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# The Crossings of Louis Pirolli, a Migrant Among Others (1886-1953)

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**Fabrice Langrognet,**

**“The crossings of Louis Pirolli, a migrant among others (1886-1953),”**

***Quaderni Storici*, Vol. 54 (2019), No. 3, 831–57.**

Abstract:

Historical studies attempting to understand the migrant experience at the individual level remain scarce. This article offers one contribution to remedying this historiographical deficit, by engaging in a transnational analysis of the life course of one migrant, Luigi Pirolli (1886-1953). At the time of his birth in the heart of the Italian Mezzogiorno, Luigi’s family already had a migration culture. Combined with a particular nexus of constraints and opportunities, this allowed him to migrate at fifteen to the Plaine-Saint-Denis, a working-class, all-migrant suburb of Paris. This is where he would eventually pass away after two world wars, several return-trips, and various oscillations of his national, ethnic, and class identifications. From the reconstruction of Luigi’s itinerary, made possible by a great variety of archival and oral sources, emerges a narrative in which contingent and singular mechanisms of social and cultural differentiation are brought back to the forefront of migration history.

Keywords:

Migration – microhistory – Plaine-Saint-Denis – France – Italy – ethnicity – nation – gender – class

“*Se gira ‘o munno sano / Se va a cercá furtuna / Ma, quanno spona ‘a luna / Luntano ‘a Napule / Nun se pò stá!*”<sup>1</sup> It was only fitting that the acclaimed American tenor Mario Lanza, whose father Antonio had left the little Molisan village of Filignano for the United States in 1905, was in Italy when he recorded the famous song *Santa Lucia Luntana*.<sup>2</sup> Composed soon after the First World War, the melody had been among the first to give a voice, however stereotypical, to the emigrants from the Mezzogiorno, supposed to spend their entire life longing for an elusive homecoming.

For all the aesthetic appeal of this melancholic motive, studies about the transnationalism of migrants, and in particular about their ties to their native soil, have painted a more complex picture. These connections, which vary greatly in both nature and intensity, undergo constant processes of weaving and unravelling.<sup>3</sup> Across migration studies, they serve as a yardstick for models of ethnicity and assimilation, even in their reformed, constructivist forms.<sup>4</sup> For their part, historians have shown that long-distance circulation of information and social remittances are not specific to urban, modern migrations.<sup>5</sup> In addition, by restoring the idiosyncratic character of interpersonal connections, historical investigations have shed new light on areas of

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<sup>1</sup> “One travels around the world / Seeking fortune / Yet when the moon rises / Being far from Naples / Is unbearable!” All translations are ours unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> S. Palomba, *La poesia napoletana dal Novecento a oggi*, Naples: L’Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2003, 183.

<sup>3</sup> D. Smith, “An ‘untied’ research agenda for family migration: loosening the ‘shackles’ of the past,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 30 (2004), No. 2, 263–82; R. Waldinger, *The Cross-Border Connection: Immigrants, Emigrants, and Their Homelands*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> T. Faist, “Transnationalization in international migration: implications for the study of citizenship and culture,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 23 (2000), No. 2, 189–222.

<sup>5</sup> L. Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650*, Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press, 1992.

agency and even nonconformism in migrant lives, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the structural forces influencing broad migration patterns.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this article is to build on those efforts and document the workings of transnationalism from the vantage point of one individual life spanning across the 19th and 20th century. It argues that the intricate, and evolving, mechanisms of identification experienced by migrant people of yore, can be fruitfully accounted for at close range.<sup>7</sup> This inquiry focuses on another, much less famous, family of migrants than Lanza's, which came from the exact same part of the world. The protagonist of this story is called Luigi Pirolli. He was born eight years before, and a couple of miles to the east of the place where Lanza's father, who happened to be his second cousin, had himself grown up.

For a long time, microhistorical approaches remained unfamiliar to migration historians. This was due to the combination of several factors: the long shadow of the New Social History and its countercultural preoccupations, which prompted enterprises of ethnic legitimation through quantitative and group-wide studies; the transnational and global turn of the 1990s, which appeared to call for bigger scales, not smaller ones;

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<sup>6</sup> P.-A. Rosental, "Between macro and micro: theorizing agency in nineteenth-century French migrations," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 20 (2006), No. 3, 457–81; A. Arru, "Networks and logics of migration: the circulation of credit among immigrants in nineteenth-century Italy," in A. Steidl *et al.* (eds.), *European Mobility: Internal, International, and Transatlantic Moves in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*, Göttingen: V & R, 2009, 19–38; N. Davis, "Transnationalism, the urban & migration in the Victorian era: the lives of Henry & Sophia Morwitch," in Marie Ruiz (ed.), *International Migrations in the Victorian Era*, Leiden: Brill, 2018, 156–86.

<sup>7</sup> On "identification," see R. Brubaker, F. Cooper, "Beyond 'identity'," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29 (2000), No. 1, 1–47.

the practical difficulty, before the digital era, to embark on a microhistorical effort without having stumbled upon a treasure trove of information beforehand.<sup>8</sup>

Over the last couple of decades, however, migration historians have displayed a new interest in singularity. They realized that reclaiming the agency to migrant individuals could help debunk capitalist and nationalist teleologies.<sup>9</sup> In the biographical analysis, they saw one of the means to avoid, or at least control for, the perils of taking ethnic, national, racial or gender groupness for granted. This led to a reevaluation of overlooked migration and integration patterns, not necessarily dependent on origin and ethnic ties.<sup>10</sup> The focus on particular itineraries also offered a way to intertwine the micro and the transnational, something that, at its best, can recapture the “interrelationship of the local and the global.”<sup>11</sup> By highlighting a mix of idiosyncrasies and long-distance connections, the small scale would reveal contextualizations and comparisons that are often invisible through the macro lens.<sup>12</sup>

Luigi’s story is one of a “migrant among others.” He did, in fact, live his life among other people: family, friends, colleagues, strangers. His networks provided him with knowledge, opportunities and solidarity; quarrels and rivalries made him alter his

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<sup>8</sup> G. Levi, “On microhistory,” in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, 97–8; S. G. Magnússon, “‘The singularization of history’: social history and microhistory within the postmodern state of knowledge,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 36 (2003), No. 3, 701–35.

<sup>9</sup> B. Gregory, “Is small beautiful? Microhistory and the history of everyday life,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1999, 101–2.

<sup>10</sup> F. Ramella, “Biografia di un operaio antifascista: ipotesi per una storia sociale dell’emigrazione politica,” *Publications de l’École française de Rome*, Vol. 94 (1986), No. 1, 385–406; S. Cavallo, “La leggerezza delle origini: rotture e stabilità nelle storie dei chirurghi torinesi tra Sei e Settecento,” *Quaderni Storici*, Vol. 36 (2001), No. 106, 59–90.

<sup>11</sup> F. Trivellato, “Is there a future for Italian microhistory in the age of global history?,” *California Italian Studies*, Vol. 2 (2001), No. 1, 1–24, quote 4.

<sup>12</sup> A. Epple, “Lokalität und die Dimensionen des Globalen. Eine Frage der Relationen,” *Historische Anthropologie*, Vol. 21 (2013), No. 1, 4–25; J. P. Ghobrial, “The secret life of Elias of Babylon and the uses of global microhistory,” *Past and Present*, Vol. 222 (2014) No. 1, 51–93.

behavior. But the expression “among others” also suggests that Luigi may have been only one among many other migrants who shared similar experiences. As in any microhistorical analysis, this point will remain largely open.

The analytical point here rather consists in showing, by virtue of one particular case, that general assumptions about entire cohorts of people, their motives and their ethnonational identifications, can benefit from critical challenges based on agency and unpredictability. Today, such a challenge can be mounted thanks to growing potential of “micronominative”<sup>13</sup> research. The investigation presented here, which draws upon archival records from public and private collections, oral interviews and digitally accessible information, started from a single line in a census record.<sup>14</sup>

Not only does Luigi’s story underline with greater detail than elsewhere the cumulative effect, over several generations, of migration culture, transnational networks, and a context-specific demand for foreign labor. It also highlights the role played, in an evolving set of institutional and social circumstances, by individual decisions in the face of opportunities or misfortunes, as well as the singular correlations of such decisions with variations in self- and other-identifications. If Luigi’s life, recounted here in chronological order, is exemplary, it is of the many social and cultural

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<sup>13</sup> C. Ginzburg, C. Poni, “Il nome e il come: scambio e mercato storiografico,” *Quaderni storici*, Vol. 14 (1979), No. 40, p. 181–190, cit. p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> The information about Luigi and his family was collected as part of an in-depth investigation about the tenants of one particular building in the Paris area at the turn of the 20th century. The reference to interviews will be abridged as follows: “Int. Par.” for Mr. Parravano, nephew of Luigi Pirolli, interviewed on 28.10.2016; “Int. Thom.”, for Mr. Thomas, grandson of Luigi Pirolli, 31.10.2016; “Int. J. Pir.” for Mr. J. Pirolli, grandson of Agostino Pirolli, 16-28.01.2017; “Int. Vit.” for Mr. Vitale, great-grandson of Pietro Carlo Pirolli, 17.01.2017-9.02.2017; “Int. Salv.” for Mr. Salvatore, great-grandson of Luigi Salvatore, 14-19.01.2017.

reconfigurations that could go along with a destiny on the move in the first half of the 20th century.

