



LETTERS FROM SWISS-ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS TO VICTORIA IN THE 19th CENTURY

by Tony Pagliaro

A chance remark by a relative of Swiss scholar Giorgio Cheda led him to read a letter sent to Switzerland last century by one of the many, probably 2,000, Italian speaking Swiss who emigrated from Ticino to Victoria, principally in the years between 1853 and 1856. Fascinated by the letter's contents Cheda began a search which led to more letters, many of which had been lying in attics and cupboards in the Locarno district for more than a century. These were to inspire his doctoral thesis and later the two volume work *L'emigrazione ticinese in Australia* (Locarno 1979). The first volume of this work contains Cheda's study of the causes and effects of this unusually brief and intense exodus. The second presents some 320 letters written by the emigrants themselves. My quotations of the miners' letters are from this second volume. Obviously the first volume too has an important role in what I will say, although I do depart from it in various respects.

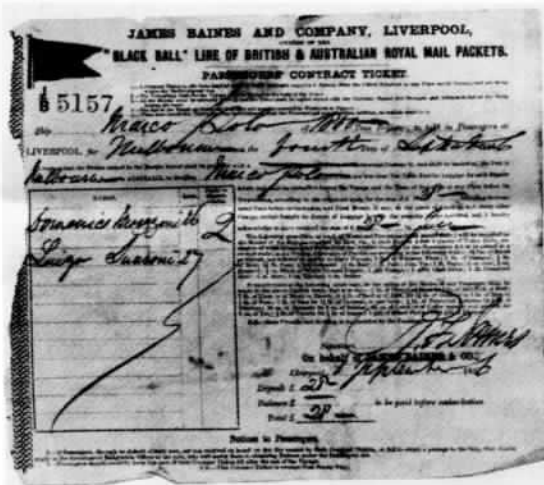
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The first question which you might like to hear answered concerns the identity and occupation of these emigrants. Who were they? What was their background? Why did they come to Australia? After patiently

searching through communal archives, notaries' records and shipping lists, Cheda was able to produce some two thousand names'. Nearly all came from the districts of Locarno and Valle Maggia, near Lago Maggiore. In particular they came from the villages scattered along valleys which rapidly grow narrower and provide less land for cultivation as they wind towards towering mountain peaks.

Who were the emigrants? Nearly all were male. Not every comune registered the same details so full statistical details of occupations and ages are not available. However what is provided from Valle Maggia gives us a pretty clear picture of the whole. From this valley's 846 emigrants, the principal groups in descending order were masons (289), peasants (197), stone cutters (61) and day labourers (57). The were one hundred and fifty of unidentified occupation, thirty six carpenters and a few others of assorted trades such as blacksmiths and sweeps. But, as Cheda tells us, the figures do not tell the full story. Most peasants were practised in one craft or another and many of the masons, carpenters etc. were also, and in many cases primarily, peasants.

The reasons why these people came to Australia are a little more complicated than one might suppose. I imagine that the usual picture we get of the Victorian goldrush is that a large number of poor people on the other side of the globe heard about the discovery of gold and forthwith packed their bags and headed off to make their fortunes. But poverty alone is not a reason for emigration. Many of the poorest areas of Italy, for example, were in fact the last to be affected by emigration during the nineteenth century.

Emigration overseas usually "takes off" best in areas where there is an already established tradition of local population movement. This was true of Ticino: its inhabitants were accustomed to travelling to Lombardy, particularly Milan, in winter and there make use of such crafts as they had learnt.



Ticket for Australia issued in 1856

Intensive advertising by shipping companies is not to be underestimated. Certainly gold is an attractive product but nevertheless it did require marketing. Those who needed to market it were the shipping owners, seeking a return for their investments. Certainly, as railways started to shorten the distances across the Continent a much larger market became available for "commercial development". But still, an indication of the keenness to sell tickets can be seen in the fact that the Liverpool company James and Baines started a campaign of weekly newspaper advertisements as far away as Ticino. It was to last from October 1854 to July 1856. Local agents were appointed by German, French and English companies.

These undertook their own campaigns, typically making use of market days to shout out to the assembled crowds about the fortunes waiting to be made. The complaints by emigrants that they had been deceived about the journey, the conditions and the riches to be won were to come later, and from a safe distance.

At the time, relations between the governments of Ticino and Lombardy were at a low point. Lombardy was a part of the Catholic Austrian empire. Ticino, on the other hand was ruled by a radical government with decidedly anticlerical tendencies. Ticino had become a refuge for various Italian patriots seeking independence from Austrian rule. Early in 1853 matters reached a crisis point and Austria decided to impose an economic blockade and to send home from Lombardy some 4,000 Ticinese immigrants. The precarious situation of many Swiss had been further aggravated by a series of bad harvests. In these circumstances the option of emigration to Australia became more attractive.



