediamo presto.

Adele Negro

UPCOMING

Michael Parenti



Reading from his new memoir,
Waiting for Yesterday:
Pages from a Street Kid's Life

Place: Fratellanza Club- 1140 66th St., Oakland
Date: Thursday, September 17, 2014, 7-9PM

Award-winning author, political scientist, and raconteur Michael Parenti will be reading from and talking about his recently-published memoir, *Waitng for Yesterday*. In it, Parenti provides a revealing picture of his early years as a youth in New York's East Harlem 'slum', along with some of the influences that helped shape his lifelong commitment to activism and social justice. Including vignettes about growing up in a three-generation, working-class, Italian family, the book offers a cast of diverse and colorful characters, brought to life on the gritty Harlem streets where Parenti played as a boy, set against a backdrop of impoverished tenements, stoops, punitive classrooms, and a neighborhood church with its ornate celestial offerings. Along the way, Parenti challenges many of the stereotypes faced by Italian Americans and other ethnic groups, while delivering a story that is both personal and broad-ranging, both insightful and truly funny, the human comedy at its best. Hearing him deliver his thoughts about it will make for an evening not to be missed.

Parenti will be autographing copies of his new memoir, which will be on sale.

Light refreshment will accompany a no-host bar.

Suggested donation to cover expenses is $5.

This event is co-sponsored by the WRC and the Fratellanza Club. Please RSVP to Lawrence DiStasi: tel: (415)868-0538, or email at lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net.

Una Storia Segreta

20th Anniversary Celebration

Impossible as it may have seemed, this year marked the 20th anniversary of the original opening of the World War II exhibit, *Una Storia Segreta: When Italian Americans Were 'Enemy Aliens'* on February 24, 1994. To mark the occasion, we decided to hold an anniversary celebration at the site where it all started, the Museo Italo Americano in San Francisco. When we mentioned the idea to Maria Gloria, who first proposed that we do an exhibit way back in 1993, she was more than enthusiastic. She would certainly speak, she said, and she would also make a generous contribution to make sure we were able to produce a celebratory brochure. We did that, and those of you who attended the event—on Sunday March 23 at the Museo—got a copy that featured a complete list of the exhibit's appearances at over 50 sites nationwide, including state capitols, city halls, the Rayburn Office Building in Washington DC, and numerous resolutions from governors and legislatures. (to request an email copy of the brochure, email me at lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net).

Unlikely as it might have seemed after 20 years, yet another standing-room-only crowd packed the Museo to join in the celebration. Paola Bagnatori paid tribute to this *Storia Segreta* phenomenon by opening with the remark that *not* booking the exhibit for a whole year was the greatest mistake the Museo ever made. WRC president Adele Negro then introduced the program and speakers, who included Maria Gloria, Costanza Foran, John Buffo, Richard Vannucci and Lawrence DiStasi. An eager audience followed the presentations with numerous questions about the war years, the exhibit, and how Italian Americans were treated. In short, interest in and enthusiasm for this heretofore unknown history remains almost as strong today as it did 20 years ago when a low-tech exhibit opened in a back gallery of the Museo and went on to spark a movement that not only resulted in national legislation, but has literally changed the accepted public narrative about what happened to enemy aliens during World War II. Whether there's more to be heard from this little exhibit may be best expressed by my favorite Yogi Berra-ism: 'It's never over till it's over.'

Member Activities

Liz Vasile has been writing a series of fascinating articles for *L'Italo Americano* on Italian American urban geographies in and around San Francisco. They have included pieces on truck farms, Ghirardelli and his chocolate factory, the old Italian Mission District and more. As a geographer, Vasile provides a fresh take on what we all thought we knew. We look for more.

Lawrence DiStasi assembled a group of Italian American poets to take part in the SF Jazz Ethnic Poetry Festival's Italian American night on April 3 at the SF Jazz's sparkling site in San Francisco. Poets reading their work included Sandra Mortola Gilbert, Tom Centolella, Giovanna Capone, and Jack & Adelle Foley. Though it was a Thursday night, a lively crowd, including Ishmael Reed, the poet laureate of SF Jazz, was there to cheer on each of the poets.

Lawrence DiStasi was invited to make a presentation to a summer workshop for secondary teachers put on by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy at the National Japanese American Historical Society's new building in the Presidio. The three-day event featured little-known histories. On Tuesday, July 29, at the *Dissident Voices* segment, DiStasi gave an illustrated talk on the danger of the government's categorizing of Italian aliens as "Potentially Dangerous" during WWII. Most in the audience had never heard that Italian Americans were targeted during the war, and expressed eagerness to convey this little-known history to their students.