## **1. Migration culture and opportunities (19th century)**

### *Being born at a far-flung crossroads*

Luigi Pirolli was born on January 1, 1886. Administratively speaking, his birthplace belonged to Pozzilli, Molise, a town of about 2,000 that lay at the southernmost edge of the Samnite Appennines, between Rome and Naples. To be more accurate, his family lived in a distinct, if not autonomous, subsection of Pozzilli. That hamlet, called Demanio, harbored a few dozen farmers. It was quite distant of Pozzilli itself, about three hours on donkeyback to the north.

The geographical position of Demanio is important to understand why, and where to, some members of Luigi's family could decide to leave. On the one hand, living there very much meant living at the margins. At the confines of its province, Demanio was in the mountains, a long way from major towns. On the other hand, Demanio, far from being shut out of the outside world, did enjoy structural connections that would prove decisive for the Pirollis and their neighbors.

Closer to Demanio than Pozzilli's center were Filignano, to the west, and Casalcassinese, to the north. In these parts, the habit of migrating to France and the rest of Europe through the northern route had taken hold early in the postunitarian era. It was not until the inauguration, in 1886, of a railroad connecting Venafro to Naples, that

people from that area started to find an easy way out to other shores, particularly the Americas.<sup>15</sup> Before Luigi moved anywhere himself, his family had already the experience of both migration routes.

### *The youth of Luigi's father*

As a child, Giacinto Pirolli, who would become Luigi's father, had attended school. Not only did Demanio, in its heyday, have an elementary school, but records consistently show that Giacinto and his brothers were able to read and write. This was a truly remarkable feat. In 1861, only 14 % of adult men of the Molise and Abruzzi regions were literate, and the proportion was undoubtedly much lower for farmers like the Pirollis.<sup>16</sup>

This suggests, from the start, a broader-than-average set of skills in the family, which would come in handy for migration purposes. Not that it necessarily meant a higher social status, though. While Giacinto's father owned his two-storey farmhouse and was not bound by a lease to a landowner, this was not exceptional in Demanio, and certainly not synonymous with affluence.<sup>17</sup>

In the village, gender and age were certainly the most common geometries of difference. Mothers and sisters, in addition to participating in harvests, would take care

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<sup>15</sup> G. Masciotta, *Il Molise dalle origini ai nostri giorni*, Cava dei Tirreni: Di Mauro, 1952, Vol. 3, 423; F. Cefalogli, *Il Molise nell'Unità d'Italia*, Isernia: Cosmo Iannone, 2011, 139; Z. Ciuffoletti, "Sfruttamento della manodopera infantile italiana in Francia alla fine del sec. XIX," in J.-B. Duroselle, E. Serra (eds.), *L'Emigrazione italiana in Francia prima del 1914*, Milan: Angeli, 1978, 249–57.

<sup>16</sup> Int. Thom., Vit.; Ministero dell'Istruzione pubblica, *Statistica del regno d'Italia: Istruzione pubblica e privata, anno scolastico 1862-63*, Rome, 1866, XXIII.

<sup>17</sup> Archivio storico comunale di Pozzilli (ASCP), b. 13, catasto fabbricati, vol. 1, [no date], No. 317.



of the house, feed the poultry and other animals, and attend to most domestic chores. Wives would also take over the direction of the household when husbands were driving the herds during the month-long transhumance, a division of roles that would be reactivated in the context of emigration.<sup>18</sup>

As Giacinto was growing up, the area became plagued by banditism. His family came to experience it in the most direct fashion in 1867, when a band of outlaws raided the house of one of his cousins, a few hundred yards up the road, leaving five dead and two wounded. In these surroundings, the *briganti*'s victims and accomplices were often acquainted, if not related, and tensions ran high. Both the bandits and law enforcement, whose repressive measures proved particularly harsh, could be manipulated to settle personal feuds. Even Giacinto's own brother Agostino, only 16 at the time, was suspected of complicity with the brigands.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Agostino and Pietro Carlo: the trailblazing musicians*

As elsewhere in the Mezzogiorno, escaping the perils of reckless violence contributed to early emigration decisions in Demanio. In addition, by the early 1880s, the economic situation had become less and less auspicious, due to shrinking wood resources, crop prices brought down by foreign competition, and insufficient revenues from domestic work.<sup>20</sup> By the time of Luigi's birth, a migration culture already existed in the village,

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<sup>18</sup> S. Anselmi, "Mezzadri e mezzadrie nell'Italia centrale," in P. Bevilacqua, *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, vol. 2, Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1990, 228.

<sup>19</sup> F. Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l'Unità*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983; Archivio di Stato (AS) Isernia, Sottoprefettura di Isernia, atti di polizia, SS.9, No. 11-39-1868, Giuseppe Pirolli. Agostino Pirolli would be arrested five more times in the following years for suspicion of theft, and serve six months in jail in 1872-3 (see doc. referenced in note 22).

<sup>20</sup> E. Sori, *L'Emigrazione italiana dall'Unità alla Seconda guerra mondiale*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979, 115.

and more importantly, within the Pirolli family itself. Luigi's paternal uncles Agostino and Pietro Carlo had already been on the move for several years, thus playing a critical role, albeit indirectly, in shaping their nephew's life opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

As many others highlanders before them, Agostino and Pietro Carlo had decided to hit the trail and earn a living as strolling musicians. In 1881, Pietro Carlo left first, for France, where he would have been able to tap into the connections of an established network of musicians from Pozzilli, Filignano and Casalcassinese, active in various regions, in particular in Normandy. A few months later, it was now the turn of Agostino to set off with his wife, with whom he reached Rome through Cassino. From there, they went all the way to Switzerland, before reuniting with Pietro Carlo in France.<sup>22</sup>

On the road, Agostino and Pietro Carlo employed a child performer, a 16-year-old Pozzilli native who had been entrusted to them by his mother. The youth was eventually beaten –though not by them but by some unknown Frenchman– and abandoned to his fate on a beach in Normandy, without food nor shelter. The Pirolli brothers were denounced, arrested and tried in Italy. Found guilty of violating the 1873 Italian law against employing minors in wandering trades, they were sentenced to one year in prison and a heavy fine.

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<sup>21</sup> On the importance of migration cultures in perpetuating migration, see D. Massey et al., "Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19 (1993), No. 3, 431–466.

<sup>22</sup> All the details on the journey are drawn from AS Roma, fondo Tribunale penale e civile di Roma, b. 4100, fasc. 28765, Tribunale correzionale di Roma, trial No. 7384, ruling 1.02.1883, and Corte d'appello di Roma, trial No. 28765, ruling 2.07.1883.

For decades, children from various regions of Italy had been seen around Europe as street vendors and young musicians.<sup>23</sup> Boys, in particular, had routinely been consigned by struggling parents to “*padroni*” who would employ them on the streets, provide for their food and clothing, and send the extra income, if any, to the family. But all *padroni* were not as considerate as Signor Vitalis in the 1878 bestseller *Sans Famille*. Accounts of mistreatment and an increasing cultural sensitivity to the well-being of children prompted calls to rein in this system of indenture, in which critics saw a new form of slave trade. Luigi’s uncles had the misfortune of being among the few who were actually caught and punished by the courts.

#### *A family’s culture of migration*

As a child, then, Luigi had certainly heard about France. While Pietro Carlo kept crisscrossing France with his family for a long time, Agostino would regularly touch base in Pozzilli, and had quickly picked up the French language.<sup>24</sup> Luigi’s first cousins Ernesto and Raffaele, who joined their father Agostino on yet another French tour in 1890-1891, were also able to tell him about their French adventures.<sup>25</sup>

By the last decade of the 19th century, Agostino had knowledge of France’s geography and could mobilize social networks from Lyon to Jersey, in the Channel Islands.<sup>26</sup> He

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<sup>23</sup> M. E. Ferrari, “I mercanti di fanciulli nelle campagne e la tratta dei minori, una realtà sociale dell’Italia fra ‘800 e ‘900,” *Movimento operaio e socialista*, Vol. 6 (1983), No. 1, 87–108; J. Zucchi, *The Little Slave of the Harp: Italian Child Street Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Paris, London, and New York*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Archives départementales de l’Eure (AD27), 4M29, Auguste Pirolli, 20.04.1885; AD du Calvados (AD14), M3077, Pirolli; ASC Filignano (ASCF), mar., Agostino Pirolli e Francesca Di Meo, 14.08.1889; ASCP, births, Vincenzo Pirolli, 7.09.1894.

