

# American Italian Historical Association

## WESTERN REGIONAL CHAPTER

### NEWSLETTER

*A people without a past is a people without a future*

Bolinas, California

[www.aiha-wrc.org](http://www.aiha-wrc.org)

Summer 2008

#### President's Message

May you and your families enjoy the summer season. My husband and I just returned from a short trip to San Diego. I was born and raised a baseball fanatic, so the trip included our first visit to Petco Park to see a Padres/Mets game. Our last day in town we stopped to visit Little Italy. San Diego has an active Little Italy Association and a few years ago it began a banner program to "honor Italian Americans and their contribution to the world as we know it today." The current banners feature Italian American baseball players including Yogi Berra, Joe Torre, Tony La Russa, Robin Ventura and local boys Joe Dimaggio and Ken Caminiti.

It has now been a couple of months since our one-day conference on Italian Farming in the Central Valley, and I have had time to reflect on how successful it was. Ninety-two folks from near and far spent the day learning about our rich culture. WRC member Vincenza Scarpaci traveled from Oregon to join us, and Jim DiPrima came across country! I continue to receive notes and emails from attendees who share their own stories and express their gratitude for the conference. Carlo Vecchiarelli, the president of the Board of Trustees for the Chabot/Las Positas Community College district, attended the conference and was quite impressed. He wants us to "take the show on the road." Many who attended want to know when we will sponsor the next conference. I am indebted to WRC volunteers Cathe Cornello, Christine Vota and Frank DiPiazza. Al and Deanna DeNurra were the first ones there and the last to leave. Their assistance was invaluable. In addition to our wonderful panelists, I would also like to especially acknowledge the generous financial contributions of Robert Brower and Margaret Accornero Baker.

A friendly reminder that this year's AIHA conference will be in New Haven, CT., November 6-8. Several members will be on a variety of panels.

The WRC is currently 146 members strong and growing. Benvenuti to new members Chester Aaron, Dan Astromonte, Betty Bilay, Mike Bungarz, James Buttafuoco, M.D. F.A.C.P., Richard Cimino, R. Douglas Emeldi, Sandra Ragusa-Hallquist, Lori Handschin, Norma Hickman, Betty Maffei, Barbara Rindge, Luigi Romani, Jonine Gotelli-Slutz, Donald Slutz, and Joseph Solari II.

I hope to see many of you at our general membership meeting on September 20 at the Pittsburg Historical Society. The meeting provides an opportunity for you to let the officers know what types of programming you would like to see in the future. Following the meeting, there will be a program and film on Italian Prisoners of War. (further details provided in this newsletter)

*Ciao e a presto,*

-Teri Ann Bengiveno

#### Upcoming

#### WWII Italian POWs in California: Enemies or Family?

(to be preceded by WRC's General Membership Meeting)

**Place:** Pittsburg Historical Museum, 515 Railroad Ave.,  
Pittsburg CA 94565

**Date:** Saturday, September 20, 2008.

**Time:** General Membership Meeting, 2PM to 3PM.  
Italian POWs program & film: 3PM to 5PM

Each year, the Western Regional Chapter of the American Italian Historical Association holds a general membership meeting—a place where members are encouraged to make known their responses to our chapter's activities, and offer suggestions for programs, improvements, and so on. This year that important meeting will precede the Italian POW program, running from 2 to 3PM. Please come and share your thoughts, whatever they may be, about your organization.

The main event on this program will be a screening of the award-winning documentary on WWII Italian POWs, "**Prisoners in Paradise.**" The film, directed by Camilla Calamandrei, tells the story of the over 51,000 Italian soldiers brought to the U.S. as prisoners of war, tracing their romances and friendships with American women, as well as their unrecognized contribution to the Allied war effort.

"Prisoners in Paradise" will be introduced by WRC's vice president, Laura Ruberto, who acted as a consultant on the film. Dr. Ruberto's grandfather was an Italian POW in Benicia CA, and one of those who later emigrated to the United States. Large numbers of Italian Americans who lived in the area at that time remember the many POW camps, including the frequent visits to look for Italian relatives. For anyone who remembers those times, or for anyone who would appreciate learning more about this critical period in our history, this program should be of intense interest.