Passport for Australia issued to Giuseppe Martella in 1855.

Many of the town councils provided loans to their citizens. Some sold or mortgaged their plots of land before leaving for the ports - Hamburg, Le Havre or Liverpool. Emigrants usually signed a contract with the shipping company when they purchased their tickets and this specified the conditions under which the journey would take place, the rations which would be supplied and so forth. But treatment frequently fell far short of what was specified, and large number of emigrants felt they had been betrayed.

"On land we were treated well because if they hadn't wanted to treat us well we would have made them. In our contract the food which they should give us is this a) morning; coffee, bread and sugar, b) lunch; soup bread, meat and vegetables, c) evening; bread, meat and soup. What we received in the first days was: in the morning a small glass of coffee and there was no more than six ounces of bread and this had to do for the entire day.. At dinner there was not more than one and a half ounces of meat per person, there were three small spoons of soup and it was made with broth which was bad and full of worms and the peas we call arbelg in our dialect. And in the evening a glass of tea, which was a glass of hot water and for this on the twentieth day of the said month of July we protested to the captain on account of the dinner and we are contented with two small spoons of soup made with rice and no condiment which is worse than animal food. We tried hard to make ourselves be treated well as our contract said, but there was no way of getting them to listen. How many times we cursed that rogue Reborra and Osvaldi and his agents and also the captain and most of that meat which they gave us was from those horses which Noah put on the Arc to preserve the race and most times we threw it in the sea.

And then we inform you that on the first of August we had a little storm, and we were all tossed about, and then at finding ourselves shut up here on the waters and one can only see sky and water and then I inform you that on the nineteenth day of August we arrived at the equator, and then I inform you that on the thirtieth of the said month an old Genoese man passed from this life to the next and gave his soul to God and his body to the sea.

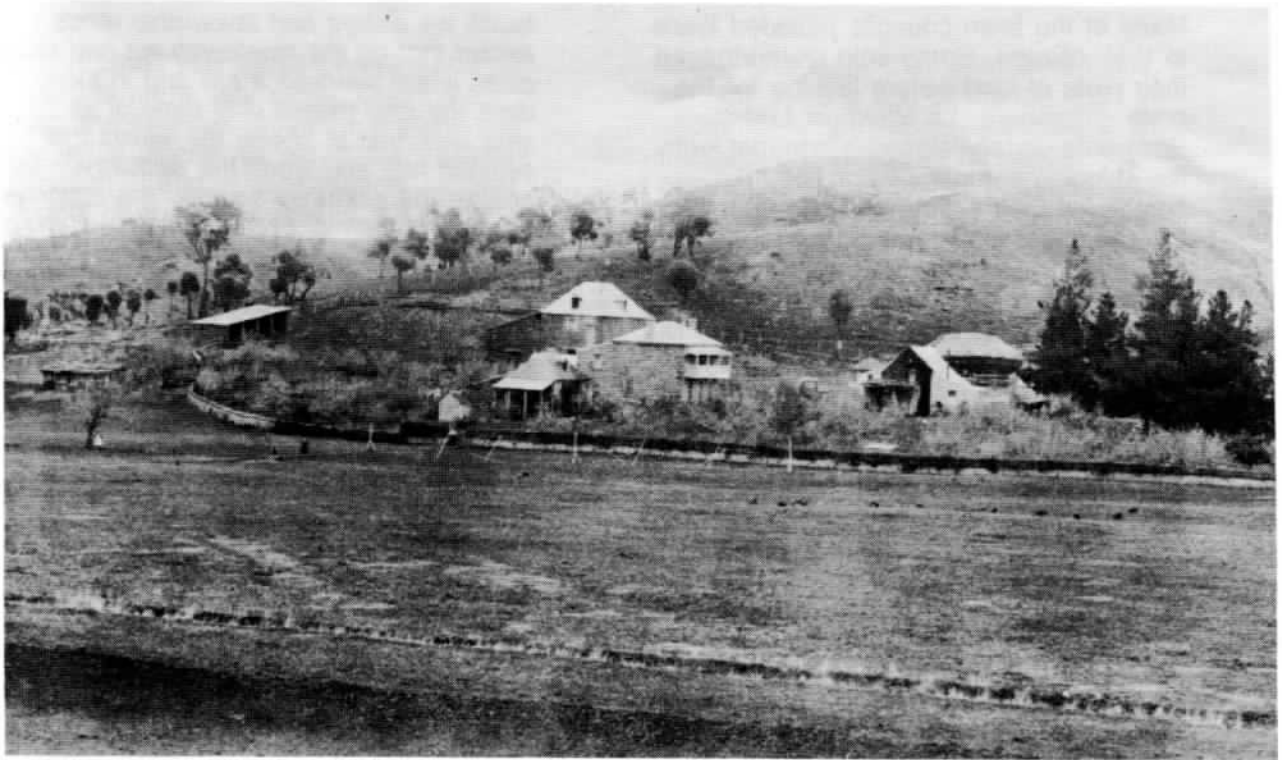
And then I inform you that from the sixteenth of September until the twenty