<sup>25</sup> AD14, 3U4 966, Trib. de Lisieux, 16.03.1891, Pirolli Augustin *et al.*; 2U4 1599, Cour d’appel de Caen, 22.04.1891, Pirolli.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

had also developed practices that would later be reappropriated by Giacinto, and even by Luigi. Being particular about having all the necessary authorizations required; appealing rulings and administrative decisions; deliberately concealing the truth; invoking poverty as an excuse; pulling political strings to influence the authorities.<sup>27</sup> Despite the difficulty of actually retrieving evidence of this aside from formal similarities, it is likely that the Pirolli brothers did in fact share some of their “personal information field” about migration.<sup>28</sup> A certain standard of practices emerged from the sum of their individual experiences, which incrementally improved the chances of success of the family’s subsequent migration ventures. Thanks to Luigi’s uncles, France was now an option for the Pirollis.

### *The American route*

And yet in the Spring of 1890, another pair of Pirolli brothers decided to emigrate in another direction. Giacinto and his brother Antonio left for Naples, embarked on a boat, and arrived in New York harbor with three fellow land workers from Pozzilli.<sup>29</sup> Maybe the judicial troubles of their older brothers had convinced them to seek another route; or maybe they were not gifted for music, and had heard about good paying, industrial jobs in America. Be that as it may, Giacinto only returned between January 1893 the

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<sup>27</sup> The file of Agostino’s arrest in Normandy in 1891 contains the business card of the local member of Parliament, A. Engerand. A handwritten note on the back that suggests that the Député had asked the Préfet not to deport Agostino to Italy (AD14, M3077, Pirolli).

<sup>28</sup> J. Jackson, L. Page Moch, “Migration and the social history of modern Europe,” *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 22 (1989), No. 1, 27–36, quote 30.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. National Archives, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York*, M. 237, R. 546; L. 1; No. 460 (via Ancestry.com).

Spring of 1894.<sup>30</sup> The economic crisis in America probably played a role in his homecoming.

About this multi-year trip, we do not know much, except that it made the transoceanic emigration another possibility for the family. Not only would Giacinto go there again at least once more, but his brother Agostino's third wife would emigrate permanently to the United States in 1913, after Agostino's passing.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, since Giacinto left to France only a few years later, it is doubtful that, in that particular instance, the temporary trip to America had been enough of a financial success.

## **2. Growing up in the Plaine-Saint-Denis (1901-1906)**

### *Hearing about, and leaving for, Paris*

In late 1900, Luigi's father got wind of an opportunity. Manual labor was needed in a glass factory, somewhere near Paris. In the absence of direct evidence, how the information reached Giacinto is up for guessing. By connecting the dots in the sources, we can reasonably infer, however, that it was very probably through the family network of Luigi's mother, Maria Carmina.

One of the very first Italian families to have been employed, about five years earlier, at that very glass factory, located in the Plaine-Saint-Denis and commonly referred to by the name of its founder and director, Mr. Legras, was that of Rosario Verrecchia. A

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<sup>30</sup> ASCP, 1893, deaths, No. 3, 12.01.1893; 1895, births, 1895, No. 12, 29.02.1895.

<sup>31</sup> Int. Par.; Int. J. Pir.

Filignano native, Rosario was a first cousin of Maria Carmina Pirolli. Not that there had been no Italian nationals at all in the “Plaine,” as locals called the area, when Rosario and his family had moved there in 1896. But in the particular perimeter around the glass factory, very few had been living, and in the early 1890s, almost all southern Italians spotted in the area were still isolated strolling musicians.<sup>32</sup>

One Molisan family, though, had been there for a while, that of Luigi Salvatore, Rosario’s own brother-in-law. Salvatore had moved to the Plaine with wife and children as early as 1893.<sup>33</sup> Both brothers-in-law had earlier been living in Paris, in the La Villette neighborhood, from the early 1880s, and both had been employed at one of France’s main railway companies. Rosario had even made enough money to buy out a small, two-bedroom hotel-restaurant, which he had held for four years, and which served as one of the main retreats for newcomers from the Mezzogiorno. After an injury had forced Rosario to quit his railworking job in 1893, he and his wife had reverted to the classic solution of singing and playing music in Normandy. But they had not spent a full year on the road until they heard from the opening at Legras, probably through Salvatore, who himself did not take advantage of this opportunity, re-emigrating instead to London.<sup>34</sup>

By the 1890s, several others of Maria Carmina’s first cousins had settled in La Villette as well, with their respective families. Just as Giacinto’s relatives, they had transitioned

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<sup>32</sup> Saint-Denis Municipal Archives (SDMA), 1F21, Census, 1896, vol. II, 171; ASCF, 1843, mar., No. 13, 7.08.1843; *Journal de Saint-Denis (JSD)*, 22.05.1892; SDMA, CT928, “Déclarations d’étrangers”; *Le Matin*, 25.09.1894.

<sup>33</sup> SDMA, CT928, No. 1737; Archives de la ville de Paris (AVP), V4E 3106, mar., No. 15, 7.01.1882.

<sup>34</sup> *Archives commerciales de la France*, 25.06.1882, 862; AVP, D1P4587, rue Labois-Rouillon 6; AVP, V4E7717, XIX<sup>e</sup> arr., 1883, births, No. 3110, 16.07.1882; *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 12.07.1893; Int. Salv.; AD14, 2MiEC 1000, Bayeux, 1895, births, No. 98, 27.08.1895.

in the last years of the century from agriculture to industry by way of music. One of them was a construction worker; another was employed at a sugar refinery. Sources suggest that the latter secured a job at the Legras factory and a dwelling in the Plaine through Rosario Verrecchia, with whom he was close.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, we know that Rosario, who spoke fluent French, helped some of his Legras colleagues from Pozzilli illegally obtain work permits for their underage children. He would personally go to city hall and produce, on their behalf, fake birth certificates in support of their applications.<sup>36</sup> The centrality of Verrecchia's role as the head of an immigration network matches the indirect recollection of Salvatore's great-grandson, who affirms that the two brothers-in-law acted as "the emigration channel" to Saint-Denis.<sup>37</sup>

Upon arrival, Giacinto and his two eldest sons Luigi and Giustino resided at the same address as Rosario and his wife. These kinship ties surely helped them negotiate their adjustment to the immigration context, which was rife with challenges. The language, the job, the landscape, the food, the neighbors: a lot needed to be processed, and the help of French-speaking, well-connected relatives could certainly go a long way in the first weeks of their presence in France.

### *Luigi and Giustino, factory apprentices*

Before he departed for France, Giacinto had undoubtedly been aware, for some time already, of the route that led to French glass factories, if not to that particular one in

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<sup>35</sup> See AD27, 4M29, Orazio Di Meo, 26.10.1884, 14.03.1885, 8.10.1885; AVP, V4E 10510, XIX<sup>e</sup> arr., births, 1893, No. 808, 15.03.1893; ASCF, 1872, births, 20.08.1872; 1895, mar., 26.09.1895; SDMA, E309, births, 1900, vol. 2, No. 1149, 2.09.1900; SDMA, E313, births, 1901, vol. 1, No. 883, 10.07.1901.

<sup>36</sup> Interview of Angel Vettese, 17.08.1901, in AD93, 4U7/995, file No. 49750, 27.08.1901-5.10.1901.

<sup>37</sup> Int. Salv.

Saint-Denis. After a 1892 law had prohibited the work of anyone under the age of 13, the French glass barons, who had relied on child labor for centuries, had decided to circumvent the law by resorting to foreign children, whose age was harder to control. Sources clearly show that Legras swiftly replaced the bulk of its youngest manpower, which had been exploited for years, by little Casertans and Molisans.<sup>38</sup> In addition to escaping regulations, this was a way to keep finding the necessary supply of labor for the lowest-paid positions, as the appalling working conditions were starting to turn even poor French people away.<sup>39</sup>

Adapting the longstanding practices of the street performers' era, children were now indentured to work in crowded, noisy, overheated factories. Italian law, well-equipped against strolling professions, was lacking a provision specifically addressing this new traffic. One of the few child-smugglers who was eventually tried, though, had been active in the Plaine-Saint-Denis, providing Legras with his first twelve Italian apprentices.

In 1898, that unscrupulous *padrone* and his young wards had moved to the very building where Luigi and his family would later arrive. Severely mistreated, three of the boys had died, triggering a general outcry that had echoes in France, Italy and even in the United States.<sup>40</sup> Remarkably, Pietro Carlo and Agostino Pirolli's story in

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<sup>38</sup> See AVP, D1U6 219, 5.11.1884, No. 6088; D1U6 316, 19.11.1888, No. 5415; D1U6 373, 19.11.1890, No. 5397. French National Archives (FNA), F/22/505; F/22/452; BB/18/6111, 23BL164.

