

Wirth, Christa: *Memories of Belonging. Descendants of Italian Migrants to the United States, 1884–Present*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2015. ISBN: 978-90-04-28456-2; 406 S.

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In Saul Bellow's novella „The Bellarosa Connection“ the main narrator states „I used to say to my clients, ‘Memory is life’“. Indeed, memory is an essential part of life, yet just as well it is elusive, dynamic, malleable. How then can we use it for historical research, what are the limits and gains? In the light of a downright „memory boom“ in the historical sciences since the end of the 1990s (due to historical transformation processes such as a generational change, a rapid transformation of media technologies and changes in the history of sciences), a continuing surge of conferences and publications are discernible in academia and the wider public. Christa Wirth – historian at the University of Zurich – adds a valuable contribution to this field in her revised PhD by showing how „collective memories of belonging“ were created amongst one Italian family over several generations. Moving from individual memories to collective family memories with their links to national and transnational narratives, her meticulously researched study sets out to explore how an individual's memories shift and change depending on where the individual stands at the intersection of locality, class, gender, and generation. At the same time she aims to write a history of memory of migration, everyday life, and ethnicity using the case of one family to show how the experience of migration and settlement influenced consecutive generations in their identity and memory constructions. She follows one of the basic assumptions since Maurice Halbwachs' „La mémoire collective“ from 1939, namely that individual and collective memories are interlinked and that the individual process of remembering is a deeply social phenomenon.

The first valuable contribution of Christa Wirth's study to the field of memory and migration is that, besides including many other historical records, she can empirically draw

on a dense corpus of oral history interviews she conducted over nine years with the American and Italian descendants of a family the author herself is related to. What at first glance may seem problematic, is tackled with theoretical and methodological circumspection. The second strength of the study is that the interviews she conducted with the members of several generations not only allows her to excavate voices that are rarely heard (such as women's voices), but also to follow the changes as well as certain continuities in memory formation over generations. Oral history can play an important role in unearthing pasts that historical research so far has ignored, because, as the author argues, „they do not fit into their master narratives“. Studies spanning several generations are rare and therefore especially valuable.

In her lengthy introduction and first chapters, Christa Wirth lays the theoretical and methodological foundations. She introduces the reader to the main concepts (such as identity and memory) and research traditions on which her work is based (immigration history, transnational studies and Whiteness studies), but also outlines her methodology. Following she gives a vivid picture of the social historical background of the so-called „Soloperto family“, originating from Sava in Southern Italy, and at the same time addresses their reasons for transatlantic migration to the United States in the beginning of the 20th century. Finally, she introduces her analysis in the following empirically founded chapters. Choosing a „motif analysis“ allows her to give answers to one of the overarching questions guiding the book: how did the offspring of Elvira and Giovanni Soloperto integrate into U.S. society and how did their path of integration – which happened differently along two different strands of one family line settling in Worcester and another in New Hampshire – fit into the larger picture of descendants of immigrants in the United States as studied by other scholars? For her interpretation she „clustered“ the interviews according to frequently appearing similar motifs and patterns of memory and compared the motif patterns between the family lines, generations, gender, and class. Questions of work and consumption, of migration and assimila-

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tion are some of the many addressed motifs. The „motif analysis“ generates many interesting observations and details, hardly perceptible in official or state sources. For example that for some of the interviewees the introduction and use of cars in daily life created a rupture in the family „togetherness“ of earlier times since the physicality of walking translating into „cohesive communities“ was disrupted and substituted by car riding as a form of „social alienation“. Or how a „generational gap“ appeared between the first and third generation due to changing language use, with the standard Italian and Italian dialects slowly fading over the generations. Yet, such generational rifts partly were bridged by communal food rituals in the kitchen, therefore adding a new dimension of „togetherness“.

Another overarching issue addressed in Christa Wirth's book is the question of „Italianness“ and how Italians have been subject to discrimination and exclusion as well as how Italian ethnicity served as a social category influencing the self-perception and daily life well beyond World War Two. In this context, the author engages in one of the longer-lasting debates (dating back to the publications of historians such as Noel Ignatiev, Mae Ngai and Matthew Frye Jacobson) whether „White ethnics“ were privileged over non-Whites.<sup>1</sup> Christa Wirth critically debates this assumption by arguing that the entry into the „American Dream“ and the process of integration must be differentiated in several respects and did not „come easy“ for all Italians arriving and living in the United States. Not only did many carry painful memories of discrimination; even more so, not all Italians had the intention of becoming American and returned to their country of origin. Furthermore, southern Italians – together with Jewish immigrants belonging to the so-called „new immigrants“ arriving from Southern and Eastern Europe – were restricted to minimal entry quotas as a result of the 1924 Immigration Act. Here, one could intervene by recalling one of the main arguments made by Mae Ngai, that Asian migrants were outright banned due to racial discrimination. Moreover, as historian Adam McKeown has very poignantly argued, the techniques designed

to control Asians evolved as the template for practical workings of general restrictive immigration laws in the White settler nations, and ultimately around the world.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, although Italian newcomers – and other European immigrants – were racially regarded as „inbetween people“ and positioned beyond the pale of Whiteness at the turn of the century and even in later decades in the United States, unlike „non-Whites“ they hardly were denied citizenship once they had entered the country (except for specific medical, moral or political reasons). Having one's citizenship denied and being completely barred from a country in the first place can make a profound difference in the possibilities, aspirations and dreams of migrating people as several studies and the present-day situation of refugees make painfully clear.

But this is only a minor quibble. In times when PhDs are expected to be written in three years and tedious archival work can hardly be part of the research plan anymore, a study that spans several countries and continents and whose author has taken the time and effort to carry out thirty-four in-depth interviews, has collected a large amount of additional material, and clearly has dedicated a vast amount of time to the interpretation of the material (as well as to revising the book for publication) – one can only compliment the author of this study for her rigorousness and dedication to the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, New York 1995; Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Princeton 2004; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Cambridge 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, New York 2008.