

**From Brez, Trentino, to the Sierra Mojada Mine, Coahuila, Mexico. Transnational  
Networks of Italian Miners  
De Brez, Trento al mineral de Sierra Mojada, Coahuila, México.  
Redes transnacionales de mineros italianos**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the migration flow of a community of farmers from Brez, Trentino – at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – that headed to Sierra Mojada in Coahuila to work as miners. It describes the political and cultural characteristics of the receiving country, the Italian settlers, and the transnational geographic spaces they had to cross. Numerically the miners are only a small fraction of the total emigration from northern Italy to Mexico, yet the microhistorical Italian perspective makes it possible to frame them within international migratory movements. The study found consistent connections between migrants' city of origin and adopted city, and identified the importance of networks of family members and friends for support for subsequent migration flows. Those who returned as a result of World War I – as subjects of the Kingdom of Italy – continued to work as miners in different locations, making them difficult to trace.

*Keywords:* 1. migration, 2. miners, 3. Italians, 4. Brez, 5. Sierra Mojada.

**RESUMEN**

Se presenta un examen del flujo migratorio de una comunidad de campesinos de Brez, Trento –pertenecientes al Imperio austrohúngaro– que se dirigieron a la Sierra Mojada, en Coahuila, para trabajar como mineros. Se describen las características políticas y culturales inherentes al país receptor, de los colonos italianos y los espacios geográficos transnacionales por donde tuvieron que transitar. Siendo numéricamente una pequeña fracción del movimiento total de la emigración del norte de Italia a México, la perspectiva micro-histórica italiana permite encuadrarlos dentro del movimiento migratorio internacional. Encontramos la constante vinculación de su ciudad de origen con la de adopción y viceversa, así como la importancia de las redes familiares y de amigos como apoyo para los subsecuentes flujos migratorios. Los que, como consecuencia de la Primera Guerra Mundial retornaron –como súbditos del Reino de Italia–, continuaron empleándose en la actividad minera en diferentes lugares, por lo que es muy difícil ubicarlos.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración, 2. mineros, 3. italianos, 4. Brez, 5. Sierra Mojada.

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## INTRODUCTION

This sociohistorical article is centered on an unprecedented study examining the circumstances in which a group of farming families from the municipality of Brez, in the Non Valley in the Trentino region (when it belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire), emigrated to work in the mining settlement of La Esmeralda in Sierra Mojada, Coahuila from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The study ends in 1927, after the Mexican Revolution and World War I, when the Trentino region was reincorporated into the Kingdom of Italy and a second wave of emigrants headed for other important mining sites in the neighboring state of Chihuahua. Four proposals were identified based on research on Italian migration to the Mexican Republic. The first covers historiographical work containing lists of Italians, both named and anonymous, who crossed the Atlantic from the Kingdom of Spain (Peconi, 1998; Mapelli, 2003), and anthropological studies of relations between Mexico and Italy during the nationalist and fascist period (Savarino, 2006, 2017) and until investigations on Italian business owners in Mexico (Pureco Ornelas, 2010).

The second proposal relates to pioneering research on migration specifically from Trentino to Mexico during the Porfiriato, conducted essentially by migrants' descendants (Zilli, 1998, 2002; Tommasi, 2010; Martínez, 2010, 2015), which focus on the reason migrants were forced to leave the Trentino region and relinquish the contracts drawn up between Mexican and Italian colonizing companies to pack themselves into boats that took them to the port of Veracruz and later establish state-sponsored agricultural colonies. On another note, and due to descendants' desire to save their ancestors from anonymity, historical family biographies have been published (Naif, 2012; Tomassi, 2010). Together, all these works are testament not just to academic interest, but a search for roots. Lastly, academic theses have begun to be published analyzing the migratory phenomenon, independently and following a different approach (Fontano, 2016).

In this case, the only evidence of the saga of the Trentino miners is documentation showing that they went to work in mineral deposits in the United States, which mentions deposits in Canada and Mexico (Bolognani, 1996). Without a doubt, the best production on the topic was organized and written by the chronicler of the Brez municipality, which he published with support from the Casa Rurale di Brez and which highlights migration to Sierra Mojada (Ruffini, 2005, 1994). This is joined by the few family stories passed on down generations and the Monument to the Miner built in the main square of the town of Brez with donations sent by those who migrated to North America to work in the mines (Ruffini, 1994, p. 135).