Following the screening, there will be a discussion and reception. Audience members will have a chance to ask questions and share stories of their contacts with or knowledge of Italian POWs held in various Bay Area locations.

The Pittsburg Historical Museum can be reached via Highway 4: take exit #24/Railroad Avenue towards downtown Pittsburg. Parking is free in the lot alongside the museum. For more information, contact Laura Ruberto at (510) 981-2922 or by email at [LRuberto@peralta.edu](mailto:LRuberto@peralta.edu).

To contact the Museum, call (925) 439-7501 or email:  
[pittsburgmuseum@netscape.com](mailto:pittsburgmuseum@netscape.com).

**Italian Farming in the Central Valley**

No matter how often it happens, the actuality of an event that has been germinating for years never ceases to amaze. The conference on Italian Farming in the Central Valley held at Las Positas College on April 19 was like that: the presentations were fascinating, informative, wide-ranging, and often emotionally moving. Partly this is because those who have shared a deeply formative kind of life such as farming rarely discuss it in public. The conference gave them a forum to do just that—to see something that is usually taken for granted given prominence and validation. To me, that alone was worth all the work it took to assemble such a program. Add to that the large crowd of almost 100 attendees and the opportunity to meet and watch in action participants one has heretofore met only by phone or email, and the day became one of those unforgettable gatherings for which the WRC has become famous. We are hoping that within a short time, we'll have the televised record to add to our archives. What now remains, and it is considerable, is to continue the research, the interviews, the filling out of the historical record that has now been so well started. Already, several people have expressed interest in expanding the range and scope of the investigation, so stay tuned. More importantly, if you have experience or history in any aspect of California agriculture, take part. Contact Lawrence DiStasi (415)868-0538, or Teri Ann Bengiveno (925)833-9194.

## Future Programs

Fresh from the triumph of the Italian Farming conference, Las Positas College is now working on an **Italian Film Festa** to be held in April of 2009, with the AIHA/WRC as co-sponsor. In addition to films, the exhibits *Una Storia Segreta* and *Con Le Nostre Mani* are both scheduled to appear at the festival. Schedule information will be forthcoming.

The **Museo Italo Americano** has launched a community-wide effort to collect, preserve, reproduce and exhibit historical articles documenting the experience of Italian immigrants to northern California. Plans are in progress to mount an exhibit in Spring 2009. The AIHA/WRC has agreed to help with this important effort, and will be scheduling events whereby those with historical articles can donate or lend them for recording and exhibition. If you have old photos, implements, documents, costumes etc. that you would like to contribute, contact the Museo directly at (415) 673-2200, or contact Lawrence DiStasi at (415) 868-0538.

**WRC elections** will be held later this year. Current officers—President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Curator—are eligible to run for another term, but anyone with nominations for officers should send them, via email or snail mail to: Adele Negro, 206A Cypress Ave., Pacific Grove, CA 93950; email: [afn@redshift.com](mailto:afn@redshift.com).

## Una Storia Segreta

The *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit will be displayed in Seattle at the annual Festa Italiana Seattle this September 27 and 28. This will be the first time the WWII exhibit will be seen in the Pacific Northwest. The Festa includes a week of activities beginning with a traditional mass in Italian at Mt. Virgin Church. The sponsor of the exhibit is Dennis Caldirola, whose

## Book Reviews

father was one of the Italian seamen interned at Fort Missoula, MT. For more information, see the festa website at [www.festaseattle.com](http://www.festaseattle.com).

The **Enemy Alien Files Consortium** held its latest event, *In-Alienable: Immigrant Rights*, a series of multicultural, intergenerational dialogues, at the Oakland Museum Saturday, April 12. Rose Scudero testified about her experiences as an evacuee from Pittsburg, and Lawrence DiStasi spoke about the general attempt on the part of government authorities to induce cultural amnesia among Italian immigrants.

## Member Activities

**Richard Vannucci**, WRC treasurer, followed up the success of the Italian Farming Conference with another success on April 20: the first “Jazz & the Italian Tinge” night at The Dogpatch Saloon in San Francisco. Featuring Italian American jazz greats like Vince Lateano, Mario Suraci and Christine Bota, the program drew an overflow crowd that thoroughly enjoyed the antipasti, the music, and the overdue recognition of the fact that Italians have played a greater role in jazz than one would imagine from Ken Burns et al. Stay tuned for a repeat performance.