<sup>39</sup> *JSD*, 22.07.1894; 13.08.1896.

<sup>40</sup> *Le Radical*, *Le Matin*, 25.07.1898, *Le Petit Parisien*, 28.07.1898, *La Lanterne*, 29.07.1898, 1.08.1898; *La Stampa*, 4.08.1898, 23.08.1898; *Washington Times*, 9.10.1898. For more details, see G. Tassani (ed.), R. Paulucci di Calboli, *Parigi 1898. Con Zola, per Dreyfus. Diario di un diplomatico*, Bologna: CLUEB, 1998, 95–9; 105; U. Cafiero, “I fanciulli italiani nelle vetrerie francesi. Relazione preliminare del Comitato piemontese. Inchiesta fatta nei circondari di Sora e di Isernia,” in *Opera di assistenza degli operai italiani emigrati in Europa e nel Levante*, *Bollettino bimensile edito dal Consiglio centrale*, Vol. 1 (1901), No. 2, 1–22.



Normandy was recalled by the press to provide some genealogy to child exploitation by Italians.<sup>41</sup>

The episode certainly had a distinctive impact on the context of Luigi's arrival in the Plaine. As Giacinto and his sons had only been there for a few months, in the summer of 1901, the factory was still under public scrutiny. A sweeping inquiry by a labor inspector found that out of the 79 employment documents presented by Italian child workers, many did not correspond to their holder, and others had been established on the basis of forged birth certificates.<sup>42</sup>

Giacinto and his sons barely escaped being caught red-handed. We know that the three of them were already in Paris in January 1901.<sup>43</sup> At that point in time, Luigi had the required age to become an apprentice, unlike his younger brother Giustino. For his eldest, Giacinto obtained a regular work permit, and Luigi was officially hired in the first days of February. For Giustino, Giacinto could have secured a permit based on a counterfeit birth certificate, as he would for his other children several years later.<sup>44</sup> But he opted instead for making Giustino pass successively as two different nephews of his, first Augusto and then Ferdinando, each time to make sure the boy's age was over 13. These cousins of Luigi's had emigrated to America a year earlier, and the family had probably kept their original birth certificates before their departure. Asked about his age, the fake Ferdinando did quite well, but revealed his real date of birth to the

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<sup>41</sup> See e.g. *Le Petit Parisien*, 28.07.1898.

<sup>42</sup> *Le Matin*, 2.07.1901; FNA, F/22/452, Rapport Drancourt, 25.07.1901.

<sup>43</sup> APP, CB 92.2, 1907/1310, 23.11.1907.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

inspector.<sup>45</sup> The need for secrecy must have been drummed into Giustino by his father: decades later, he would still lie about his starting date at Legras.<sup>46</sup>

The sources seem to suggest that Giustino, and also youngsters like Luigi who actually had the required age, were let go during the summer of 1901 by Legras to assuage labor inspectors. This would have marked one of the first episodes in Luigi's life, in which a national identification as Italian translated into a tangible, and in that case adverse, consequence. Though Luigi, at that point, could speak and write standard Italian, Italy as a nation must not have meant much to him. During his three years of primary education, he had certainly been told about the Italian kingdom's history and institutions, but this had likely remained superficial.<sup>47</sup> Be that as it may, a few months passed, the pressure decreased, and Luigi and Giustino –now both over 13– could be hired again.<sup>48</sup>

### *Gender construction and ethnic distinctions*

In these early years, Luigi's interactions with others would have largely been conditioned by gender dynamics. At the factory, girls and boys were assigned different tasks and spaces. Knives, among male apprentices, were ubiquitous. Masculinity had to be displayed in fistfights, theft, and early female conquests. Factory halls and local bands of *apaches* –as banlieue hoodlums had come to be known– shared some of their

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<sup>45</sup> To see through the entire imbroglio, see Commissariat de Saint-Denis Sud, Louis and Ferdinando Pirolli, 14.08.1901, in AD93, 4U7/995, *doc. cit.*; FNA, BB/11/13146, 16273x30; Declaration of intention in order to request U.S. citizenship, Ferdinando Pirolli, 16.09.1907 (retrieved from the Atlantic County on-line library).

<sup>46</sup> FNA, BB/11/13146, 16273x30; SDMA, 1F24, Census, 1901, vol. II, 103–6.

<sup>47</sup> G. Ricuperati, *Storia della scuola in Italia: dall'Unità a oggi*, Brescia: La Scuola, 2015, 41–61.

<sup>48</sup> See Letter to the Préfet de police, 18.02.1927, in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27, Louis Pirolli, in which he declared October 7, 1901 as his starting date at Legras.

personnel, which made the possession of a weapon almost compulsory for self-defence purposes.<sup>49</sup>

Delineations based on gender were also apparent within the Pirolli family itself. Once again, Maria Carmina had not migrated with Giacinto. Instead, she had stayed in Demanio, taking care of the other children and the farm. By her contribution at home, however, she took a major part in her husband and sons' migration projects. Who had come along immediately, by contrast, was Luigi's fifty-year-old aunt Teresa, widow of his late uncle Antonio, with her nine-year-old son. As a widow, she could not possibly stay in Pozzilli, without anyone sending money back to provide for her children.<sup>50</sup>

The boundaries of difference were certainly less salient when it came to ethnicity. On the face of it, French workers at Legras seem to have been at first unsympathetic to Italian workers, and Italian children in particular. Luigi might have experienced another instance of ascriptive, ethnic identification in that context. And yet one should not jump to hasty conclusions. Records suggest that scoff and occasional mistreatment were not specific to Italian children, but affected young apprentices in general. Even in the peak years of anti-Italian racism in the 1890s, incidents had remained isolated in the Plaine-Saint-Denis. By the early 1900s, the significant number of Italians at the factory, and the fact that they were not threatening anyone's position in a context of full employment, contributed to easing any lingering tensions. And when a fight would

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<sup>49</sup> On the youth at Legras, see e.g. APP, CB 92.1, 1905/113, 2.02.1905; CB 92.3, 1907/828, 11.07.1907; AVP, D3U9 253, 15.02.1908, No. 3949; CB 92.4, 1908/951, 10.12.1908; CB 92.5, 1909/1159, 18.12.1909; CB 92.11, 1915/152, 8.04.1915.

<sup>50</sup> SDMA, 1F27, 1911 Census, 299. See F. Ramella, "Reti sociali, famiglie e strategie migratorie," in P. Bevilacqua *et al.*, *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, Rome: Donzelli, 2001, 151–3.

break out between Italian and French workers, interethnic resentment was generally not a decisive factor, despite what the press would say.<sup>51</sup>

Combined with proximity, community of origin certainly provided a favorable ground, however, for personal bonds. In the mid-1900s, Luigi started having an affair with Maria Rodi, a 16-year-old glassworker from Casalcassinese, who had also come to work at Legras with her parents in the late 1890s, and who lived at the same address. But Luigi also mingled with people coming from elsewhere. For one thing, the squalid building where he lived –which was composed of separate, two-storey hovels along a deep courtyard– accommodated many people of various origins. In 1901, half of the 250 residents came from the provinces of Caserta and Campobasso, with only a couple of workers from Piedmont. But other households included six families from Alsace-Lorraine, a couple formed of a Bavarian husband and his unmarried lover from the Somme, four people from Belgium, and twelve families from a variety of French provinces, many of whom had been living in Paris proper in previous years. No tenant aged 16 or more had been born in Saint-Denis.<sup>52</sup> In that sense, the context of Luigi’s arrival in the Plaine, while heavily influenced by social networks and solidarity from his own region, had a multiethnic dimension which would remain a staple for years to come. This sheer demographic diversity, which would only increase in subsequent years, was a condition of possibility for Luigi and his peers to venture out of, if not break with, their ethnic microcosm, often seen as inescapable for first-generation

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<sup>51</sup> See our article F. Langrognet, “Interethnic resentment or mundane grudges? A 1900 Paris fight under the microscope,” *Immigrants and Minorities. Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, Vol. 37 (2019), Nos. 1-2, 24–43.