Primary sources of information were therefore extremely varied, and range from the detailed information contained in the U.S. National Archives, the General Archive of the State of Coahuila (AGEC), and the General Archive of the Nation (AGN), to Mexican and foreign digital newspapers from the period, oral historical records from descendants of the

main actors, and similar records from the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas in El Paso. Without losing sight of the historical perspective, and in order to contribute to the study of migration, in this case to Sierra Mojada, Coahuila, I drew on the concept of chain migration (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964, p. 82) to demonstrate the consistent connection between migrants' city of origin and adopted city, with the aim of describing how a community from the municipality of Brez, in the Non Valley in Trentino, located the areas they crossed. In this process I drew support from the anthropological view of transnational movements (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, pp. 1-2) and the perspective of circular movements "that encompass persons, goods, and information crossing national borders" (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, pp. 60-61).

Given that, quantitatively, the social actors that emigrated from the municipality of Brez make up just a small fraction of total migration from Trentino to the Mexican Republic during this period, I adopted the Italian micro-historical perspective (Levi, 1993), which enabled us to discuss the specific case of the Italian miners of Sierra Mojada and consider them within the broader issue of international migration, as otherwise they would continue to go unnoticed. Mindful of the heterogeneous nature of this migration flow, this study has focused on the specific case of certain migrants who spent a long time living in the mining town, such as the Ruffini, Prevedel, Menghini, and Zueck families. The rest met the criteria for temporary workers or *birds of passage* as they would move to the area to work for a time – perhaps two years – and then return to Brez for a while.

In order to find out how the community of the municipality emigrated within this complex framework, it is important to determine the following: What nationality were they? What route did they take and which means of transport did they use? Who were these migrants? Why did some leave Sierra Mojada for good while others returned? Consequently, first I offer a contribution to the study of the migratory flow from Trentino to Mexico and cover aspects relating to miners; secondly, this work will examine how a community from the Non Valley in Trentino located the spaces they traveled through, and lastly, I will demonstrate the persistent connection between their city of origin and their adopted city. In view of the above, this study will begin with a cursory mention of the importance of migration policy in the north of the Mexican Republic from the establishment of the new border between the United States and Mexico. The second section will touch on the historical context of the foundation of the town of Sierra Mojada and La Esmeralda in Coahuila. A third section will describe the social and economic environment of the municipality of Brez. Lastly, I will discuss the conditions that encouraged migration and the Trentino migrants' integration into the mining industry.

## THE IDEAL SETTLER

My aim is to discuss migration from Trentino to the northern Mexican Republic, but beforehand I believe it is fitting to mention that the settlement of populations across Mexico's vast territory and the demarcation of its northern and southern borders has been a constant throughout the country's history. In order to gauge the scope of the settlement policy of the Mexican Republic, it must be situated within the context of Mexican society at the time. To begin with, the powerful and influential Secretariat of Development, Settlement, Industry and Commerce was established in 1853 to boost the country's economy. To achieve this, one of its first strategies was to amend the General Settlement Law of 1824, which allowed the entry of English-speaking Protestant settlers who achieved their independence and subsequent annexation to the United States in 1845 (Siliceo, 1857, pp. 37-60).

It is well known that the United States invaded the Mexican Republic, leading to an armed conflict and the subsequent loss of over two million square kilometers and at least 100,000 inhabitants, which marked the beginning of complicated border relations between the two countries. As a result, not only was it necessary to determine and establish a new northern border spanning over 3,000 km across the states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, but new border crossings were created in a new economic order (including the Paso del Norte crossing – of particular importance for this narrative – which later became Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and the city of El Paso in Texas), and a new settlement strategy was proposed as the new nation-state continued to need both Mexican and foreign settlers.

Consequently, the idea of promoting laws to encourage migration with no ideological distinction was upheld from the brief rule of Maximilian I of Habsburg through to supporters of liberalism like presidents Benito Juárez, Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, Manuel González, and Porfirio Díaz. Certainly, the strongest boost to Italian immigration came during the Porfiriato (1876-1910), which spanned the terms of office of General Porfirio Díaz, his comrade-in-arms Manuel González Flores (1880-1884) and his secretary of development, General Carlos Pacheco, who, it was said, had an Italian air about him (González Navarro, 1994, pp. 203-205).

