

Pellegrino T.

“Suddenly all these years have gone by and you feel at home in Zurich”



Pellegrino T., male, born in Campania in Italy in 1941, in Zurich since 1962

Where are you from?

I'm from Campania, a region in Southern Italy whose capital is Naples. I'm from the province of Benevento, one of the five provinces of Campania. Benevento is located almost in the middle of Italy, in the Apennines. My village, San Marco dei Cavoti, is barely an hour's drive east of Benevento.

Where are your ancestors from?

They always lived in this village, both my father's side and my mother's side. I was born in 1941. There were three boys and two girls. I was the second oldest. My parents had a small farm. First I went to the primary school and then the "scuola media", which is comparable to the secondary schools here in Switzerland. When my school years came to an end, I had to help on the farm. We had three cows, two oxen, a donkey and about 40 sheep. And we also had chickens and pigs. But my parents didn't own any property except for the piece of land containing the farmstead and garden. This land belonged to my grandfather who lived with us too. On top of that, we rented land.

How was your family able to support itself?

We had to take the land on lease from the big landowners and pay rent. The rent was so high in those days that in bad years, the harvest was only just enough to cover it. The landed proprietors wanted the rent paid in kind: wheat, corn, lamb and cheese. Land wasn't just leased by the big landowners. People with grocery stores or small craftsman's businesses who had inherited land leased their property as well. Our land was not very

fertile. The village is about 700 meters above sea level and the goods we produced on lease were up as high as 1,000 meters. Then as now, I believe the rents were quite high. That is, the landowners profited from the situation.

What was the social stratification of the village?

There was a middle class, of craftspeople and small shopkeepers; then there was the upper class, the big landowners, the so-called *Signori*; they had several farms with tenants they installed, and they owned other land too, which they rented to people like us. The *Signori* had a very high opinion of themselves. They behaved like aristocracy: they never acknowledged, but would wait until the tenant greeted them. They were addressed as *Don*, lord. In southern Italy, *Don* means something like a *Von* or a *de* before one's name. The tenants on the *Signori's* farms had to hand over about half their income, whereas we farmers with our own places only had to hand over about a fifth. But we had much lower incomes than the farmers in the lower, better places, who had more fertile land to work. And we had to pay just the same in the bad years too.

What ideas did you have as a boy of ten or twelve years about the job you wanted when you were grown up?

My dream was always to become a policeman. I tried to get in, but they wouldn't take me because my father was on the left. He was a 100% socialist. They thought that they couldn't take the son of someone opposed to the government as a policeman, because it's their job to protect the government. I told the police chief that, with this approach, he'd just produced another leftist!

How did someone from the Neapolitan hinterland become a socialist?

We were also politicised in the country villages. My father developed his political ideas in his youth, in Mussolini's day. He was opposed to fascism. Secretly at first, then actively in the village party. He also had to put up with trouble.

What did you do in San Marco as a young man until you emigrated?

I worked on the farm with my parents. If we didn't have enough work, I went as a labourer to relatives or friendly farmers to earn some money, but I had to hand it over at home. I helped a man who owned a lorry move stones. Later I worked for a highway construction company, and I had to hand these wages over at home too. I never even got 1,000 lire to go to the cinema with.

When did you first hear of emigration?

In 1953 my uncle emigrated to Australia, and in the same year my aunt went to England. My whole family cried as though a catastrophe had befallen us. That was the period in which the great exodus from our village began. People didn't only go to Australia or England or Canada, but to Germany and Switzerland, and also to South America - Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, and Brazil. But the dream destination was America. People would say: "he'll get rich quick and come back as an American!" And when an emigrant came back on holiday, people said "the Americans are here!" Also when the first emigrants to Switzerland, seasonal workers, came home for two months, they said "here come the Swiss!" But I can't recall that anyone ever came back from America and really were rich. Apparently the people from San Marco always landed up in the wrong place.

How did you decide to emigrate?

I could see that the land my parents farmed wasn't enough. And I didn't want to stay at home forever working for my father. I didn't like his patriarchal attitude; I wanted to be independent. After my attempts to get into the police I tried to join the army as a volunteer. That didn't work either. So I said to myself: "there's only one thing for it - abroad!"

I knew people from my village, half relatives, who were already in Switzerland. And a cousin of mine was working as an errand boy in a butcher's in Zurich. I tried to find something in a restaurant, but without success. Then a distant relative of mine wrote to me that he had something for me - in a market garden. If I wanted to come, I just had to answer, and so he sent me the contract. I was not quite twenty-one when I signed the contract. I left home on 2 July 1962.

What was your arrival in Zurich like?

