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Honors 1000

24 October 2014

Keeping Our Focus

“Michael! Michael, come here!” Carlo was freaking out. He had seen the story in the newspaper while he was at work. The headline read: “Ford gives 10,000,000 to 26,000 employees” in the New York Times.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was January 5th of 1914, and this is what they had been waiting for. Michael peeked his head curiously through the curtain that had been separating their room from the rest of the house.

“Yeah Car?” Michael looked his age for once with that eager curiosity. Carlo brought his younger cousin along two years earlier when he decided to take the journey to America to make money for his family. Carlo was 19 when they left and Michael was only 15. They came from the Southern-Italian city of Lecce. Italy, in recent years had been experiencing extreme drought and poor soil for farming. Carlo and Michael’s family had been having a very rough time and had moved in together three years before they decided to leave, when Michael’s father had left for America.

“It’s time to move along Michael. We will catch a bus tonight to Detroit. Henry Ford is offering $5-a-day at his plant. It will be easier work than we have been doing and we will make more money. We’ll be able to send some money back home soon if we can get the job.”

The bus arrived at seven and Carlo and Michael were ready to go with the few belongings they had. They had spent the last two years living with other Italian-Americans who had come over earlier and offered for the boys to live there with them for a good price. Carlo had made it clear that he would not stay in New York for any longer than he needed to like most. “Because Italians preferred to live among their friends and neighbors, subsequent immigrants settled near those who had come before.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Although they didn’t have much money to move right away, by working multiple odd jobs that other American’s did not want, and working hard for long hours, Michael and Carlo had saved up enough money in the time to make a move.

After 15 hours on the bus, the boys arrived right around 10 am. As the workday was well underway they expected to see only a few individuals around the Highland Park Plant. As they walked down the street though, they saw a line already beginning to form outside the factory full of men looking for a job. Luckily, Carlo thought to himself, the New York Times was one of the first newspapers to print the news, or the boys would be out of luck completely. They quickly got in line and waited their turn. Within the next few days over 10,000 men from all over would show up to apply for a position.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ford sent the men home with a manual after their interview saying he would be willing to hire them if they followed all of his advice that was written.

“Car. How are we supposed to listen to his rules if we can’t read em?” They had learned to speak over the past two years from the families they had been living with, but reading was never necessary.

“We have two days until we start, so first we need to find somewhere to stay. Tomorrow we will figure that out.” Carlo had talked to a couple of the men waiting for an interview at the factory with them, and had heard about an area with some small affordable houses just west. The west side had more bus routes that led to the Ford plant, so after stopping for some food that was where Carlo planned to head. [[4]](#footnote-4)

“You mean he wants to completely control our lives when we are not even working?” Michael looked at Carlos, dumbfounded.

“Yes, but we need the money.” Carlo had talked to the man who lived down the street from where they had found a house, who had agreed to read the manual to him for a small price.

The jobs we worked at the factory were mind numbing and repetitive, but my body needed the break after the past two years of working hard labor jobs for long hours. Henry Ford was a genius to be honest, implementing the assembly line in order to make us all interchangeable and of no value. “It was the first critical step in the dehumanization of manufacturing work.” [[5]](#footnote-5) I spent hours just tightening bolts, while Michael threw on the tires the bolts were attached to. We, and the other workers, had been changed from men to carriage horses, working as a team rather than as individuals. If one of us horses messed up, another could be easily switched in. This idea made us all work harder to keep our pay. Work was not the only way Ford had changed Michael and I though. Ford’s control on my entire life was quickly in place. Ford’s stipulations and living the city life itself had soon Americanized Michael and I in the senses of home-life and language, although it would never change our beliefs and our strong focus on our family.