<sup>52</sup> This information has been reconstructed from SDMA, 1F24, Census, 1901, vol. II, 103–619 and a variety of other sources (naturalization records, posterior censuses, police dockets, etc.), as places of origin were not mentioned in the 1901 census.

immigrants. Among the families with whom the Pirollis were friendly, later evidence points at a family from Champagne, whose eldest son was about the same age as Luigi.<sup>53</sup>

In 1906, an expected event opened a new chapter for Luigi and his family, and reinforced the gender and national differences it was predicated upon: Luigi had to leave for Italy to accomplish his military service. Starting with the medical examination at the Consulate in Paris, the draft and the three years of service certainly familiarized him with Italy as an institutional reality.<sup>54</sup> And yet the way the young Pirollis negotiated their military obligations was far from unequivocal obedience –something the Italian authorities themselves did not really expect from the emigrants.<sup>55</sup> Not only did Luigi reported a few days late, but when his little brother Giustino’s turn to serve arrived two years later, he displayed an even greater reluctance. Having an elder brother currently in uniform, Giustino thought he had a solid motive of exemption. Unbeknownst to him though, the law had changed a few months before, and his request was denied.<sup>56</sup> Giustino was eventually exempted as mentally retarded –which we know he was not. This strongly suggests that he faked his condition to dodge the draft.<sup>57</sup>

### **3. Allegiances in conflict: crossings between nations (1906-1927)**

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<sup>53</sup> Marie Detante née Collinet, who later moved to the address where Giacinto's family would reside from 1907, came all the way to Saint-Denis city hall to accompany Luigi when he lost a baby in 1909. AD 93 1E66/369, SD, deaths, 1909, No. 329, 16.03.1909, Nicola Pirolli. On Marie, see AD Marne, 2E 497/9, Passavant, mar., 1880, No. 6, 22.11.1880. On Jules, AD Marne, Dizy-Magenta, 2 E 236/10, births 1883-1892, 26.03.1885.

<sup>54</sup> FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27; ASCP, Lista di leva, 1886, No. 31; P. Del Negro, N. Labanca, A. Staderini (eds.), *Militarizzazione e nazionalizzazione nella storia d'Italia*, Milan: Unicopli, 2005, 15–9.

<sup>55</sup> C. Douki, “The ‘return politics’ of a sending country: the Italian case, 1880s–1914,” in N. Green, R. Waldinger (eds.), *A Century of Transnationalism: Immigrants and Their Homeland Connections*, Urbana (IL): University of Illinois Press, 2016, 36–50.

<sup>56</sup> Italian law No. 763 of 15.12.1907 (see in particular Art. 6).

<sup>57</sup> ASC Pozzilli, lista di leva, classe 1888, No. 23, Giustino Pirolli; Royal decree No. 553 of 10.12.1896 on the list of conditions and imperfections exonerating from military service, Art. 14; FNA, BB/11/13146, 16273x30.

*From outsiders to insiders*

As Luigi made his way back to Venafro to join his battalion in 1906, Maria joined him, and their first daughter was born in Pozzilli later that same year. Giacinto and Giustino also came along, only to return to the Plaine-Saint-Denis a year later, this time with the entire family but Luigi. They now moved into a somewhat less miserable apartment. Surely, Luigi's six siblings did not have a bed each, except for his sister, a consequence of the common gender boundaries of the time. But Giacinto made sure his sons had different shifts at the glass factory, which allowed them to take turns in their beds. As close as it was from Luigi's earlier address, they were now the only Italian family in the entire street. The Pirollis were starting to blend in.<sup>58</sup>

When Luigi returned to France with Maria and their daughter in 1909, the centre of gravity of his social life was now clearly in the Plaine. As Maria became pregnant again in the Spring of 1910, the two decided to get married in Saint-Denis. A marriage at a French city hall was nothing groundbreaking in itself; Luigi's uncle Pietro Carlo had done so two decades earlier.<sup>59</sup> But it signalled a growing conversance with local institutions, and a disinterest, if not a distrust, for the Italian Consulate, where very few of Luigi's Italian neighbors chose to get married.

In those same years, Luigi's position at the Legras factory improved significantly. By 1913, he had become a glass-carver. He and his brother Giustino seem to have been among the very first non-French nationals to reach this type of qualified positions –

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<sup>58</sup> Int. Par; SDMA, 1F27, Census, 1911, vol. 1, 340–2; A. Faure, “Comment se logeait le peuple parisien à la Belle Époque,” *Vingtième siècle*, No. 64 (Oct. 1999), 41–51.

<sup>59</sup> AD76, 4E12467, Le Havre, 1889, mar., No. 75, 28.01.1889.

which did not mean job security though. So far, they had been the preserve of skilled French workers, in particular Alsatians and Lorrainers.<sup>60</sup> The Demanio nucleus may well have enjoyed, in the process, a less foreign status at the factory. If Luigi's friendship, in the early 1910s, with one of those senior glassworkers from Lorraine is any indication, he had now earned enough credit to be regarded as a peer by at least some of his former superiors.<sup>61</sup> All the more so, since the ones that were now looked down upon for their dismal appearance and their inability to speak French were not Italian, but Spanish. The last flock of new victims of Legras's illegal childwork scheme, starting in 1908, came from a mountainous area between Burgos and Santander.<sup>62</sup>

For Luigi then, who now went by the name of Louis and probably had some of the Spanish children as subordinates, a dynamic combining class distinctions and inter-ethnicization<sup>63</sup> may well have contributed to "francize" him in that period. The evolution of Luigi Pirolli's ties to his home country, and conversely his complex relationship to France, cannot be fully understood without accounting for those 'horizontal,' transethnic interactions between him and his fellow migrants. The young Spaniards were experiencing the exact same conditions in which he had grown up ten years earlier. In that sense, they were to him what he had been for Bretons and Alsatians at the factory— a contrasting presence, in relation to which he appeared all the more local and well integrated. This displacement of hierarchies reminds of the classic, yet

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<sup>60</sup> AD93, 1E66/370, Saint-Denis (SD), deaths, 1910, No. 480, 3.05.1910, stillborn child; 1E66/321, SD, mar., 1910, Vol. 2, No. 377, 25.06.1910; 1E66/326, SD, mar., 1913, Vol. 1, No. 411, 5.07.1913. Luigi remained a day-worker his entire career at Legras. Even managers could be liable to, and afraid of, losing their position overnight (see APP, CB 92.30, 1933/2780, 22.11.1933).

<sup>61</sup> FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906 x 27, Report from the Préfet de Police, 2.05.1945; SDMA, CT 1005, 4 imp. Trézel, M. Jeandel; AD 93 1E66/274, SD, births, 1914, vol. 2, No. 836, 29.06.1914, Albert Pirolli.

<sup>62</sup> AVP, D2U6 168, Rapport Girardier, 27.12.1909; AVP, D1U6 1188, 29.01.1913; AVP, D3U9 327, 29.05.1914; Archivo General de la Administración (Alcalá de Henares, Spain), sig. 54/5.933, 2<sup>a</sup> p., No. 3, and sig. 54/5.861, leg. 665, 1905.

<sup>63</sup> On this concept, see R. Vecoli, "An inter-ethnic perspective on American immigration history," *Mid America*, Vol. 75 (1993) No. 2, 223–35.

still insightful vision of Norbert Elias on the established and the outsiders: a power balance is reached between the two groups through interdependence, the former needing the latter to enhance its standing.<sup>64</sup>

This mechanism certainly played a role in Legras's ability to maintain, over the decades, a very low level of unionization and strikes at his factory despite the notoriously toilsome working conditions. The trust placed in Luigi by the management over the decades, suggested by his steady ascent through the company's ranks, strongly corroborates Louis's later account that he had never taken part in any political or labor movement.<sup>65</sup> Wholeheartedly or not, the Pirollis had reason to stay quiet about the factory's practices, for all their fraudulent and exploitive features: they had thrived in that system.

### *The Great War: crossing borders and symbolic boundaries*

As the war broke out in 1914, the Plaine population immediately faced a chaotic situation. At the glass factory, production was all but halted, as many workers departed for the front and clients cancelled orders. In the late summer, many people left, through private journeys or public-funded "repatriations" to their native region or country, to run away from the enemy's rapid advance on the capital, or because they suddenly found themselves out of work.<sup>66</sup> The Pirolli family went back to Demanio in September.

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<sup>64</sup> N. Elias, "Introduction: a theoretical essay on established and outsider relations" [1976], in *Id.*, *The Established and the Outsiders*, Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage, 1994 (2nd ed.) xxx-xxxii.

<sup>65</sup> *Le Réveil des verriers*, 1.04.1893, 1.07.1910, 01.12.1912; J.-P. Brunet, *Une banlieue ouvrière: Saint-Denis (1890-1939)*, Lille: Service de reproduction des thèses, 1978, vol. 1, 280; FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27; Int. Par.

<sup>66</sup> *JSD*, 9.08.1914; *APP*, CB 92.11, 1914/835, 17.12.1914; 1915/3, 3.01.1915; G. Majoni, "Relazione sull'opera svolta dal Commissariato a tutela delle nostra emigrazione in conseguenza dello scoppio della



Louis and three of his brothers could have decided to join the French Foreign Legion, as many hundreds of Italians in Paris and several former neighbors and colleagues of theirs. But they either had no time, or no inclination to enlist.