It was beautiful weather in Zurich, a splendid summer day. A man travelling with me said that he was going to be collected from the station by his cousin and the hotelier that he was working for. I could ask the hotelier if he'd phone my employer for me. And that's how it worked out. The hotelier told my employer what I looked like and what I was wearing, and told me to stay where I was until my boss collected me. He was still eating, and it'd be half an hour until he came. After about three-quarters of an hour I saw a man coming towards me in gardening clothes and Wellington boots. He looked at me: "Tremonte?" - "Si! Weber?" - "Si." He nodded and took my suitcase, and we went to his car, a Land Rover, and got in, and it seemed to me that he drove like a madman. We only went to Unter-

Affoltern, but it seemed to me like the end of the world. So far from the station: how would I ever find my way back?

Then came the introductions to Mr Weber's family, and to the two workers, an Austrian and an Italian from my village. Mr Weber told me I could take the rest of the day off, and that work would start the next day at seven o'clock. He showed me the room I was to share with my uncle. Mr Weber's mother asked me if I'd like to eat. I said yes, I was hungry. She brought me a beef olive with some good sauce and bread. Then she indicated to me, with nods of the head and with incomprehensible words to dip a piece of bread, which she'd broken off, in the sauce and put it in my mouth. And with nods of the head and words that she didn't understand, I let her know how good it tasted to me. We laughed and understood each other perfectly well.

Then I went for a walk in the neighbourhood, because I knew that some of my fellow *paesani* lived there. By chance I actually bumped into someone from my village. He was on his way to see some acquaintances and took me along with him. So I spent the first evening with them, then went back to my room, and started work the next day.

Was the work hard?

It was much harder at home on the farm. But it was still hard. The gardener had a lot of customers who would phone regularly with orders for salad and vegetables that had to be delivered. Twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, he went to the market at Bürkliplatz. He was known there for his fresh produce. On the day before we weren't allowed to pick anything before four in the afternoon. We'd be finished with this work between seven and eight in the evening. After supper the preparation would start: washing and bundling radishes and carrots, setting up lettuce, and so on. This work would be finished at about midnight or one a.m., then we'd go to bed and get up again at seven. There was no money for overtime. Everything was included in the basic wage. I earned 300 francs per month, plus bed and board. After a month I got a rise of 30 francs, because I worked well. And after another month I got another 20 francs, so that I was getting 350 francs per month.

How long did you stay in that job?

I had a seasonal contract and I had to go again on 22 December. In November and December it often snowed, and the cold set in. Sometimes when we went out to pick Brussels sprouts our hands would be shaking with the cold. To get at the watercress we had to sweep the snow away. Everyone sympathised with me; it was a particularly tough winter - that was the year that the whole Lake of Zurich froze over, the winter of 1962-3. At the end of February I was back in Zurich.

I wanted to do something better on my second stay in Zurich. I went looking for work and discovered how difficult that is when you don't speak the language. You go from factory to factory, from restaurant to restaurant, from butcher's to butcher's, and they all say: "no, no, no". I looked for a week. I already had a room. And then I found work in a fridge factory, as a general hand: cleaning, helping the warehouseman, loading and unloading. Then I had to replace someone who'd gone sick, priming the compressors. These were painted afterwards in the customers' choice of colour. With the priming I had to work with this horrible stinking solvent which gave me a headache all day long. I asked if I could work somewhere else. No, came the answer. I had to stay there, or there'd be no-one to do that work. Then through a relative I found a job as a warehouseman at a heavy machinery works. I earned 4.15 francs per hour there.

I was lucky, because at the machinery firm I could work with Swiss people all day. At first the warehouse supervisor didn't want to take me: "he doesn't speak any German, what should I do with him?" But the boss said: "then he'll learn, you just have to speak slowly to him." I had two good colleagues who were always patient with me. After a couple of months I could get by with them in Swiss German. As well as that, I attended a German course at the vocational school.

Where did you live then?

It was difficult to find a room. A labourer's wages were so low that a room of one's own was too dear. So I lived in Affoltern in a converted truck garage, where you could still smell the lorry and diesel oil. The owner had had her premises decorated to form a makeshift dwelling. She packed the space with eleven beds and, in the front room where the office had been, put in a shower and four gas cookers. Everyone had a little cupboard for necessities; there wasn't a fridge. The woman knew how to get the most from her garage. You couldn't keep any milk or meat because it'd go off straight away. That was how the eleven of us lived in one room, and another six lived in an adjoining space.

How high was the rent?

60 francs a month, and that was quite a lot of money in 1963. In the other room with six beds they paid 70 or 75 francs each.

How did you all live together in such a packed space?

It was fun too, because there were young people there. We larked around a lot. But there were older men there too, and they were already marked by the hardships of emigration. Men who'd left their families in Italy and were homesick for their children. Some were also homesick for Italy. There was a record player, and everyone had their favourite tunes.