One tactic they used was to ask various Mexican diplomats and intellectuals on the old continent to identify ideal settlers to prevent a reoccurrence of what happened in the state of Texas. One such person was the representative of Mexico Don Enrique Velasco, who in 1878 suggested that migrants should be made up of Catholic peasant families from the north of the Italian Peninsula – Piedmont, Lombardy or Liguria – as they shared common values such as respect for religion and family, and intended to settle in the country (Zilli, 2002, pp. 65-75). Although one the priorities of the Secretariat of Development was a policy promoting peasant settlers that would support the emerging agricultural industry,

once promising mineral deposits were discovered in the state of Coahuila, migratory discourse took a turn.

We should not be surprised, then, that in reference to an economic sector other than agriculture, the editor of a support publication for the corporate mining community, *El Minero Mexicano*, published in February 1879 an introductory article in which he proposed mining as a strategy to attract migrants, praised settlement laws, called for new mining and tax laws and more and better means of communication, and lastly, asserted that protecting mining would not only create work, but also encourage immigration (*El Minero Mexicano*, 1879a, pp. 217-218).

### THE SIERRA MOJADA OF COAHUILA

Firstly, it is worth pointing out that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in the state of Coahuila and at a regional level, political interests were controlled by three families who consolidated their economic and commercial power thanks to – among other things – the opportunity to export their goods through the new border crossing from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso. The families were those of businessman Evaristo Madero, identified by President Manuel González and then by secretary of finance José Yves Limantour, and whose investments were essentially concentrated in the region known as La Laguna; lawyer Miguel Cárdenas de Monclova and partners, such as the Carranza family from Cuatro Ciénegas and those close to Porfirio Díaz’s right-hand man General Bernardo Reyes; and lastly, those in the same group as General José María Garza Galán – governor from 1886 to 1893 – a protégé of General Porfirio Díaz and partner in the main companies determining boundaries in northern Mexico, located in Monclova, Río Grande, and Sierra Mojada (Falcón, 1988, pp. 425-428).

All had significant economic interests in Sierra Mojada and played a key role – from different sides – in the Mexican Revolution. Although official discourse always referred to the area as a vast desert land with a harsh climate, seemingly offering no opportunity to exploit any natural resource and with no trace of any civilization whatsoever, the Sierra Mojada (Spanish for “wet mountain range”, so called because the reflection of the sun causes one of its mountains to appear wet), on the border between the states of Chihuahua and Durango, would have continued to go unnoticed had Néstor Arreola not come across by chance, in May 1879, what he thought was a silver ore in a hill known as La Blanca (*El Minero Mexicano*, 1879b, p. 420). The site’s fame quickly spread thanks to a well-organized media campaign in leading Mexican and foreign newspapers, which promoted it as a window of opportunity to quickly amass a fortune. Meanwhile, with the actual or fictitious arrival of hundreds of miners, several exploratory commissions were established, including one by La Aviadora de Minas de Real del Monte, one by Guillermo Purcell, one by Valentín Gómez Farías, and one by the Ferrara brothers (Milea, 2012, pp. 55-66).

The official commission was directed by the mining engineer Santiago Ramírez, who concluded that in reality, La Blanca contained basic lead carbonates in limestone, zinc, and copper, which were very difficult to exploit. Moreover, he added, there was no communication infrastructure to export them and the lack of water was a major hindrance, while there were more varieties of minerals in the La Esmeralda mine (Ramírez, 1885, pp. 490-535). Nonetheless, rapid urban development of the new mining town of Sierra Mojada began in September that year and envisaged a market, train station, telegraph office, a postal service and stamps, a few shops, and even an organized brothel which, together, contributed to safeguarding the interests of the public treasury, in addition to a theater, church, and school ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1879a](#)).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the first political leader, General Francisco Zérega, imposed environmental protection regulations stressing that public use of water would be free of charge ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1880](#)).<sup>3</sup>

Although *El Minero Mexicano* continued to urge potential mining investors and settlers to come to the new town, within a year Mexicans and some foreigners – from Ireland, the United States, and Italy – were already living there. By the turn of the century, the Italian migrants, who came from Salerno ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1882a](#)),<sup>4</sup> were engaged in various major branches of the mining and commercial industry. These included the Ferrara family, which owned properties in the municipality of Cuatro Ciénegas, and the D'Estefano and Cassale families. Once the economic conditions were in place, the political leaders, imposed from central Mexico through the governor of Nuevo León Bernardo Reyes, and General Zérega (Falcón, 1988, pp. 423-467) allowed the establishment of mining enclaves around the town in accordance with the new geo-economic perspective of business owners, with social life revolving in one way or another around their businesses (Sariego, 1994, pp. 197-209), as occurred in the town of La Esmeralda.