Sandra Gilbert's new book, *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity*, has just been released by W.W. Norton. *The Culinary Imagination* traces the social, aesthetic, and political history of food from myth to modernity, from ancient sources to our current wave of food mania. We are certain to hear more about this one.

Luisa del Giudice's collection of essays, *Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migration, Development*, was published by Fordham University Press in June. Among the contributors are Laura Ruberto and Ken Scambray.

Maria Mazziotti Gillan recently returned to her parents' village of San Mauro, Cilento where she was feted with parades, lectures, and all the honors given to a renowned poet. Her latest book (her 20th) is the combined poetry/visual art collection, *The Girls in Chartreuse Jackets* (Redux Consortium: 2014).

Tommaso Caiazza, who received an IASA-WRC grant, is researching the history of Italians in San Francisco. He would be grateful to anyone with information on that subject.

L'Italo Americano is looking for a reporter to cover San Francisco and the Bay Area. Anyone interested should contact Simone Schiavinato at director.italoamericano@gmail.com.

In Memoriam

Rose Viscuso Scudero, who was one of the few living survivors to have experienced firsthand the WWII evacuation of enemy aliens from her hometown of Pittsburg, died after years of medical problems on May 9. A funeral was held at Holy Rosary Church in Antioch on May 19. Rose was a stalwart in the WRC effort to make the WWII events known to the public. She spoke often to school groups about her experiences, was written up in Pittsburg's newspapers several times, and testified at the October 24, 1999 Judiciary Committee Hearings in Washington DC that led to passage of Public Law #106-451. She was a leader in getting funding for the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum's new building in Pittsburg, and served as President of that Society. Her bright spirit, her energy, and her unflagging devotion to the *Una Storia Segreta* cause will long be remembered.

Book Reviews

Waiting for Yesterday: Pages from a Street Kid's Life, by Michael Parenti, (Bordighera: 2014).

Michael Parenti is one of Italian America's treasures, the author of hundreds of essays and more than eighteen books, including *Democracy for the Few*, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar*, *Make-Believe Media*, *The Culture Struggle*, as well as a noted political lecturer throughout the nation and beyond. I've read several of Parenti's books, always marveling at his ability to write incisive, engaging prose, but, to my mind, *Waiting for Yesterday* exhibits Parenti's real gift more clearly than any other. That is, Parenti is a humorist, an Italian American Mark Twain who skewers those in authority with sparkling wit, cleverness, compassion and deep insight. He does this in his new memoir from the very outset. For example, he tells us early on about his grandmother, who performed the *malocchio* ritual when anyone in the family got sick. Then he gives us some additional information about more recent manifestations of *malocchio* on TV, such as the habit of postwar Italian immigrants to put an open pair of intentionally-broken scissors on top of the television set so that no one on TV could send *u malocchio* into their homes. Then comes his social critique: "As we now know, the baneful effects of television are not warded off that easily." It's a delicious point, made memorable with brevity and wit.

This kind of trenchant humor is found everywhere in his memoir. Describing the immigrants who left loved villages to try to make a better life in the United States, Parenti makes his point this way: "Having fled to the crowded tenements of New York, they found they had a little more to live on but *sometimes less to live for*." This speaks to what numerous Italian immigrants—my father for one—discovered: a better life may involve more possessions, but that by no means concludes the matter. Then there is the hilarious comment about the young Parenti's encounter with an evangelical preacher trying to sell this slum boy on the wonders of the Protestant Bible:

"Will you read this Bible if I give it to you?"
"Yes," I exclaimed.
"God wrote this himself, son!"
"Wonderful!" *I had no idea God wrote books*.