If the First World War forced upon people choices that had not been necessary until then, leading some to hang on to France, while leaving others to discover themselves as Italians,<sup>67</sup> the Pirollis were probably in-between these two situations. France had been part of their history for too long, and Louis had lived almost exactly half of his life in each country. For him, any “dual political-institutional loyalty”<sup>68</sup> would only become an issue, if ever, later in his life. By now, he was probably still “without clear national identity.”<sup>69</sup> And yet there is little doubt that early deaths of his French neighbors sent to the front must have made him sense, more vividly than ever before, what a difference in nationality could actually entail.<sup>70</sup>

Once in Italy, the Pirollis did not plan to stay for long. Louis was already back at work in March 1915 in Saint-Denis, without Maria nor the children. As for his parents, they had to go through a longer procedure to be allowed back to France. The passport for foreign destinations had become compulsory, as well as the pre-approval by the *Commissariato generale dell'Emigrazione*.<sup>71</sup>

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guerra europea,” 36, in Archivio centrale dello Stato (ACS), Rome, *Min. interno, Dir. gen. p. s., Div. polizia, Div. polizia giudiziaria*, fasc. 11900.a, 1913-15.

<sup>67</sup> M.-C. Blanc-Chaléard, *Les Italiens dans l'Est parisien. Une histoire d'intégration (années 1880-1960)*, Rome: École française de Rome, 2000, 184.

<sup>68</sup> E. Franzina, “Militari italiani e Grande Guerra,” *Zibaldone: Estudios italianos*, Vol. 3 (2015), No. 1, 78.

<sup>69</sup> D. Gabaccia, F. Ottanelli (eds.), *Italian Workers of the World: Labor Migration and the Formation of Multiethnic States*, Urbana, Chicago (IL): University of Illinois Press, 2001, 2.

<sup>70</sup> In Louis's street, no less than thirty men would fall at war. One of his immediate neighbors at 4 rue Trézel was killed in April 1915 (SDMA, 4 H 1/2043).

<sup>71</sup> FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27; Int. Par.; APP, CB 92.15, 1918/395, 11.04.1918; E. Lémonon, *L'Après-guerre et la main-d'oeuvre italienne en France*, Paris: Alcan, 1918, 54–5.

In early 1915, the new political and demographic context of the Plaine was, once again, making ethnonational boundaries shift. At Legras, the vast majority of Louis's Alsatian and Lorrainer colleagues had recovered their French citizenship in the last decades of the 19th century; they had been spared, therefore, an ignominious deportation to a concentration camp.<sup>72</sup> And yet bearing a German-sounding surname was certainly unpropitious in 1915, and could have enhanced, by contrast, Louis's social status in relative terms.

In addition, refugees had arrived from Belgium and Northern France, fleeing the German conquest. In February 1915, registered refugees were already about 900 in the Plaine. In Louis's little street, thirty-four such families would reside during the course of the war. Saint-Denis does not seem to have been, all in all, a hotspot of anti-refugee xenophobia. But in contrast to the refugees, Louis was certainly comforted in both his external identifications, and self-awareness, as a local, a "Plainard."<sup>73</sup>

Louis had to leave for Italy again in May 1915, as the kingdom entered the War. He would serve for four years, and did not suffer any significant injury on the front; his brothers were also spared.<sup>74</sup> It has been shown that, for young Italian soldiers, "wartime experience meant not only life in the trenches but an unprecedented degree of travel around the country," thereby educating them "about what Italy was and what values it

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<sup>72</sup> J.-C. Farcy, *Les camps de concentration français de la Première guerre mondiale, 1914-1920*, Paris: Anthropos, 1995.

<sup>73</sup> APP, CB 92.11, 1915/51, 2.02.1915; APP, CB 92.11, 1915/273, 15.05.1915; SDMA, CT1328.

<sup>74</sup> FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

represented.”<sup>75</sup> There is little doubt that for the second time after his military service, the country of his birth became something meaningful in Louis’s eyes.

*At once more Italian and more integrated*

As he came back from the war and took back once again his position at Legras, Louis’s status as veteran and military award holder certainly cemented his sense of belonging in the Plaine. At the same time, he became aware of the difficulties facing fellow immigrants from Italy, who started arriving again in significant numbers. In early 1922, Louis co-founded a fraternal benefit society called “*Stella meridionale*” (litt. “southern star”) with one of his younger brothers and two cousins. Records are otherwise silent about this society, but if anything, this initiative indicated at this stage a consciousness, from Louis’s part, of a role to play in assisting his fellow nationals, or at least his fellow southerners.

In this pre-social security era, benefit societies had been active in the Plaine for decades, either set up by factory bosses –Legras had one– or by workers themselves. But as opposed to migrant groups from French provinces, neither Italians nor Spaniards had thus far had their own society along ethnic lines. Was it for want of initiative, or simply of resources to put in common? It is true that the Italian Benevolent Society based in Paris was known to Plaine residents, and could be called upon in times of urgency. Besides, foreigners could not found their own society without ministerial approval; this

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<sup>75</sup> V. Wilcox, “Encountering Italy: military service and national identity during the First World War,” *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, Vol. 3 (2011), No. 2, 292.

made things more difficult, and bears witness, by contrast, to the resolve of Louis and his co-founders.<sup>76</sup>

Their fluency in French and their solid position in the Plaine factories enabled the Pirollis' clan to assume this role of ethnic leadership.<sup>77</sup> They also had the ability of crossing back and forth over national boundaries, both physically and symbolically. Two of Louis's brothers married French-born women in the early 1920s, as did his one of his cousins.<sup>78</sup> As for Louis and Giustino, they bought in 1925 an Italian grocery shop in the Plaine, with its stock of pasta, olive oil and mortadella, to which Louis later added French wines and liquors.<sup>79</sup>

By the mid-1920s, the family's economic situation had gotten visibly better. Louis's two youngest brothers respectively left for Brazil and Algeria, later to become successful businessmen. As for the grocery, of which Louis became the sole owner after buying out his brother's stake, it turned an annual profit of 10,000 francs. This came on top of the 54 francs he was making on average at Legras every day, more than twice as much as an unskilled worker. Nothing really uncommon here: shopkeepers were often employed in factories, and relied on their spouses to run their shop. What was more

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<sup>76</sup> Recueil des actes administratifs de la Préfecture du département de la Seine, Feb. 1922, 228; SDMA, 5Q61; 4H3/137, Letter from the Director of the Italian Benevolent Society, 3.11.1917; N. Samama, *Questioni riguardanti la condizione giuridica degli Italiani all'estero (Francia)*, Florence: Ariani, 1911, 123.

<sup>77</sup> In the same years, Louis was willing to go all the way to the city center to declare the death of an Italian-born family friend at Saint-Denis city hall (AD93, 1E66/397, deaths, 1925, vol. 2, No. 909, 1.07.1925), and act as witness at the local court for another friend who needed an identity certificate (FNA, 19770883/297, 25901x34).

<sup>78</sup> AD93, 1E66/338, SD, mar., 1920, No. 840, 17.07.1920; AD93, 1E66/343, SD, mar., 1922, No. 923, 28.10.1922; FNA, 19770876/181, 33986x32.

<sup>79</sup> AD93, 1739W25, 1925, 1.04.1925, enr. 8.04.1925; 1739W49, 1932, 22.10.1932, enr. 4.11.1932.

original was that Louis and Maria partly specialized in Italian delicatessen, and that their shop became a focal point for Italians of the neighborhood.<sup>80</sup>

It seems likely that Louis made, at least in part, an instrumental use of his ethnic origin, as part of his social mobility strategy. On the one hand his recommendations, as a trusted glassmaker, could go a long way in helping fellow nationals secure jobs at the factory, and his familiarity with the French administrative apparatus could be of great help to facilitate the logistics of their arrival – the same mediator’s role his great-cousin Rosario Verrecchia had been playing two decades earlier. On the other hand, catering to Italians was a way to sustain his grocery business and increase the ranks of his benefit society, thus cementing his financial and social standing at the local level.

### *Switching nationalities*

In 1927, Louis decided to request French citizenship. I consider France “*comme ma vraie patrie*”<sup>81</sup> he wrote to the Justice Minister, demonstrating his ability to write in proper French. And yet the authorities took much time to process his request –though apparently not because of Luigi’s arrest and brief incarceration for carrying an illegal firearm–, which went luckily unnoticed by the naturalization service. On Christmas eve 1927, Giacinto died without having seen any of his children become French.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27; 20010479/1, 31x1967; C. Zalc, *Melting shops. Une histoire des commerçants étrangers en France*, Paris: Perrin, 2010, 147, 185, and *Id.*, J. Rainhorn, “Commerce à l’italienne: immigration et activité professionnelle à Paris dans l’entre-deux-guerres,” *Le Mouvement social*, No. 191 (April 2000), 49–67.

<sup>81</sup> “... as my true fatherland.”

<sup>82</sup> Int. Thom.; APP, CB 92.25, 1927/1622, 17.09.1927; AVP, D1U6 2144, 20.09.1927; AD93, 1E66/401, SD, 1927, deaths, No. 1377, 24.12.1927.