This encouraged the free distribution of land, mostly among the political and economic elite of the states of Coahuila and Nuevo León and the national capital, and the settling of both Mexicans and foreigners ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1879b](#)).<sup>5</sup> In short, it was not entrepreneurial immigrants who benefited from the various laws on settlement and wastelands, but Mexican real estate speculators and some foreigners (De Vos, 1984, pp. 76-113).

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<sup>2</sup> Miguel Gómez and Cárdenas explain that it was necessary to establish the town of Sierra Mojada.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco Zérega, military commander of the area, informs inhabitants of appointments and compulsory instructions. Sierra Mojada, Coahuila.

<sup>4</sup> Melchor Salas, mayor of the town, sends the secretary of government of the state of Coahuila the general census of population and updates on the town.

<sup>5</sup> Applicants for land were members of the political and economic elite, such as Victoriano Cepeda, Juan L. Galán, Mucio Peña and Sotomayor, Ismael Galán, Hipólito Charles, and U.S. entrepreneurs Juan Willet and W. Parrish, along with entrepreneurs from the state of Nuevo León and the capital of the Republic.

## LA ESMERALDA IN SIERRA MOJADA

Despite the ups and downs of the mining companies, La Esmeralda, located 4 kilometers from the town of Sierra Mojada, slowly concentrated services to meet the needs of the new Mexican and foreign settlers, such as a train station, a telegraph, a church with a clock, and some shops. Nonetheless, it is also known that since business owners from Saltillo set up mining businesses through a company they called La Constancia, one of the ways they controlled miners was by selling drinking water – while for high-ranking employees it was fetched from the town of Sierra Mojada (Chism, 1887, pp. 542-544).

In 1887, the Consolidated Kansas City Smelting and Refining Company (KCSRC), run by Robert Towne, was able to benefit from the discovery of the copper ore chrysocolla, with high silver content, in the following ways:

- 1) By leveraging the pro-foreign investment policy of the regime and renting the main mines in the area – like the San Salvador and San José mines – from their original owners.
- 2) By hiring cheap labor and subjecting workers to a worse coercive labor system to force them to increase production, and a strict, hierarchical social division of labor.
- 3) By introducing new machinery and mining methods, abandoning the *serpentón* or *galeme*<sup>6</sup> system and adopting the U.S. water-jacket smelting furnaces (Milea, 2012, pp. 55-56).
- 4) By obtaining a concession from Mexican authorities to build a 125-kilometer-long railroad from the Escalón station in the state of Chihuahua to Sierra Mojada.

The railroad was initially called The Mining Railroad (*El Ferrocarril Minero*) and connected to the Mexican Central Railroad (*Ferrocarril Central Mexicano*), facilitating the transportation of unwrought lead and copper to Ciudad Juárez for smelting at the plant in El Paso, Texas (El Siglo XIX, 1890, p. 2). However, the great opportunity to expand the new mining capitalism came when, as a result of pressure from miners in the state of Colorado who alleged unfair competition from the Sierra Mojada miners, a tax of 1.5 U.S. cents was levied on each pound of unprocessed metals imported from Mexico, as was the case with lead. This protectionist law (which was in effect for four years), known as the McKinley Tariff, resulted in the American Smelting and Refining Company (hereinafter ASARCO) replacing KCSRC and performing mining work in Mexico, to reduce costs (Suess, 1893, pp. 32-33).

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<sup>6</sup> TN: *Galeme*: a reverberatory furnace of 1 to 3 *arrobas* capacity (Keith R. Long, U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, *A Partial Glossary of Spanish Geological Terms*, 1991). The *serpentón* was a type of *galeme* used to smelt argentiferous-lead ore in Sierra Mojada (Milea, 2012).

Meyer Guggenheim's stake as a shareholder allowed him to acquire control of the company and thanks to political and social dealings by his sons Daniel and Isaac Guggenheim, they were able to obtain a duty-free importation permit for all the cutting-edge technology necessary to extract the new non-ferrous industrial metals (lead, copper, and zinc), and a concession to build smelting plants, directly from President Porfirio Díaz. Of particular note is the Gran Fundición Nacional Mexicana in Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo León, where world-class minerals were sent for subsequent exportation from the port of Tampico to the United States or Europe (Malcolmson, 1902, pp. 100-139; Underwood, 2009, pp. 64-70).