These vignettes also give us an idea of how Parenti proceeds, not just in this book but in everything he writes. He skewers everyone, sparing no one, including his own family and himself. Where memoirs often create the impression that the old days and one's traditional family could do no wrong, were, in effect, saintly, Parenti makes clear that he, and his Italian family and neighborhood, were unique but typical of many other immigrant groups. There is no overly sentimental nostalgia here ("nobody, absolutely nobody, has 'pure' blood, whatever that is supposed to be"). So while we understand that Parenti misses the old days, and wishes they could return—his title, *Waiting for Yesterday* is his way of addressing the fact that with his father gone (in 1983), he had lost all opportunity to ask him the deep questions about his life—we see that he actually blames himself for discarding the past too soon: "Suddenly," he says, "all these urgent questions came forward only to hang silently in the air, waiting for yesterday." Later, in describing the commercialization of his favorite restaurant in Greenwich Village, now gussied up for tourists and no longer serving the iconic sheep's head meal (*capuzella*) dear to Baresi, he repeats this mantra, noting that "yesterday never really returns, no matter how intently we search and wait." Anyone who has lived with parents and grandparents, anyone who has lived through a treasured era burned into memory, knows exactly what he means. But again, Parenti does not idealize those days, nor gloss over the pains and the disappointments. Describing his father after retirement, he notes how, watching TV constantly, the elder Parenti had imbibed the notion that crime was everywhere (though by then he lived in a safe Bronx neighborhood), and begun to favor politicians who were tough on crime ("just as the right-wingers wanted"). In 1982, therefore, instead of voting for Mario Cuomo for New York governor, old Parenti voted for the Republican Ed Koch. When his son asked why, he said "Cuomo's against the death penalty. Koch supports it."

There is much more in this memoir, including not only Parenti's usual attacks on sacred cows, but also some of the most concise and balanced summaries of Italian American history you will find. Throughout, Parenti maintains his humorous, and wise tone (in commenting on the annual recurrence of neighborhood fads—one week everyone was spinning tops, the next shooting marbles, the next trading cards, the next rolling on skates—Parenti ends with this lovely observation: "Who orchestrated these recreational fads, if anyone, I never knew. It seemed to have its own communal rhythms"). When he ends his "human comedy," he does it, as we might expect, with a recent, rather disappointing family reunion, where the older surviving aunts and uncles decide against coming because they think it is mainly for the young. Parenti laments this as "an act of age segregation that would have been unthinkable in earlier times." Another sign of a world lost. But then he recounts a recurring dream he had, set in a modern apartment that turns out to be an upscale renovation of the decaying brownstone in East Harlem where he grew up. Parenti then realizes what the dream was about: an attempt to bring together the deeply split worlds of his past and present: "The slum was being gentrified. The working-class Italian youth and the professional-class American academic were to live together under the same roof." This is essentially what Parenti does in his memoir: he accomplishes the truly difficult feat of treating both his radical-intellectual present and his working-class past without denigrating or short-changing either. Read this charming and edifying book and you'll see what I mean.

Lawrence DiStasi

Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945, (U of N. Carolina Press: 2010), by Jennifer Guglielmo

Jennifer Guglielmo's book is a welcome antidote to the usual dismissal of Italian immigrants, especially women workers, as indifferent if not hostile to the American union movement. Guglielmo demonstrates with her research that, in fact, many Italian women brought an even more radical organizing tradition with them than what they found in the United States,

and were only diverted and finally assimilated into the reformist unionism here because of the harsh repression radicals faced in the early 20th century and again with WWII. Along the way, she reinforces the idea that it was not passivity that initially led Italian immigrant women to eschew unionism, but rather reliance on another type of strategy based in mutual aid and collective direct action. The problem for typical union histories is that the scholars of these histories did not (could not) consult Italian newspapers and texts and so assumed there was no movement among Italian immigrants. Had they done so, they would have found a radical political culture, often rooted in anarchism and/or syndicalism, that opposed not only the capitalist exploitation of workers, but also the oppressive power of the nation-state and nationalism itself. They would also have found powerful feminist advocates for what they called "*emancipazione*"—liberation from all authoritarian restrictions on women up to and including male authority in marriage.

Guglielmo traces this radical resistance to such places as Sicily in 1892-4 when Sicilian peasants rose up after a series of poor wheat harvests. Interestingly, these organizations to empower peasants were called *fasci*—alliances in rural towns and cities that functioned as mutual aid societies, unions, agricultural coops, and political parties (predating Mussolini's use of the word for his later 'fascist' movement). Drawing inspiration from socialist and syndicalist theory, these *fasci* believed in worker collectives taking power over their own work, and even in supplanting capitalism and the state. When hundreds of thousands of Italian workers were forced to migrate to find work, and settled in New York and its environs, they brought such ideas with them. In New York and cities in nearby New Jersey like Hoboken, Newark and Paterson, thousands worked in the needle trades as tailors, dressmakers, and as seamstresses or hand embroiderers working at home. Denigrated as docile and ignorant, impulsive and impractical, these women, like their immigrant counterparts from other nations, were seen as useful to industries that required them to work long hours at mind-dulling tasks for poverty wages. American labor leaders even saw fit to join the move to restrict Italian immigration "on the ground that Italian workers undercut wages, were unorganizable, and racially undesirable" (141).

