

Immigration. Its stories. A resource for all

Letizia Alros (May 25, 2014)



We accompanied Laura Boldrini on her visit to the Museum of Emigration at Ellis Island. Her guides: rangers Franco Paolino and Danielle Simonelli, and Professor Anthony J. Tamburri. These were emotional moments on the strip of land at the estuary of the Hudson River, which speaks of the emigration of the past, yet bringing us back to the present. In hope of a future, which knows how to use the migration processes as great resource.

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The sky is gray, promising another rainy day in New York. It's nine o'clock in the morning. Two rangers and a professor - all three of them Italian-Americans - are taking part in the visit of an Italian official.

The president of the Chamber of Deputies, [Laura Boldrini](#) [3], is preparing to go to Ellis Island, which from 1892 to 1954 was the main entry point for immigrants who came to the United States. The boat is called Liberty IV, and it will arrive at the area still affected by the devastating effects of Hurricane Sandy.

The building of the museum located on the island is back in use, although the heating still does not work. It's quite empty here, everything is still kept elsewhere.

Yet that piece of land at the estuary of the Hudson River, remains the physical and metaphorical reference to those who had sailed in pursuit of the American dream. It is worth to visit nonetheless. "This is the first time I come to Ellis Island, and I wanted very much to come here as the Speaker of the House," said Laura Boldrini before stepping off the boat.

Who are the three Italian-Americans that accompany the Speaker of the House? They are: Franco Paolino, Danielle Simonelli and [Anthony J. Tamburri](#) [4]. All three with different stories, but each one of them emblematic.

While Boarding, Laura Boldrini, immediately met ranger Franco Paolino. He's young and has a good command of the language of his origins. He hails from Aversa. He greets her speaking in Italian, with great warmth and emotion, and accompanies her to the boat. Ellis Island is waiting, ranger Danielle Simonelli, on the other hand, speaks only English, like many other Italian-Americans of his generation.

Emigrating to the U.S. often meant leaving behind the mother language in order to integrate. His grandparents / parents aimed to become Americans, before anything else. Therefore the cut of the linguistic umbilical cord was necessary.

In Danielle Simonelli's case, clinging to his roots is immediately visible. He tells not only the story that the museum exhibits, but also add some details about his family, of the Italy that he has kept inside and rediscovered like a precious treasure.

Yet another Italian-American, is the Dean of Calandra Institute, Anthony Tamburri who unveils to the Speaker of the House the many hues of an Italian-American presence in the U.S., so strongly rooted in the past.

It was an emotional visit. Tens of thousands of people have placed their feet on that island, after a long and exhausting journey. They brought their history, encountering other stories. And once again, some of the poorest passengers, those in third-class who make us understand what it meant to crowd the island with expectations, often lengthy, for their health and identity checks.

The richest, as a matter of fact, almost always completed these procedures directly on the ship. It was referred to as the Island of Hope or the Island of Tears. There was actually a risk of being rejected. Sometimes even families would be separated. The children were permitted to enter and their father not.

This is the data of 12 million immigrants who between 1892 and 1954, landed on Ellis Island. 80% were admitted, 2% was sent back to the country of origin for various reasons, and 18% were held in waiting for further investigation.

Only a few people are accompanying Boldrini. Along her side are the Consul General [Natalia Quintavalle](#) [5] and Deputy Consul Roberto Frangione.

We are with them, among the few journalists. No private boat, no special escort. On the way back on the ferry, as we talk to her, she is approached by an Italian tourist, stunned at recognizing her. "Yes, she replies, I am, Laura Boldrini."

And she wanted to visit Ellis Island, as much as visiting the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Memorial, where one of the most serious industrial accidents in the history of New York took place. It caused the death of 146 people (123 women and 23 men), mostly young Italian and Jewish immigrants. The



workers, locked for fear that too many breaks would be taken, did not managed to escape and survive.

The path that Laura Boldrini says she wants to achieve is ideally linked not only to the history of immigration, but also to the role that women have had. She strongly believes: "The woman was vital and active - she says - she was not just the follower. She was essential for inclusion into society."

She repeats several times that migrants are an added value for all countries, and that today they are such for Italy. During her short stay in America she meets not only representatives of the past Italian emigration, but also those of the new one." A pride, in both cases, which brings out a mixture of feelings," she says.

A visit to Ellis Island is an important opportunity for Laura Boldrini. She listens carefully to Anthony Tamburri and the rangers. She asks questions. They are mostly technical, but at times full of details unavailing an almost maternal sensibility. It's a obvious emotion.

Nothing has changed. In the Mediterranean, it still happens today. "I come across the same states of mind - she says - such as in Lampedusa; fears, risks, not speaking the same language, and at the same time the desire to succeed, courage, sometimes despair. These are the same stories of those I met during the years of work as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. " Surrounding her are a few people. She stops and emotionally looks at a staircase. "These are steps to the entrance to New York or to the return back to their country of origin." The guide says: they have not been completely restored, the floor is worn out.

The men and women who passed the medical and legal screenings, entered the country that would grow and become what it is today, thanks to them. "it is on that energy that the United States of America is founded upon. Immigration is a resource," says Laura Boldrini.

On the way back a light rain continues to drizzle while we are moving away from the Statue of Liberty who appears to still watch us vigilantly. We leave behind a museum that everyone should visit, and which story should be retold in school books.

We can say that the few Italian authorities have visited it with such intensity. Intensity, which was not only institutional, but quite personal. Because behind today's data, such as the statistics of the immigration of today, there are most importantly all people, stories and families.

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