fourth we always had favourable winds except that on the nineteenth we had strong gales which wrecked a sail and in those days the ship carried only three of its 26 sails and then at seeing the waves that seemed hills and when the said waves beat against the ship they seemed like cannon shots, and then at seeing the ship which was now almost buried in the water, now was as high as the said hills, and then I inform you that the most fearful misfortune is this: that on the evening of the vigil of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary the kitchen of the ship would have burned down if they hadn't arrived in time to put it out. God knows what would have happened perhaps there was no salvation. But the assistance of God and the most Holy Virgin continues to help us and then on the morning of the feast a young man from Fusio of 21 years who was called Salvatore Tabacchi passed from this life to the next and gave his soul to God and his body to the sea.

And after so many misfortunes comes a consolation and what is the consolation. It is that we left that hovel of a ship and we left yesterday evening which was the evening of the feast of All Saints and you can imagine what consolation is in our hearts, and here below one can see written the names of all."

Melbourne seemed a busy city, "bigger than Locarno and Lugano and Bellinzona put together", as one migrant noted. The beauty of its setting was commented upon by many. Alessandro Pozzi has this to report:

"As regards Australia I find this country beautiful in every way. The air is healthy, it has been mainly cool so far, but it is often windy. The water is not very good. There are no fountains but one gathers rain water. Near the city there is a river and a great number of carters collect water from the river, carry it into the city and sell it to the inhabitants, who keep it near their houses in barrels. For fuel they use wood and a little coal which comes from abroad. As for soil this is a very fertile land but little cultivated. We arrived here in winter but already all sorts of plants were to be seen: flowers in the gardens, peas, onions. All sorts of cultivated plants were green and thriving just as at home in September and October. In short one can say that in winter plants grow strongly rather than decline and every sort of vegetable grows better than at home. . . .



The Righetti farm at Yandoit

The position of this town is very beautiful. It is on a hilly plain. The surface is smooth but undulating. All the land I have seen until now is like a meadow and covered with plants, trees which resemble the weeping willow. In the distance one can see a mountain near which I passed when going to the mines and there are some others but they are all covered in forest. Conditions until now have been good, works are going well particularly in building. They tell me that Melbourne last year (1853) was not half as big as it is now, and it could well be true. In the space of a few days one sees a shop open where 15 or 20 days previously a building had not even been started. In the city there are already some fine buildings and it is being continually improved. It is in a very beautiful position beside the port formed by the river. The roads are well made but there is a lot of mud in winter.¹⁶

Many would have preferred to seek employment rather than go to the mines, but in the difficult economic circumstances of 1854 jobs were already in short supply and there were not many chances of employment for a foreigner: "I stayed in Melbourne about two months and then I had to go to the diggings like everyone else because in this country no worker who

comes from Europe can find a job . . . and few of them too! (S. Pozzi 1854)

And so they made their way to the diggings. This was Tranquillo Patà's experience:

"In the morning we left at ten o'clock to go to the goldfields. We went on for six hours. Some threw away clothes because they didn't have the strength to carry them. They burnt or threw away nearly all the trunks. I am the only one who still has his clothes and trunk because I paid 7 pounds 14 shillings to a Genoese Italian to bring them to the goldfields. So, in the evening we reached an inn where we slept. We paid 22 pence to sleep on a verandah. In the morning we travelled for three hours. We found a hotel where we ate paying 4 pounds 8 to have some coffee and bread and then we left. In the evening we arrived in a small town where we got some bread and then we went on for an hour. We found a farm and we paid 22 pence to sleep on the floor in a room. Then in the morning we left and started travelling through a forest where you could hardly follow the road. We kept on travelling around in the forest for three days and for three nights we slept in the open. In those days we had to pay 22 pence a pound for bread. Anyway on the seventeenth we found an Italian and asked

him if there was far to go to the Bendigo goldfields. He said there were still twelve miles. Anyway on the eighteenth at nine o'clock we arrived at the goldfields very confused because we didn't know where to find our fellow countrymen."

