

Making it in America

Oreste Sola

The millions of European immigrants seeking a better future in Argentina encountered a country full of promises but with few economic opportunities outside the urban centers along the eastern coast. Since there was no land available, the only option left to them in the countryside was to work for the traditional landowners as tenant farmers. As a consequence, large masses of immigrants concentrated in the cities, particularly in Buenos Aires. Although most immigrants had a common background, their experiences are hard to classify. Some managed to enter the local upper classes, but the majority joined the developing working class. When they did not find what they had hoped for, they returned to their homelands—as soon as they had gathered enough money. The correspondence between Oreste Sola and his family in Italy offers a glimpse of some of the experiences the newcomers shared. Like many, Oreste had to change jobs and residences many times before achieving some degree of economic autonomy. It is telling that he ended up in the construction business, working on the urban projects that were transforming Buenos Aires into a modern city. He was among those who would eventually form the powerful, large middle class characteristic of Argentine society. Although Oreste's history is certainly illustrative, one must keep in mind that his situation was not representative of the majority. Oreste was literate and fairly well educated. Such skills gave him an advantage in his pursuit of fortune that less educated immigrants certainly lacked.

Buenos Aires, 17 August 1901

Dearest parents,

I have been here since the fifth of this month; I am in the best of health, as are my two companions. As soon as we got here, we went to the address of Godfather Zocco, who then introduced us to several people from Valdengo who have been in America for some years and are all doing well more or less. The language here is Castilian, quite similar to Spanish, but you don't hear anyone speaking it. Wherever you go, whether in the hotel or at work, everyone

speaks either Piedmontese or Italian, even those from other countries, and the Argentines themselves speak Italian.

This city is very beautiful. There is an enormous amount of luxury. All the streets—they call them *calle* [*sic*] here—are paved either with hard wood or in cement as smooth as marble, even too smooth since the horses, tram horses as well as carriage horses, which run here, keep slipping constantly. It is not unusual to see twenty or more of them fall in one day.

There are some buildings beautiful beyond words, only five stories high, six at the most, but with ornamentation the equal of which you won't find in all of Turin. The most beautiful building is the water reservoir, built by the English, and, what is surprising, it is all marble for half its height but with certain small columns sculpted and decorated with exquisite workmanship. The other half of it is also enchanting; it occupies ten thousand square meters.

The Piazza Victoria [Plaza de Mayo] is also beautiful, where all around on two sides there are only banks. They are of all nations: English, French, Italian, Spanish, North American, etc., etc. On another side is the government building where the president of the Argentine Republic resides. He is Italian, Rocca by name, the third Italian president in a row who sits on the Argentine throne. There is also the railway station of the south, which is something colossal. With workshops, offices, and the station itself it will cover 1 million square meters. Now they are at work on a government building for the Congress [Parliament]. The architect was an Italian, as is the chief contractor, who is supervising all the work. It is a job that in the end will cost more than 700 million lire. It will occupy an area of a block that is ten thousand square meters and will be surrounded by a square, which, along with the building, will constitute an area of about 100,000 square meters. This work will be better than the first (the railway station), but perhaps I shall not be able to see it finished.

All of this is inside the city, but if you should go outside for a few hours, it's worse than a desert. You find only houses made solely out of mortar, with only a ground floor and a door you have to enter on all fours. Outside you don't see a plant; everything is desert. The plains stretch as far as the eye can see; it takes hours on the train before you come to the mountains. There are a few tracts of land, sort of green, where they may let a few horses loose to graze. Here they let the animals go out no matter what the weather might be. Here you can't find a rock, though you pay its weight in gold for it. All the ground is black like manure, thick and muddy. When it doesn't rain, it gets hard, and if you try to dig, it shoots out as if it were rock.

The food here is pretty good, but it doesn't have much flavor. This is true for all Argentina.

All the guys here are jolly as crazy men. In the evening when we get together

Good-bye. You too should be happy as well as Mom that I am in America. Give a kiss to Narcisa and another to Abele. Tell him to study hard, that one who studies and is knowledgeable is greatly respected and sought after here.

Oreste

Throughout the journey one meets only horses, cows, and goats, none of which have stables. On the rail line you don't see a house for three hours or more, and everything is like that. The first night an ox was sleeping on the

tracks; the train hit it so hard that it knocked it for a distance of more than fifty meters. It gave a long bellow and then died. There are also ostriches in great number. You find carcasses of other animals who have just died; the owners of these vast tracts don't go looking for them. They leave them there to rot as food for the vultures, which are abundant. All of Argentina is like that. From Mendoza it takes fifteen hours by mule to get to Chile. My trip cost me more than thirty scudos. Everyone, Carlo, Cichina, and Luigi, gives their regards to you. Tell Secondino to come and see America, to drink and eat and travel.

Time is pressing since I have to work every evening until ten. I work at home after work.

You should write me at: El Taller del Ferro Carril G.O.A., Mendoza.

Good-bye everybody. Kisses to Abele and Narcisa. Tell Abele to study hard and to learn to work. Send him to the technical schools; I imagine he has been promoted. Good-bye, Mom and Dad. Be in good spirits as I am.

Yours always,

Oreste

Buenos Aires, 3 May 1903

Dearest parents, brother, and sister,

As you will see from the heading, I am once again in Buenos Aires. Yesterday evening, while I was visiting Godfather Zocco, he showed me Dad's letter, indicating that you were already thinking ill of me because for some time now I haven't written. Actually you are not far wrong.

I am fine here, in excellent health; business is also good. As I had written you from Santa Teresa, [it is just] that I had to keep on the move. I left there toward the end of February and went straight to Santa Fé, where I had to take a job with a French railway firm. I worked a few days, but then, since Frenchmen and Italians don't get along with each other, I went on my way. The next day I left for San Cristóbal [San Cristóforo]. I stayed there for only three days since they are still all Negroes, and I headed straight for Tucumán, where I had an excellent job. But since there is malaria in that area—they call it *chucho* [*ciucio*—and at that time there was also smallpox, and it seemed to be spreading, I got scared and took off again. I would have liked to go to Bolivia, but since I was rather far away from the big cities, it was not convenient for me. So I headed for the capital. Almost two days and three nights on the train. I assure you that I am tired and have had my fill of traveling.

Now for about a month I have been here and have been employed in the

work on the Congreso Nacional, which is under construction; the work will last at least a half dozen years. I am doing very well here, and if I did not have to do my military service, I would stay on to the end. That would be of great advantage to me.

Meanwhile for this year I am not coming to Italy to be in the army. Since I have a good job, I have a firm desire to stay put until next year so that then I would do only one year of military service.

In a few days I'll pay a visit to the Italian consul, just so I won't be declared a draft dodger, though I have time up to the age of twenty-six. For this year then, unless something special happens, it will be difficult for us to see each other again. I had come here to the capital with the intention of coming back home, but since I have hit the mark nicely, it's better that I stay here.

The day before yesterday we celebrated May Day, but there wasn't much of a crowd, however. We talk a lot about the celebrations in Italy. Some time ago Sasso arrived, and he gave me news about you.

I imagine that Abele will be making progress in his studies and that soon he will become a Marconi or something like that [and that] Narcisa will continue to work and to sing. I'll accompany her from here. [I imagine that] Mom will be in good health, as well as Dad, and so you will last a hundred years, just as I think I will keep on going.

All our fellow countrymen here are in excellent health. Zocco and my travelling companion Pierino give their regards to all of you.

Keep in good spirits, and stay healthy, and don't worry about me so much. I manage all right wherever I am.

Best and heartfelt kisses and hugs from your ever-affectionate son and brother,

Oreste

Translated by John Lenaghan