Louis grew impatient with the process. To speed it up, he managed to secure political support. In February 1928, the personal assistant of Aristide Briand, France's minister of Foreign affairs, wrote the following to the Justice minister's chief of staff: "Mr. Pirolli is regarded as an excellent person, with some influence among Italians, and his naturalization could cause seven or eight others to follow. Mr. Briand is particularly interested in Mr. Pirolli's case."<sup>83</sup> It is unclear through which channel Luigi obtained this high-level support.<sup>84</sup> But this shows that at least one, well-connected local politician understood he was a pivotal figure in the neighborhood, with a singular capacity to persuade his countrymen to become French at a time when replenishing the ranks of the nation, and its military, had become once again a public policy priority.<sup>85</sup>

On August 10, 1928, Louis and Maria became French citizens. The mobilities of Louis's family, from agriculture to music, from vagrant trades to industrial work, and then from unskilled, exploited tasks at the factory to qualified jobs and small business ventures, was finally sanctioned by a participation in the institutional procedure of naturalization. As with the family's other transitions, the change did not arrive from nowhere, and would not mean severing ties with the past. Louis and Maria had been exposed to the French state, and to the French national culture, for a long time. After going back and forth across national borders, they had decided to cross a major legal boundary, which certainly resulted from a nexus of complex identification issues and a series of pragmatic choices.

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<sup>83</sup> Note dated 20.02.1928, in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

<sup>84</sup> In the archives of Briand's chief of staff, we could find no trace of the intervention that brought Pirolli's case to the minister's attention (FNA, 320Mi, Fonds G. Peycelon, 1913–32).

<sup>85</sup> P. Lawrence, "Naturalisation, ethnicity and national identity in France between the wars," *Immigrants & Minorities*, Vol. 20 (2001), No. 3, 1–24.

#### 4. Establishment and disenchantment (1928-1944)

##### *The logics of naturalization*

His naturalization was certainly a natural step in Louis's mind. As reasons for his application, he stated that he was "established in France for good" (*définitivement*), that he wanted to enjoy "citizenship and political rights" and "ensure his children would be French," and that he had "no ties in Italy" anymore nor any intention to go back. These motives were fairly stereotypical, and only partly sincere. It is true that Louis did not have much family left in Demanio. And yet in those same years, he started to reinvest the profits of his business in a house back in the village, and also went there to sign off Giacinto's inheritance. As for the "true fatherland" comment, he was not the only one to use the exact same expression in these years, probably following a practice that was passed between immigrants when filing their applications.<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, it is possible that Louis may have been worried that fascism, which adopted an anti-emigration stance in 1927, would end up having adverse consequences for his situation in France.<sup>87</sup> It could also be that his senior position at the factory reactivated some form of xenophobic resentment by some French workers under his command, even if generic racism was still moderate, especially in the diverse context of the Plaine. As for a desire to secure his business and work positions, they may have participated intuitively in his choice, although restrictive measures against foreign shopkeepers had yet to be passed at that point. Finally, the right to vote could have been

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<sup>86</sup> Unsigned police report [no date, probably 1941], in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27. Compare with application letters in FNA, BB/11/6172, 18503x14; BB/11/12583, 33988x29; BB/11/12595, 34552x29.

<sup>87</sup> J. F. Bertonha, "Emigrazione e politica estera: la 'diplomazia sovversiva' di Mussolini e la questione degli Italiani all'estero, 1922-1945," *Altreitalie*, No. 23 (July 2001), 39–60.

yet another incentive, in spite of the distance Louis kept from any active political or labor involvement.<sup>88</sup>

As for Louis's wife Maria, the gendered character of application procedures, almost entirely centered on the husband's biography and aspirations, renders more difficult to assess the meaning, in her own eyes, of her nationality change. Her grandson hinted that she might have felt more strongly attached to Italy than Louis. But she could speak perfect French as well, was not more religious than her husband, and technically, she had been in France for longer.<sup>89</sup>

After Louis and Maria's naturalization, Luigi's siblings would follow suit in the 1930s. In January 1931, Louis received the Honor Medal for thirty years spent at the glass factory, outlasting even the Legras family, who had sold the company in the early 1920s. Louis was also the head foreman of the glass-carving unit, which meant he was now one of the factory's most senior employees. The Pirollis' standing was better than it had ever been, and contrasted with the rest of the Plaine, hit hard by the Great Depression.

*An unsuspected time bomb: Louis's judicial troubles*

In 1932, however, Louis's situation started going downhill, highlighting the precariousness of upward mobilities. Louis's wife Maria apparently fell ill, and Louis suddenly found himself short of money. In charge of controlling the working time and distributing the wages of the glass-carving personnel, he decided to inflate the numbers of working hours and pocket the difference between the cash he was given and what he

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<sup>88</sup> Int. Thom.; FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27; AVP, D1U8 176 and D2U8 300, 14.01.1931, No. 2684.

<sup>89</sup> Int. Thom.



paid his subordinates. In six months, he misappropriated 3,852 francs. That he confessed quickly and offered to reimburse the factory without delay, which he did, did not spare him the loss of his job, nor judicial consequences: a suspended 18-month jail sentence and a 100-franc fine. His good reputation certainly played a role in this lenient sentence.<sup>90</sup> In following years, Louis only worked at the grocery shop, and his judicial troubles were quickly forgotten.

### *War again, on the road again*

When his son was mobilized in the French Army in August of 1939, Louis asked to enlist as well; but he was turned away because of his age, 53.<sup>91</sup> It seems that he had a great respect for the military as institution, whether Italian or French. He was also versed into military history, which he would read avidly in his late years.<sup>92</sup>

The spring of 1940 was traumatic for Louis. First, he received news that his son had been taken prisoner in Dunkirk and sent to a stalag in Germany. Then, in early June, Louis had to flee south with his entire family, to escape the imminent invasion of Paris. As they were approaching the Loire with thousands of other refugees, bombings intensified. As opposed to other people of Italian origin, it does not seem that the Pirollis had to endure anti-Italian insults for what people perceived, whether true or not, as attacks by Italian planes.<sup>93</sup> But the family's car was hit, and took fire, causing Louis's grandson to be lost in the ensuing chaos, only to be found days later at a Red Cross facility by his agonizing relatives.

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<sup>90</sup> APP, CB 92.28, 1932/2095, 1.05.1932; FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27; AVP, D1U6 2796, 26.09.1933.

<sup>91</sup> FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

<sup>92</sup> Int. Thom.

<sup>93</sup> É. Alary, *L'exode: un drame oublié*, Paris: Perrin, 2013, 208–62.

After a few weeks, Louis's family was back in Saint-Denis. At some stage, he decided to host a couple of French-born war refugees from Le Havre, which he accommodated free of charge above the grocery shop. As he chose to do so, Louis may have remembered his own family's fate during the flight south, and possibly even the hardships faced by refugees of the First World War. The very close relationship the Pirollis would go on to forge with that refugee couple indicates once again how ethnic affinities would, at various points in Louis's life, fade behind other bonds of solidarity.

### *Losing citizenship*

In 1942, Louis had the surprise of being notified, at the police station, a presidential decree: on account of his 1933 conviction, he was stripped of his French nationality. Louis was among the 15,000 people who would face a similar fate under the Vichy regime, although Italians were not, by a wide margin, among those who had the highest chances of being "de-naturalized."<sup>94</sup> Louis was then issued a temporary residency permit that read "stateless person of Italian origin."

The most direct, practical consequence was a legal incapacity to run the grocery shop. He managed to keep on with it, however, since the husband of the war refugee family agreed to become the manager and pay Louis as an employee, which kept up appearances in the neighborhood. But that Louis then fought relentlessly to recover his citizenship suggests that there was probably more to it than material considerations –a

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<sup>94</sup> C. Zalc, *Dénaturalisés: les retraits de nationalité sous Vichy*, Paris: Seuil, 2016, 46–7; 181; 240.

sense of shame and “disgrace,”<sup>95</sup> as he himself put it. An indication of this is that neither of his two grandsons ever heard about it.<sup>96</sup>

In a sense, Louis probably never felt more French than when he was deprived of that nationality. Suddenly, what it meant for him, as a form of accomplishment, appeared in broad daylight. Four decades in France; an (almost) exemplary professional career; the set-up of a business; the raising of two French citizens, one of whom was now married to a police officer, and another who had fought and been detained in French uniform. All of this was now jeopardized, many years after the fact, by what he regretted as the only “stain” of his life.

Most people Louis knew did not go through the same experience, although some had been sentenced for petty criminal offences as well. “From the bottom of my heart”, Louis wrote to the Justice Minister, I ask you not to “condemn me to die, I who have loved France so much, with an identity card in my pocket bearing the word ‘stateless.’”<sup>97</sup> The Mayor of Saint-Denis, a former communist who had followed Jacques Doriot in the far-right adventure of the P.P.F., certified that Louis had “always had very French feelings.” But all the appeals Louis undertook –even to Pétain himself<sup>98</sup>– eventually failed, except for his judicial rehabilitation in 1943 which, in itself, had no automatic effect on his citizenship status.