Many miners made their way to the Jim Crow Ranges near Daylesford. It will be remembered that at this stage surface mining was no longer profitable and the normal procedure was to sink shafts to pay dirt level (60-100 feet). Generally partnerships of four or five men were formed. There was a great deal of rivalry in the search for gold. More or less violent cases of claim jumping were common. Hostility was probably fuelled to a degree by national resentment.

"I will tell you the news from here. There have been two battles, a place having first been discovered by Italians. Afterwards the English came all armed to make the Italians leave and take the gold. The Italians were at work, unprepared and unarmed. They all left and after two days a great number went back and the English were wounded and killed. The police came and seeing what

had happened said the Italians are right because the English robbed their gold." (B. Rusconi, Jan. 1856)

"The general nature of the English people is very rough and vindictive and woe to the person who can't make himself feared. They swear falsely and throw you out of the place where you are finding gold. They are very scared of knives. However it is a remarkable fact that the women are as kind as the men are rough." (G. Respini, July 1856)

For many the great advantage of Australia was the freedom from constraint. As Stefano Pozzi put it, "I am happy to be here for the great freedom above all. You sing, speak, do anything and no-one can stop you. You work, as is the duty of man. No-one obeys or is master; everyone is master and no-one a servant."

Some followed the rushes from one area to another. The procedure is well described by Pasquale Bontempi and we learn from him how quickly the entertainment industry followed in the miners' footsteps.



"The Account of Pasquale Bontempi from Menzonio: In Australia during his youth and years of tribulation:

Famous Australia. This is a terrible part of the world covered in forest but well loved for its riches and praised by every nation except its inhabitants who never have a stable abode. Now one sees great settlements and they seem one of the great cities of the world: carts loaded with merchandise and billiard parlours everywhere. Gaming of all sorts, vagabond women triumphing with their vices and miners digging on all sides. Afterwards one suddenly sees every citizen lift his house and put it on his shoulders and make his way among the thickest forests. Somewhere else one sees the same scene. After a very short time one sees nothing and so it continues."

Thirty years later a newly arrived immigrant had this to report:

"Nearly all of the very many Ticinese who are now broke in Australia could have returned and made their little homes flourish. In the early times they were all finding plenty of gold and, thinking it would never end, they use to pay a pound to get into a dance on Saturday nights and then they paid another ten or twenty to have a dancer for company for that evening, not including other expenses for drinks which were very

costly at the time. Imagine how terrible!" (A. Ghidossi, 1881)

For some, distance meant a strain on relationships with family members who had remained behind. Correspondence regarding the settlement of parents' estates indicates the problems a distant family member might face in obtaining a rightful share. Others, such as Antonio Maddalena, felt that their sacrifices were not appreciated.

"My dear wife, I know that you have as much regard for me as the oven brush and that you will not listen to me. My dear wife I tell you that my clothes are so full of patches that you can hardly tell what material they are made of and I still wear that velvet waistcoat of mine which I wore on the day I married you my dear wife, and I still have that shirt you made me with your blessed hands and I wear it on Sundays. But, all in all, my clothes are those of a poor beggar and you are not ashamed to wear such haughty clothes. But I beg you to be humble .. ." (September 1859)

Some saw the key to a stable future as lying in commerce. Various Ticinese set up bakery stores, sometimes engaging in fierce price-cutting wars with their fellow countrymen or other competitors. Some, like Alessandro Pozzi, found that in the



The Pozzi Brothers' store at Jim Crow mine

long run they were no more secure than the miners. There was a strong pressure on them to extend credit to their customers who often ran up huge bills in the time they were digging tunnels or sinking shafts. The dilemma was whether to continue to extend credit, in the hope the customer would be successful, or not. A rebuffed customer might well decide not to pay any of the money owing, even if he did find gold. At the end of the decade Pozzi failed although he had kept in the bank I.O.U.s to an amount of approximately two thousand pounds. In previous times there had also been various legal problems for Alessandro to negotiate.