In this context, ASARCO began to exploit mines through the company La Constancia (*El Siglo XIX*, 1891, p. 2),<sup>7</sup> and ten years later, appropriated all the *fincas* (country estates) in the region and imposed a new model of employment in which employees were either paid late or in coupons that could be exchanged at the company store (*General Archive of the State of Coahuila*, 1895),<sup>8</sup> worker accommodation was rented, and drinking water continued to be rationed or sold. Nevertheless, by 1910 La Esmeralda had become an economic and social center that rivaled the town of Sierra Mojada (*General Archive of the State of Coahuila*, 1910a).<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, the expansion of KCSRC and later ASARCO into the Coahuila desert was a window of opportunity for migrants from the municipality of Brez to come to the town of La Esmeralda and fill skilled vacancies offered by the company. While managerial positions were only occupied by engineers from U.S. mines, lower-ranking, more dangerous operational positions were filled mostly by settlers from Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, and Coahuila, who came to work in the mines as a result of the publicity mentioned above (*General Archive of the State of Coahuila*, 1882b).<sup>10</sup>

## THE MUNICIPALITY OF BREZ

In another geographical setting, the municipality of Brez, with its six villages (Brez, Arsio, Carnalez, Rivo, Salobbi, and Traversara), is located 40 km north of the capital of Trentino. The landscape is wholly mountainous and characterized by the Dolomites and Alps

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<sup>7</sup> Robert S. Towne, the manager of Compañía Metalúrgica Mexicana, was able to explore and exploit the mines, along with a railroad connecting the central railroad to the Escalón and Sierra Mojada stations, and secured a tax exemption.

<sup>8</sup> Contract signed between General Pacheco and Mr. Francisco Olivares on behalf of the company La Constancia to exploit mines of any kind and expand the metallurgical complex known as La Esmeralda in the municipality of Sierra Mojada.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the request by some residents of Sierra Mojada that the coupons be abolished.

<sup>10</sup> Melchor Salas, mayor of the town, sends the secretary of government of the state of Coahuila the general population census.



mountain ranges. Generally speaking, the reasons hundreds of people left Trentino during the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The loss of temporary work in the Veneto and Lombardy regions, when they were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy.
- 2) Diseases that attacked primarily potatoes, grapevines, and silkworms, and several floods.
- 3) An increase in the number of family members, hence smaller shares of family land.
- 4) A media campaign that convinced many to live the New World dream in Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and the United States (Ruffini, 2005, pp. 140-145).

In order to curb the difficulties, and making use of new and modern means of communication like the Atlantic liners and railroads, their strategy was to emigrate far away for a while and save up before returning with substantial capital and starting over, in contrast to the official settlers mentioned earlier. As a way to avoid emigrating and/or a response to peasants' poor living conditions, a popular peaceful movement emerged, promoted by parishes and inspired by the first social encyclical by the Catholic church, *Rerum novarum*. This consisted in organizing consumers' cooperatives or *famiglie cooperative*, modeled on Christian values of solidarity and self-governance and run by the priest Lorenzo Guetti (village of Vigo Lomaso, Trentino, 1847-1898) and, mostly, by the priest of the municipality of Brez, Silvio Lorenzoni (village of Cles, Trentino, 1844-1908). By 1893 there were hundreds of cooperatives, leading to the foundation of the Federazione dei Consorzi Cooperativi, of which Lorenzoni was the first president, and the Cassa Rurale di Prestiti e Risparmio Brez, established to offer low-interest loans (Ruffini, 1994, pp. 121-124, 175-179).

