

in the early 1960s, they now lie side by side in the Cinémathèque Québécoise. In their own way, both capture the passing of a way of life. But the similarities end there. *Saluti dall'Italia* does not pretend to record life in Calabrian *paesi*. If it does so, it is quite by accident and ineptly. In one scene, for example, an impatient interviewer snatches the microphone from an elderly woman who is having trouble remembering the names of the relatives she wishes to greet. We miss the respect that Perrault and Brault show to the fishers of l'Isle-aux-Coudres and their way of life. The Italian film is also very anxious to showcase Cosenza's modernity through images of spanking new businesses, high rises, and automobiles, an aspect completely ignored by *Ricordati di noi!* *Saluti* also highlights the petit bourgeois, in the guise of priests, local politicians, entrepreneurs, and travel agents, perhaps to neutralize the voices of an embarrassingly premodern peasantry. If the 1960s were the golden age of the documentary in Canada, *Saluti dall'Italia* is unlikely to stand out as an example of the genre.

What in the final analysis is *Ricordati di noi!*'s appeal? Those who like me grew up in Montreal at the time will feel stirrings of nostalgia when presented with long-forgotten images of the past. But the documentary's very local focus will also limit its potential to attract a wider audience. Moreover, like so many *images d'Épinal*, its unmediated and uncontextualized treatment of postwar Italian immigrants will only reinforce sentimental and distorted notions of this subject. Sadly, the opportunity to deal authentically and meaningfully with this important aspect of immigration has been missed.

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*If Stone Could Speak (Se la pietra sapesse parlare).*

By Randy Croce.

Labor Education Service, University of Minnesota, 2007.

67 minutes. DVD format, color.

Of the millions of Italian job-seekers who emigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most worked as unskilled laborers, often in construction or on the railroads. Indeed, the conventional image of the New Immigrant—not just Italians—is that of the unschooled manual worker. This fascinating documentary by labor educator Randy Croce tells the story of a lesser-known immigrant group: the stone carvers, or *scalpellini*, who left their homes in northern Italy to work in the “Granite Capital of the World,” Barre, Vermont.

It is a story, first and foremost, of the search for employment. In the Italian north, the earth yielded itself up to quarrying easier than to farming, and generations of men in villages such as Viggìu took up the *scalpello*, or stonecutter's chisel, as a way of feeding their families. In the telling phrase of a local historian, “Stone was the bread of these people.” After passing a long apprenticeship in the village design school, a *scalpellino* could be relatively well paid and might even be hired to work on the Milan

cathedral, whose unquenchable thirst for statuary provided steady employment—in the words of one Viggiù resident, “*pane sicuro*” (literally, “secure bread”). But even such a coveted position was insecure, which is why so many skilled carvers sought work abroad, and why literally thousands of them ended up in Barre, where they could quadruple the wages they made in Italy.

While some *scalpellini* returned to Italy, many settled in Vermont, where they chiseled the local stone into beautifully detailed statuary for gravesites, churches, and public buildings around the country. By 1900 Barre contained a thriving *colonia italiana*, complete with an opera, a theater, multiple brass bands, a bakery, Italian-language newspapers, a mutual aid society, and a cooperative attached to the Socialist Labor Hall, which imported olive oil, salami, and other Italian specialties. As the film shows, in this community of transplanted artisans and their families, people continued to practice cultural traditions borrowed from Italy, ranging from making home-made wine (even during Prohibition) to singing socialist anthems on May Day.

As in other immigrant communities of the time, radical sentiment was high. The film celebrates this sentiment visually and musically—we see newspapers entitled *La Rivendicazione* and *Il Proletario* while “Bandiera Rossa” (often thought of as the unofficial anthem of the Italian Communist Party) plays in the background—but it also acknowledges the internal wrangling of the left. In a touching interview, a *scalpellino*’s daughter recalls the names that her father gave his children—Lincoln, Liberia, Avvenire, Aurora—as evidence of the immigrants’ yearning for social justice. But we also learn that the labor hall was so often the site of violence between socialists and anarchists that it was popularly known as the “bucket of blood.” It’s a sobering glimpse at the complications of solidarity.