**Laura Ruberto's** lecture “Gramsci, Migration and the Representation of Women at Work” at New York's Calandra Institute can now be heard online at [www1.cuny.edu/portal\\_ur/news/radio/podcast/lecture\\_105.mp3](http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/news/radio/podcast/lecture_105.mp3). Dr. Ruberto will also be presenting the classic Italian film *Mafioso* (1961), starring Alberto Sordi, at the Cerrito Speakeasy Theater, 10070 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, on Thursday July 10, starting at 9:15PM. Admission is \$9.

**Lawrence DiStasi's** essay, “Immigrant in Paradise: Columbus and ‘Making’ America,” will appear in the book *Avanti Popolo: Sailing Beyond Columbus*, forthcoming from Manic D Press this Fall. Featuring expressions of solidarity for oppressed groups and Italian American heroes like Sacco & Vanzetti, Carlo Tresca and Vito Marcantonio, the book's contributors include Diane diPrima and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Another DiStasi essay, “The Internment of Enemy Aliens, East and West,” appears in the just-published proceedings of the 2002 AIHA Conference, Vol. 35, *The Impact of WWII on Italian Americans*, edited by Gary Mormino.

**Italian American Bloggers.** Several Italian Americans have taken to the blogosphere in recent years. The following list is only partial, and can be added to. George Giacoppe has been hosting a political blog, [splinters-splinters.blogspot.com](http://splinters-splinters.blogspot.com), for several years. Lawrence DiStasi began by contributing to the splinters blog, and last year initiated his own chiefly political [distasiblog.blogspot.com](http://distasiblog.blogspot.com). Fred Marrazzo started his [marrazzopaparazzo.wordpress.com](http://marrazzopaparazzo.wordpress.com) in the past year as well; it often features Italian/American commentary. Laura Ruberto now blogs regularly at [www.i-italy.org/bloggers/2296](http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/2296), recently posting a piece on Italian POWs. If you have an internet connection, check them out; and please notify us of other blogs by Italian Americans.

*All That Lies Between Us*, by Maria Mazziotti Gillan  
(Guernica Press: 2007)

Maria Mazziotti Gillan—Director of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College and professor of creative writing at SUNY Binghamton—has been writing courageous, often startling poems about her Italian American experience for many years now. But the poems she has written in her latest book of poetry may be the most courageous and startling of all. Most, though not all, of the poems chronicle her years tending to her husband of forty years, wheelchair-bound with Parkinson’s disease. The wonder is that regardless of how steeped they are in grief and loss and even anger, such poems still strike us as beautiful, as animated by the beauty that is love and compassion and unflinching honesty.

The poems start out with memories, evocations of Gillan’s father and mother, her sister and friends, her first often disappointing inklings of love. Then they take us through her early romance with her husband, their first adventures with children and academic life which seemed to promise nothing but the mythic house and garden of 1950s movies. Soon, though, we are brought up short, at first with only hints (“Each day is one less thing you can do/ though you can still hold my hand,/ Put your frail arms around me.”), then with full-scale journeys into aging, and illness, and the depths of seeing a loved one fade: “today we are admitting/ that you are racing downhill/ like an out-of-control sled,/ and nothing I can do will stop you.”

Only by reading the whole sequence can one truly appreciate the art in all this. Some notion of it might be garnered from parts of a single poem, “What a Liar I Am,” that stuns us, partly because we know that this kind of necessary deception applies to far more than illness:

I have been lying for a long time now,  
the sicker you get the more I lie  
to myself most of all. I cannot say  
how angry I am that this illness  
is another person in our house, so lies  
are the only way to get through each day.

.....

how heavy this illness feels. How long  
it has been going on, sixteen years now.  
Your feet, dragging along the carpet  
on days you can still walk,  
are like a fingernail on a blackboard.  
“This is all too much for you,” you say,  
and I reassure you, “No, not for you,

nothing is too much for you.”  
“I am a burden,” you say,  
and “No, no,” I say. “Not a burden.”

The face I see in my mirror is not one  
I want to see. O love, I could not  
have imagined it would come to this,  
when I can only live by lying to myself  
and you, you with your begging eyes,  
your reedy voice, a clanging bell that calls me,  
you whom I love but cannot carry.