It is worth stressing that Father Lorenzoni used the periodical *La Voce Cattolica* as a sounding board; since 1865 the newspaper had represented Catholics' position on social and economic issues, before it became *Il Trentino*,<sup>11</sup> which published notices and even

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<sup>11</sup> Silvio Lorenzoni was called to direct *La Voce Cattolica* in 1885, which he used as a vehicle to communicate his controversial ideas on religion, politics, and economics, and which he left in 1888 when he became the parish priest of Brez. The intellectual Alcide De Gasperi (village of Pieve Tesino, Trentino, 1881-1954) decided to change the name of *La Voce Cattolica* to *Il Trentino* from March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1906, with the goal of reestablishing moral unity in Trentino on the three pillars of positively national religion, spirit, and democracy. This choice was harshly criticized as it was associated with the Italian independence movement from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, known to be irrendentist (Fundación Alcide de Gasperi, n.d.).

recommendations for future migrants heading by ship to the port of New York. Another of Lorenzoni's strategies was to draw up a detailed record of each migrant, so he knew who emigrated, where to, their occupation, the arrival of any future wife, which church the marriage was performed in, and the arrival of any children, any deaths, etc. This also served to monitor the observance of Catholic and/or Trentino practices they all had to maintain while abroad.

## FROM NORTHERN ITALY TO NORTHERN MEXICO

As there is no evidence that ASARCO used settlement agencies to hire skilled labor, and on account of the fact that its mining business also operated in the United States, we assume the company did so based on other migrants from northern Italy who were already working in some of their mines. A cursory analysis of the frequency of the migration flow from the municipality of Brez shows that, although it came to a stop during World War I, 1,084 – who may or may not have been related – emigrated for the most part to North America to work in the mines. Of the 787 who went to the United States, most headed to the Diamondville and Rock Springs mines in Wyoming; Hazleton, Pennsylvania; Silverstone and Telluride, Colorado; Minden, Missouri; Frontenac and Crawford, Kansas; Coaldale, Oklahoma; Globe, Arizona; Nello, Utah; and Ironwood, Michigan.

In addition, a group of 103 people went to the enclave of La Esmeralda in Sierra Mojada, Coahuila; Santa Bárbara, Chihuahua; and Ojuela, Durango. Their pattern of entry into the American continent was through the immigration station on Ellis Island in New York, then passing through immigration again as they crossed from El Paso, Texas, to Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, although later they used the immigration station on the border between Ojinaga, Chihuahua, and Presidio, Texas.<sup>12</sup>

## THE PIONEER

One example of how knowledge is acquired through various fields is Juan Ruffini from the town of Rivo (1874-1937), who from an early age had to emigrate to various places due to the economic crisis in Brez. In 1880, like many other Italians, he was hired in Switzerland by the company Legher und Poser, a contractor for the Gotthard Rail Tunnel that was to cross the Alps. Over time, he ended up working as a personal assistant for Dr. Zopler, an engineer working on building the most important railroads in Europe, who introduced him to new tunnel boring methods. His ability enabled him to work in mines or boring rail tunnels at several locations in the empire, and ten years later he joined Juan Battista Zueck

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<sup>12</sup> The record of emigrants kept by Silvio Lorenzoni and Bruno Ruffini runs from 1870 to 1927 and was supplemented by the author by international migratory entry and exit records contained in the ancestry.com database.

and Nando Rizzi to try their luck in the Sierra Mojada mine. There he was hired by Henry Huber from KCSRC to work in the San Salvador mine, until he was required by ASARCO as a supervisor at the La Fronteriza mine, part of the La Constancia business group, where over 500 miners worked (A. Zuech, personal communication, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018).

It is likely that letters sent back to family members and friends in the municipality of Brez, such as the Albertini, Bonini, Canestrini, Corazza, Magnana, Menghini, Otzinger, Patil, Prevedel, Menghini, and Zuech<sup>13</sup> families, were their only source of information on the labor market, geography, customs, and housing conditions in the Coahuila mining town, and encouraged them to emigrate there. They were all helped by the fact they were educated in Trentino – where the illiteracy rate was less than 10 percent (Foreign Office, 1920, p. 15), compared to 90 percent in the Mexican Republic – and their proficiency in foreign languages like German and/or Italian.

Altogether, they took advantage of the opportunity to work in a company that applied cutting-edge technology and offered formal employment with a higher salary, enabling them to save and/or remit money back to their families. The condition was that they had move into a town built in the middle of the desert and learn the mining trade and the local language. Nonetheless, just like Ruffini, some members of the Prevedel, Menghini, and Zueck families soon held administrative positions within the mining company and/or started businesses as small-scale entrepreneurs, while others were trained by the same company to work as joiners on the new square timber support for mining tunnels.