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<sup>95</sup> Letter from L. Pirolli, 22.03.1944, in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

<sup>96</sup> Int. Thom.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from L. Pirolli, 15.04.1942, in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

<sup>98</sup> Letter by the Maréchal Pétain’s Secrétariat to the Sous-directeur du Sceau de France, 2.04.1943, in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

It was only the Libération and the decision, by the new authorities, to regard all the denaturalization decrees as non-existent by default, which eventually allowed Louis to recover his French nationality. No formal paper gave it back to him, no official excuses, just a legal fiction that made as if nothing had happened. Unbeknownst to his closest relatives, those years of statelessness had been a profoundly unsettling experience.

### *The chaos of 1944*

The sourness of it all was probably reinforced by another, dire episode in 1944. On the night of the 20th of April, British and Canadian bombers stormed the Plaine-Saint-Denis aiming at the railroads of the area, dropping no less than 2,000 bombs. The attack would leave 641 dead. When they heard the alarm, Louis and his family took shelter in the cellar beneath the grocery shop, with many of their neighbors. Bombs fell directly above them, destroying both house and shop.

Not all hopes were lost. At the Libération, the shop reopened at another address nearby in a local provided by Saint-Denis municipality.<sup>99</sup> But still, the war ended on a sombre note for Louis. After seeing the country of his birth turn its back to France in 1940, France had turned its back to him. In addition, in 1944-1945, the image of people of Italian descent was much less positive than that of Spaniards, who were many in the Plaine-Saint-Denis. Some of them had fallen in the Spanish War and their praise by the communist municipality indirectly benefitted all residents of Spanish origin, while Italy kept being associated, for some time, to the enemy camp.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> SDMA, 36 AC 11–21; Int. Thom.

<sup>100</sup> L. Teulière, “Mémoires et représentations croisées du temps de guerre,” *Studi Emigrazione*, No. 146 (2002), 400–14.

Louis was well known in the neighborhood, but his family was not immune from suspicion. When the French authorities after the Libération examined whether legitimate motives warranted the confirmation of his de-naturalization, the police inquiry revealed that some people in the Plaine-Saint-Denis resented Louis. They claimed that during the Occupation he had uttered pro-German statements and even sympathized with the P.P.F. Others said, by contrast, that he had kept a correct behavior all along. His son's return from captivity in 1942 and Louis's own rehabilitation in 1943 also aroused doubts, as this might have suggested "a political influence."<sup>101</sup> The use of connections to public officials would not have been a first in the family's history. But no decisive evidence allowed the police to reach any firm conclusions.

### **5. Epilogue: ageing in a world in ruins (1944-1953)**

After his wife's death in June 1949, Louis took a trip back to Italy with his daughter, her first since the First World War.<sup>102</sup> Apart from touring Rome together, they visited the ruins of the abbey at Montecassino, and of the house Louis had invested in in the 1930s. Once again, the scene must have been quite heart-wrenching. Fighting had been fierce in the area, and bombings, in Demanio as in Saint-Denis, had reduced Louis's possessions to rubble.

Louis and his daughter also visited cousins in Pozzilli. This suggests that Louis had maintained contact all along. As opposed to what prevailed for other Italian immigrants

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<sup>101</sup> Report from the Préfet de Police to the Minister of Justice, 2.05.1945, in FNA, BB/11/10553, 41906x27.

<sup>102</sup> Int. Thom.

in Europe, Louis had been able to go back several times since his departure in 1901. In that sense, the Second World War was not in itself a break with previous years for Louis.

On the other hand, Louis's last trip to Italy may have paradoxically weakened his ties to the region of his birth. It is not known to what extent Louis was repelled or disappointed by what he saw, but it is possible that he would have felt largely estranged to both Italy and Demanio. A few months after that, when he took his teenage grandson on a trip to the French Riviera, they were only miles away from Italy, but his grandson vividly remembered that Louis did not feel like crossing the border.

Louis died from cancer in the Plaine-Saint-Denis on March 3, 1953. He had secured his children's future, leaving more than one million francs in assets.<sup>103</sup> Louis's funeral was well attended, in particular by his fellow shopkeepers from the Plaine. Among them was the local Spanish grocer, with whom Louis had become friends, and the local car dealer, who had sold Louis his beloved Citroën, another symbolic marker of Louis's bumpy upward mobility in the social world.<sup>104</sup>



Louis Pirolli's story sheds light on several sociocultural dynamics, the context of which, so far, had seldom been reconstructed at the individual level.

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<sup>103</sup> AD93, 1729W208, No. 398, 5.11.1953

<sup>104</sup> Int. Thom.

The sequence of journeys by his uncles and his father highlight how the transition between a first wave of migration by strolling performers, and then a second one by manual workers employed in the big industrial factories, could actually happen within a single family. Also, it shows how the Americas and Europe could be concurrent or consecutive destinations for round-trips, or permanent settlements: Giacinto never tried to emigrate permanently to the other side of the Atlantic, as opposed to one of Louis's aunts and one of his brothers. Besides, these migration patterns illustrate how roles were allocated between genders, even though women displayed more agency than could be thought at first glance.

These migrants, despite the severe hardships they undoubtedly faced at several stages of their lives, chose from different options, tapping into their personal and family resources in terms of information, networks, and skills. In the process, they forged evolving relationships with the various places they moved to or from. Agostino and Pietro Carlo, both of whom came back to die in Pozzilli, had certainly never planned on spending their old age elsewhere. Their "invested space," as Paul-André Rosental puts it, remained in their hometown, even if they had spent many years in France.<sup>105</sup>

Paradoxically, Giacinto, Maria Carmina and above all Louis and his siblings had more opportunities to identify themselves as Italians –due to their military service and the growing presence of administrative identifications–, but it is doubtful whether they seriously hoped to eventually come back in Italy and reap the benefits of a life's work. Louis might have been the closest to actually entertain this idea, at least for future

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<sup>105</sup> P.-A. Rosental, "Maintien/rupture : un nouveau couple pour l'analyse des migrations," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, Vol. 45 (1990), No. 6, 1403–31.

vacations, but the project was jeopardized by his wife's illness and the destruction wrought by the Second World War.

In any case, the experience of both conflicts was crucial for Louis in the way it influenced the ebbs and flows of his national identifications. Louis spent seven years under arms for Italy, which did not deter him from trading his initial nationality for that of the country where he had lived his entire adult life. Then, as war broke out again, he tried to fight for his adopted nation, was cast on the road as his new countrymen were, but was then stripped of his citizenship and left in political and psychological limbo.

In that respect, Louis's trajectory also underlines how the relative salience of identifications, whether based on ethnicity, nation or gender, was never as high as when they were contrasted or contested. The context of Louis's arrival in Saint-Denis, if not through a receding xenophobia, at least through the investigations targeting Legras's transalpine manpower, made Louis grasp, albeit confusedly, that his nationality was a consequential parameter of difference. Similarly, the hyper-masculinized atmosphere of his first years in France forced him to live up to gender expectations that may have been more pronounced than during his childhood in Demanio. Later on, he probably increasingly sensed that he could identify himself as a Molisan, or at least as a Southerner, when he met soldiers from other Italian regions during his years of military service and then in the First World War.

But war is a great carousel of allegiances. Fighting the Austrians, he was likely to feel Italian; talking to other "French-Italians," he probably developed a sense that he belonged to a particular colony of expatriates; interacting with other *contadini*, he



would have realized his new status as an urban person, and a factory worker. Back in the Plaine, the contrasting presence of war refugees, or of other foreign newcomers such as the destitute Spanish children placed under his command, were likely to make him identify himself as more local than ever. This also increased periodically his standing in terms of class, which was simultaneously being boosted by significant improvements in his professional and material situation, thanks at least in part to a savvy exploitation of both his Italian roots and his familiarity with the local context. As for Louis's self-perception as a Frenchman, sanctioned by his naturalization in 1928, it was really brought to prominence by a collective challenge, the outbreak of the Second World War, and even more so by a personal one, the traumatic loss of his French citizenship.

All in all, the traces of Louis's crossings bear witness to the fluidity, and intricacy, of his identifications. Once, possibly in 1931 when he was awarded his 30-year work medal, Louis indulged in a personal glass creation, thereby following an old tradition in the industry, called "*bousillage*." But while colleagues of his had been using, for instance, little gold flakes to make lavish bowls or vases, he went for something utterly different. Into a foot-tall glass cone, he inserted a myriad of little stones painted in bright colours. The stones came from Demanio. This little bit of Apennines incorporated within a piece of glass, that is within the symbol of both the Plaine's history and Louis's life in the early 20th century, eloquently sums up the complexity of Louis's transnational mobilities, with his feet and in his mind.