The book is available from Guernica. Get one.

*The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, by Philip Zimbardo, (Random House: 2007).

*Gomorrah*, by Robert Saviano, (Farrar Straus: 2007)

I don’t usually review two books together, but these two books, one about a famous psychology experiment, the other about organized crime in Naples, really run on parallel paths to plumb the nature of crime and evil. And though Saviano situates the evil in ruthless, brutal individuals, and Zimbardo finds its source more in the situation, both employ the term “System”—albeit in very different ways—to locate the ultimate source of wrongdoing.

Zimbardo, a long-time professor of psychology at Stanford, begins by reviewing for us his famous Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) of 1971, wherein he created a mock prison and dubbed one group of student-subjects “prisoners” and another “guards” to see if the situation would change them. It did, in a way that shocked both Zimbardo and the subjects themselves. Within hours, the prisoners became docile and shamed, while the guards became brutal and sadistic. So realistic did the roles become that Zimbardo had to call off the experiment after only one week. The results were clear: where most people try to attribute evil to an individual wrongdoer, the SPE made clear that given an evil situation, good people easily turn bad. Zimbardo then moves to an analysis of current situations such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, where similarly evil situations led to real abuses. Here, though, Zimbardo reflects on himself, as the creator of the System used in the SPE, having to assume much of the blame, and does the same with Abu Ghraib: those in the Bush White House who created the System, and hence the situation, are the ones ultimately responsible for the horrors that took place there.

Roberto Saviano comes at things differently. A writer and journalist who grew up in Naples, he describes for us both the horrors of individual criminal leaders and their ‘soldiers’—these days often no more than teenagers—and the horror created by what they call the System. This all-encompassing term describes the all-encompassing nature of the organized crime network that controls Naples and its suburbs, not only dominating imports of fabrics and every other kind of commodity from China, but also running the sweat shops that turn out knock-offs of Italian designer clothes, leather goods, and everything else. More than that, most small shops in the area (one *pentito* estimated 50%) eventually become the property of crime bosses who take over when owners cannot pay their debts. Worst of all is criminal control of the waste industry. This is truly a horror, for it involves the transport of toxic waste from northern Italian cities to dumps throughout the Campanian countryside. The result is the pollution of the land, including the famed agricultural area where *mozzarella di bufalo* is produced. In one zone, so many toxic landfills are burning (when a landfill gets filled, bosses burn it) that locals have dubbed it the Land of Fires. Saviano sums it up: “people are constantly dying of tumors. A slow and silent massacre.”

Saviano uses the term “System” partly because that is how everyone refers to it, but also because it sums up the credo of those involved: “The logic of criminal business, of the bosses, coincides with the most aggressive neoliberalism. The rules, dictated or imposed, are those of business, profit, and victory over all the competition. Anything else is worthless.”

Thus, two books, two Systems, two takes on evil in our time.

Lawrence DiStasi

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT: BECOME A MEMBER OF THE AIHA/WRC....TODAY!

Send WRC dues (Individual: \$15; Family: \$20)

to: AIHA/WRC Treasurer  
5072 Elrod Dr.  
Castro Valley, CA 94546

From:

\_\_\_\_\_

(name)

\_\_\_\_\_

(address)

\_\_\_\_\_

(city, state)

\_\_\_\_\_

(phone)

\_\_\_\_\_

(email address)

\_\_\_\_\_

(volunteer skills—events, computers, mailings, etc.)

Send AIHA National Dues (Individual:  
\$40; Student: \$20; Senior: \$25) to:

JOHN D. CALANDRA INSTITUTE  
25 W. 43<sup>rd</sup> St. – 17<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10036

(NB: Please DO NOT send National dues  
to us. Send only to the above address.)

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

Lawrence DiStasi  
P.O. Box 533  
Bolinas, CA 94924  
email: [lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lwdistasi@sbcglobal.net)

## **The American Italian Historical Association**

### **Western Regional Chapter**

P.O. Box 533

Bolinas, CA 94924

**AIHA National Conference – November 6-8**  
“Small Towns, Big Cities: The Urban Experience  
of Italian Americans”  
So. Conn. State University: New Haven, CT