Our home-life was affected immensely by his “advice”. Michael and I were forced to keep our household spotless and even improve lighting in order to follow the guidelines of his manual. It was tidy, and unlike New York, we were alone and even in separate bedrooms. Although the rooms were small, we were required to live in a space that Ford would not consider to be overly crowded, and were not permitted to sleep in the same room as somebody else. I for one, thought rules were nonsense as I had come from a big family back in Italy, sharing my room with two younger brothers, and had gotten used to New York living only a curtain away from other immigrants. My family needed the money back home, though, and we were able to send some once in a while. I found myself lying awake a lot during the night thinking about my mother and siblings. I knew that they would be having a tough month with the cold and wet weather of the season.[[6]](#footnote-6) I have to admit though it is not as cold in Italy’s winter months as those of Detroit. We rarely experienced snow in Italy.

We were also made to attend the Ford School to be sure we spoke proper and clear English.[[7]](#footnote-7) We knew the basics of communication in English, but had never really needed to learn to speak fluently since we had lived among other immigrants in New York who spoke the same mixed Italian-English language that we did. They did not accept that in the factory, or even around the city. We tried to learn as quickly as we could to speak the way the American men did since as we began to settle in we realized that, “The Italian gained a stereotype of an illiterate, uncivilized, and deprived offender who could not adapt to American life and institutions.” [[8]](#footnote-8) We did not want to be seen this way just because most Italians now immigrating had no chance for prior education. As we had come just before the rush of Italians into the city, we avoided most of the harsh judgment, but not all of it.

Another big change for us was being away from our family and our culture. In New York, we spent most of our time in the presence of other Italian immigrants and were never judged for our background. In Detroit, most of Ford’s workers lived in a single area. Although some cultures banded together, there were not many other Italian-Americans working for Ford at that time. Back in Italy, our family would always eat a hot dinner together that our mother had prepared, and we spent a lot of time together. In America we had to adapt to spending more time alone. Michael and I worked Ford’s second shift, the night shift. This meant no more family dinner. Instead we ate cold meals we had thrown together that morning during our break time, just sitting around the factory.

One thing that we did not have to worry about or change was our religion. An Italian ethnic parish called San Francesco had been formed in Detroit near where we worked. Fr. Francesco Beccherini had established it in 1897. [[9]](#footnote-9) The parish was of Christian descent, and felt more like home to me than anywhere else in this new world of mine. Michael and I found more Italian-Americans gathering here than we even thought lived near Detroit, and it was refreshing to be able to speak my native language freely and be myself for a few hours every week.

In addition, the city would never change our focus to return to help our families. In 1928 when the production of the Model T was moved to the River Rouge plant completely, Michael and I decided it was time to return to our families and our homes. Detroit was good to us for the most part, but it was just never my true home. We had made plenty of money to take back to our families in the 14 years, and had even been able to send them some every year to live on. The effects that immigration and America had on me in the form of my habits at home and language will stick with me forever, but I have loved returning to my stronger culture in Italy. It was a great experience to live in American cities, and I have returned to New York to visit Michael and his family many times. Michael moved back to become a businessman, moving into a suburb. “…Many of the academics, professionals, and businesspeople…. did not live in the city but in the suburbs.”[[10]](#footnote-10) My wife and daughter enjoy the vacations, but we all agree that it is a different world and that we prefer our small, friendly town here at home.

1. "On This Day: January 5." *The Learning Network On This Day January 5 Comments*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Oct. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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3. “Interactive: Highland Park Timeline." *The Detroit News*. N.p., 16 Apr. 2007. Web. 20 Sept. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sugrue, Thomas J. "From Motor City to Motor Metropolis: Living in the Motor City." *From Motor City to Motor Metropolis: Living in the Motor City*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Oct. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Martelle, Scott (2014-03-01). Detroit: A Biography (p. 73). Chicago Review Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. "Italy in January." N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Oct. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ford, Henry. Ford Manual: Helpful Hints for Employees. Detroit: Ford Motor, 1915. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bahar Gürsel *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Jul., 2008), pp. 353-376 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "Authorization Login." *Alexander Street Press Authorization*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Oct. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rybczynski, Witold. City Life (pg.173) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)