The film’s most disturbing sequence, however, involves the stonecutters’ battle with silicosis, a lung disease caused by prolonged exposure to granite dust. In Italy, where *scalpellini* worked in open sheds with hand tools, silicosis had not been a problem. In Vermont, the sheds were walled against the weather and the men used pneumatic tools that filled the interior of their work spaces with a particulate-heavy fog. The result was a local epidemic of the asphyxiating scourge that killed most Barre carvers before they reached fifty and that gave rise to the fearsome epithet “Mal d’America” (the “American disease”). Workers who contracted the illness were often isolated from their families in the local sanatorium, and many of them took their own lives to avoid the horrors of a lingering decline.

Even more tragically, all of this human suffering was preventable. As early as 1903, unionized by the Granite Cutters Association, *scalpellini* struck to demand dust reduction. That modest request for humane treatment was met with the managerial intransigence typical of the period, and it wasn’t until 1938 that shed owners finally agreed to put in suction devices. These were so effective that no one who joined the stonecutter ranks after that year contracted the “American disease.” Lest one give too much credit to right-thinking employers, however, it should be noted that the union was made to pay for the new technology: Members agreed to a dollar-a-day pay cut to offset the cost. In an interview with the *Minnesota Labor Review* (August 2008), Croce called the stonecutters’ victory “an important example of what collective action under a union can do.” Perhaps. But it also illustrates who, in collective bargaining, holds the aces. In Barre in 1938, it wasn’t the workers.

Croce tells the stonecutters' story largely through interviews with surviving family members—both Italian and American—and many of these are enormously affecting. To hear second-generation stonecutter Angelo Ambrosini recall how at the age of six he watched his father die of silicosis; to hear a young Viggì carver speak of using the same tools that his grandfather used in the 1930s; to hear elderly Vermonters recall Italian grocers extending credit during the Depression—these are wonderfully evocative moments that personalize the wider story. There's a fruitful balance, too, between these intimate recollections and the more general observations of Italian and American scholars. Brief appearances by the late Rudolph Vecoli are especially notable, since Croce was inspired to make the film after hearing the distinguished historian lecture on the *scalpellini* in an Italian-American history class at the University of Minnesota.

"Every stone monument tells a story," the film's narrator begins, "of those it honors and of those who created it." If I have one quibble with the storytelling in *If Stone Could Speak*, it is that the stone itself—that is, the statuary fashioned by these artisans—is not very often allowed to speak. We see men tapping chisels and we see finished monuments. But we are told so little about these monuments that they remain anonymous—the unnamed "works" of unnamed "workers." Perhaps it's the frustrated art historian in me, but I kept hoping both for more biographical detail and for some stylistic analysis of what are, after all, fine works of art. I wanted to hear something like this: "Angelo Ambrosini's father finished this statue of Saint Thomas for a Minnesota church around 1910. Note how delicately he has caught the saint's expression of incredulity." But on details such as these, the film is mostly silent.

One notable exception is provided by a statue of a Vermont child, Margaret Pitkin, who died young and whose memorial was commissioned by her grieving parents on the condition that the carver (he is not named) copy in stone exactly what is shown in a family photograph. He does so, presents the exquisite result, and is told by the girl's father that he will not pay because, on the statue, a button on her shoe is left undone. "Looka the pic, looka the pic," responds the *scalpellino*. And in the photograph, sure enough, the button is undone. It's a beautiful, and unusual, moment of personalization, one that reveals the stonecutters' artistry no less than the precariousness of their existence. Here the stone of Barre truly does speak.

*If Stone Could Speak*, in English and Italian with subtitles, was produced in cooperation with the Labor Education Service of the University of Minnesota. The running time is just over an hour. It's an excellent film for classroom use, and it belongs in any library collection devoted to Italian Americans, immigration, or labor history.

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