"The police are very strict on Sundays. You can't stay open, or sell, or buy. If they see someone come out of the store with packages in their hands the storekeeper gets a fine of 5 pounds as has happened twice to two Englishmen nearby. And one Sunday we only just escaped by the skin of our teeth, since the policeman came into the store and said he had fined us because he found out we were selling goods on Sunday. But I asked him very politely, since I often give him a drink. So I said to do his duty if he was obliged, but if there was some way of pardoning us since it was the first time, he would be doing me a great favour. Then he replied that he couldn't and asked me what it was that we had given. I said it was flour because we don't have any bread at present. And then it was the boy who had given it. I wouldn't give it, certainly not. Then he said to me well if it was flour and you don't have bread, certainly it will be to make bread and I can let it pass this time. However they are not as strict at Jim Crow as they are on the other goldfields." (December 1857)

The risks for those who stayed in the mines were more serious. Battista Rusconi writes the following advice to his brother.:

"Dear brother, I will tell you the truth exactly as it is. Australia is good for five people, it is bad for 100. Make your calculation on that basis. It is overpopulated and the mines are not going well any more. You see a little money arriving in our country but don't take too much notice as everyone does the impossible because of the great needs of his family. . . The work is much harder than at home. Some months one covers one's expenses, some months a bit more, some

months less. To work a lot or little makes no difference. At present I am working eighty feet underground. Well then dear brother, abandon the thought of coming to Australia because of what I see and what I experience and what is well known. If I make my fortune we will still be brothers." (Bendigo 1857)

His generosity was not put to the test. In July 1859 his partner Vincenzo Perini writes:

"My dear friend Giacomo Rusconi, I, Vincenzo Perini, write these two lines to tell you of my good health. I trust to God that it is the same for you and your mother. To the great distress of myself and my companions I inform you of the unfortunate and sudden death of your dear brother and son Battista Rusconi, known as Cino. To the great sorrow and melancholy of you and us, while we five partners were working in the tunnel on June 27th 1859 at 10.00 a.m., a large mass of earth of about three cubic yards fell, and the unfortunate man passed to a better life. He died in a few minutes. He couldn't even say a prayer." (July 1859)



Ovald Vanzetta, Luigi Rolleri, Jim Scheggia and Fred Vanina in front of the Vanzetta brothers' water battery on Spring Creek

After the boom era of gold mining had passed many miners left the areas of Daylesford and Bendigo which had been their preferred destinations in the fifties. One can calculate from data provided by Cheda that some 35% returned home at one stage or another, but it is not generally possible to specify whether they stayed permanently or not. Some certainly made a brief trip to marry and re-emigrate. But for many, Europe or California now offered more attractive prospects. The latter, in fact, was to draw Swiss Italians for another century.

We may assume that Melbourne absorbed many who remained in Australia. But others are to be found following the New Zealand gold rushes in the sixties, as well as in Queensland and New South Wales. A strong presence remained in Daylesford and surrounding areas. Some resumed their former trades. Swiss Italians were also well represented among the farmers, grape growers, shopkeepers and hotel owners of the region. A considerable

number continued to be registered on the local rate books as "miners", but this presumably includes employees as well as the self-employed and possibly those for whom mining was a part-time occupation. Many, like Filippo Tunzi, faced hard times after the rushes had ended:

"Here you need to work like a tyrant to make a wretched living and split wood as hard as iron, because the gold mines are poor, very poor." (Bendigo, March 1873)

And it is undoubtedly true that when life on the goldfields returned to a more conventional pattern, there were far fewer reasons for optimism and fewer hopes of creating riches with toil alone. A study by K. Threlfall⁵ indicates that, some twenty years later, property values for Ticinese in the Daylesford area were above average. The positions of eminence or simple respectability which many Swiss Italians attained in their communities illustrate how successfully they faced the challenges of this new era.

1. Perhaps a note of caution should be sounded. It seems likely that not every one of these landed in Australia. In many cases we are faced with the name of an emigrant who applied for a passport stating his intention to go to Australia, or was granted a loan by the local comune for this purposes. There were however many Ticinese emigrants in various parts of Europe. Many were in London where some had already made their mark setting up restaurants and hotels. Others were to be pioneers in electricity supply. It seems probable that some emigrants for Australia did not go beyond this point.

2. *L'emigrazione ticinese*, II.230

3. *Ibid*, II.330

4. *Ibid*, II.44

5. K. Threlfall, *Unpublished Project* (Deakin University, 1986)

Acknowledgement: Illustrations on pages 9, 10, 14 and 16 are from Giorgio Cheda, *L'emigrazione ticinese*, Locamo, 1979.

Editor's note:

Tony Pagliaro teaches Italian at La Trobe University. He has completed an English translation of Cheda's two volume book on emigration from Ticino, and is at present negotiating to have the work published in Australia. I am sure that there are many descendants of the original immigrants, as well as historians of Victorian society in the last century, who eagerly await its publication.



Waterbag taken back to Ticino by one of the miners