In the face of all this, they organized themselves. Led by anarchist women who had emigrated in the late 1890s, Italian women formed mutual aid societies to provide health and death insurance and especially education. They joined socialist and anarchist societies, called *circoli politici* or *circoli di studi sociali*, where they studied together and collectively ran libraries, food co-ops, theater troupes, printing presses, and some of the earliest union locals of the IWW—the Industrial Workers of the World, or 'Wobblies'. In this way, they built a radical counterculture comprising, in the words of historian Paul Avrich, "one of the largest and most militant of the ethnic groups which made up the immigrant anarchist movement," one that included a space for feminist activism. Especially in Paterson among silk workers, and in nearby Haledon at the home of Maria and Pietro Botto, immigrant women heard Sunday speeches by the likes of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, and Upton Sinclair. Dozens of radical newspapers like *La Questione Sociale* and *L'Era Nuova* published essays by Italian radical women. Maria Roda wrote in *La Questione Sociale* about the denigration of women workers, "*le operaie*" she called them:

Men say we are frivolous, that we are weak, that we are incapable of supporting the struggle against this intolerable society, that we cannot understand the ideal of anarchism… But they are the cause of our weakness, our undeveloped intellects, because they restrict our instruction… (156).

The year 1913, when more than 150,000 garment workers walked off their jobs, marked both the high point and the twilight of this radical women's movement. The ILGWU, the main union representing garment workers, not only forged an agreement with the manufacturers without the workers' approval, according to Guglielmo, but also left shops employing Italian workers completely out of the agreement. Most Italian garment workers therefore rejected the pact, and a week later called another strike under the IWW demanding better pay and shorter hours. Italian immigrant workers, especially in Paterson and Hoboken NJ, had long found the IWW more to their liking than the accommodationist ILGWU. Closer to the Italian workers' syndicalist roots, the IWW attempted to create a worldwide unionism that included critiques of nationalism and the oppression of women. From 1909 through 1913, the IWW locals led a series of strikes, with Italian women in the forefront. Labor historian Paul Buhle in fact credits Italian women militants with the key role in this movement, adding that "Without them, craft and industrial unionism might not have happened for another generation." Their work culminated in the Paterson silk workers strike in 1913, which was marked by unity among all silk workers from the most to the least skilled, and demands for an 8-hour day. It was led by such IWW luminaries as Big Bill Haywood, Carlo Tresca, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Unfortunately for both the IWW and Paterson's silk workers, the strike ended on July 18 when the workers gave in. This was due to their desperate need for income, and to the ability of the manufacturers to hold out longer by filling orders in their Pennsylvania factories. The strike's failure also marked the end of the IWW's presence in the eastern United States.

After this, Italian garment workers in the United States began to join more conventional unions, and by the end of the large strikes of 1919, Italian dressmakers were given their own local by the ILGWU, local 89 in Manhattan, headed by Margaret DiMaggio. From this point on, the radical program of the anarchist-inspired 'wobblies' faded before the more reformist program of the ILGWU. Guglielmo clearly finds this a negative development because rather than continuing the early union's deep critique of capitalist exploitation and authoritarianism, the AFL-affiliated unions "cultivated ethnic nationalism in their members, encouraging them to identify as both Italians and Americans…[and] reinforced ethnic antagonism and segmentation within the union" (198). This would eventually lead Italian women garment workers (and Italian Americans in general) to opt for nationalism, assimilation, their privileged status as "white," and selective reform rather than the '*emancipazione*' of all downtrodden workers.

Nonetheless, Guglielmo's book marks an important retrieval of a critical history and a welcome corrective to the dismissive portrait of Italian women workers we've all heard over the years.

Lawrence DiStasi

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Yearly national dues are:
Regular IASA National Membership: **$55**.

WRC Chapter dues are an **additional $20**.
Regular: $20. Institutional: $30.
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Send "Friend of the WRC" donation of $20 to:

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Members with items for the next newsletter should send them to:

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IASA National Conference – Oct. 17th thru 19th
University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

"Italians Without Borders: Transnational Italian American Experience"