Some preferred it nostalgic, others patriotic. When yet another wave of patriotism washed over "we Italians" about "our Italy", I'd call out "throw this rubbish out! What has Italy ever done for us: stamped '*repubblica italiana passoporto*' on our passports and then said 'Ciao! Off you go! We don't want anything more to do with you!' " And then we made a joke: what has Italy done for its inhabitants? Put a stamp in their passports so that they can leave!

What did you want to do with your life?

Originally I came with the intention of earning and saving as much as possible and going back to Italy with what I'd saved. But when you see that you can never earn a really good wage here as an unskilled labourer, then reality looks different; you don't only want to save, you want to live. At first I always sent money home, because I knew they needed it, and also to make the house more comfortable, so that everyone had their own room. Then suddenly all these years have gone by and you feel at home in Zurich, and you've adapted to it, and you can speak with the people here, so that at some stage you lay aside the dreams you had.

How did it come about that you married a Swiss?

That was pure chance; it could as easily have been an Italian or a woman of some other nationality.

How old were you when you thought of marrying?

Actually from the moment I decided inwardly to stay here. I was about thirty then; I only met my wife Irma later, when I was thirty-three.

How did you feel when you'd got married, become a father twice over and advanced in your career? Does one always remain an immigrant?

After I'd decided to stay here and settle, I didn't feel like a foreigner any more. And it was all the same to me what others thought of me. If someone came up to me and thought he could talk down to me, I sent him packing. There were many who said: "you've taken something from us!" I always answered: "tell me what I've taken: you can have it back. If you think I've taken your job, you can have mine gladly, and I'll look for another. Or if you think I've taken the flat from you, then you can have a look around it and, if you're prepared to pay what I do for it, you're welcome to it. But you've got a better flat for lower rent, so why do you feel this way?" "You know, I've nothing against you," they always say, "it's the others!" Yes, so which others?

That's how they think, people who don't have their own opinions and so must borrow other people's. Also, when I used to make lots of mistakes in my speech, I suddenly reached a stage when I felt confident enough to enter into such discussions. I do my job, I do my duty, I pay my taxes, so why should I give in just because he's Swiss? Did he make some personal choice about where he'd be born? The Swiss have also gone through periods when they had to emigrate in large numbers. I say, you asked us to come, we came, and now we're here. If there are people who want to go back, then they should; I want to stay here. And if anyone wants to limit the numbers of foreigners here, they should try it politically.

Were you never worried in the 1960s by the machinations of National Aktion and Schwarzenbach's followers?

Never at all, because I spoke with colleagues, read newspapers and knew that there were two sides to the issue. And when you followed debates on television you could see that the right's opponents were in the majority and looked more sensible. The right were the blinkered extremists. People at work also made it clear to me that Switzerland could really do without people like Schwarzenbach. Nonetheless, I was astonished that he could collect so many signatures in his support. But only a few of the people who signed up in support of his initiatives against this so-called "Überfremdung" (swamping in foreign influences) chose to express their opinions publicly. Schwarzenbach's supporters lacked that kind of moral courage.

How was your relationship with the Swiss state, first as a seasonal worker and then when you had your residence permit?

With a single exception, I found Swiss public officials to be very polite, competent and helpful. However, what I thought was unfair was that German and Austrian colleagues got a C permit¹ after five years while we Italians had to wait for ten.

What do you feel yourself to be?

Neither one nor the other. I don't feel Swiss, but I'm not 100% Italian either. The twenty-one years I lived down there are still with me, those are my roots. It's the same question as whether it's really a Swiss wine if you've imported the vines from America and planted them here. As far as I'm concerned, you could do away with all the borders. We're Europeans and that's it. The whole bureaucracy of passports, customs and border controls is just too restrictive.

¹ Entitling a migrant to stay for five years, pay the same taxes as Swiss citizens, and be self-employed.

How do you see the future of the young second-generation Italians?

At the bank where I work I've been looking after apprentices for six years, and there are many young Italians amongst them. All of them have been to Swiss schools and had no problems there. Most of them say: "yes, I often go to Italy and I'm happy to have double citizenship", but few of them speak of going back to live there permanently. They do a lot of further education, are integrated, and are always looking ahead. After their apprenticeships they want to work as cashiers and then go on to trading. They also have advantages over the the Swiss and other young foreigners: firstly, they've grown up bilingual and, secondly, they have EU passports, which means they can work in London, while it's very difficult for Swiss people to get a work permit there any more. The youngsters who were sent to Italian schools have problems. One of them said to me: "I hate my father for sending me to the wrong school!" Instead of being able to go straight into an apprenticeship after school, they have to spend a year in an integration class to improve their German. It's my opinion that Italians in Switzerland should attend normal Swiss schools and afterwards go to Italian lessons where they can maintain their contact with their own culture.