#### FROM NEW YORK TO LA ESMERALDA VIA EL PASO, TEXAS

Unlike the migration of official settlers who filled Atlantic liners that docked in Veracruz, which has essentially been studied in one direction only, the members of this community traveled from different European ports, such as Le Havre in France, to cover the 5,600 kilometers that separated them from the port of New York. According to U.S. migration policy discourse, Italians had to pass a medical examination performed by the Public Health Service (Yew, 1980, pp. 488-492) at the health and immigration inspection station on Ellis Island, despite the fact they were passengers in transit to Mexico, and then demonstrate to the immigration officer that they were not a danger to the public (polygamists, criminals or anarchists) and that they carried with them a certain dollar amount and would not represent a public charge.

Based on recommendations published in the press (*La Voce Cattolica*, 1905; *Il Trentino*, 1906), emigrants traveled lightly and were accompanied by two or three friends or

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<sup>13</sup> For practical reasons, both in the United States and the Mexican Republic, the family name Zuech was transcribed as Zueck to reflect the pronunciation. However, this paper has respected the spelling found in original documents.

relatives. Over time, they dared to change their names based on their last place of residence. For example, as passengers in transit to Mexico, on the first trip they presented an Austrian passport and stated that they were peasants and able to read and write (National Archives of America, 1896);<sup>14</sup> on the second trip, from Cherbourg in France, on the Kronprinz Wilhelm Atlantic liner, the men registered as miners. They reported that their last home city in Europe was Bolzano, which was predominantly German-speaking, and they wrote their name in German, leading the medical officer to class them as of *German race* in 1911 (National Archives of America, 1911).<sup>15</sup> For instance, on one of Ruffini's trips, in 1903, he declared that his last place of residence was Switzerland and his name was Johann (National Archives of America, 1903).<sup>16</sup>

Once they were on U.S. soil, the rail networks connecting New York to many mining and metalworking hubs helped them to reach El Paso, Texas, where ASARCO had built a smelting plant. The next step was to cross the international border into Ciudad Juárez and purchase a ticket for the Central Railroad, which would take them to La Esmeralda in Sierra Mojada, where they were better known as the Italians. Once on Mexican soil they no longer endured discrimination as the interest was mutual: foreigners sought a window of opportunity for work, and Mexican authorities needed them as settlers.

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<sup>14</sup> Passenger list from New York in 1896. Fidele Zuech, a farmer aged 18 years, and Anna Atzinger, aged 22, traveled in the Gascogne steamboat as passengers in transit to Mexico, arriving in New York.

<sup>15</sup> Passenger list from 1911. Fiedel Zueck, his wife Virginia, son Rudolf and cousin Marcelo Zueck arrived on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1911, on the Kronprinz Wilhelm steamboat. The family unit declared 400 dollars.

<sup>16</sup> Passenger list from 1903. New York; series: T715, 1897-1957; roll 0407; line: 10; p: 16. Juan Ruffini, his wife Agnese and daughter Sofia arrived on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1903, on the New York steamboat. The family unit declared 200 dollars.

*Figure 1.* Northern Central Railroad from Ciudad Juárez to the Escalón station leading to Sierra Mojada, Coahuila



*Source:* General Map of the State of Chihuahua by Pedro Larrea y Cordero in 1893. Manuel Orozco and Berra map library (*Mapoteca Manuel Orozco y Berra*), rod (*varilla*): OYBCHIH01, no. 1690-OYB-7214-C-001 (Larrea y Cordero, 1893).

## THE FAMILIES

An analysis of their descendants' marriage and birth records revealed that this group remained very close-knit through endogamous marriages. Considering the social organization of Sierra Mojada, the Trentino community either arrived along with their nuclear families or waited to secure work in the mines and saved enough money to cover the travel costs of a brother, cousin, or future wife. Indeed, these women are worth mentioning as their participation in the flow of migrants is more telling (Rinaldetti, 2014, pp. 5-30). We know that, generally speaking, they traveled from New York to El Paso, Texas, accompanied by a family member or trusted acquaintance from Trentino. Marriages were one more way to strengthen fraternal ties in the community of the town of La Esmeralda, as community members traveled to the border to witness the marriage in the Catholic church the Sacred Heart of Jesus in El Paso,<sup>17</sup> the sanctuary from which

<sup>17</sup> Marriage performed on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1903, between Virginia Ruffini and Fidel Zueck. Víctor Ruffini, brother of the bride, and Enrique Salas witnessed the event. At the same

notifications of marriages were sent to the parish priest of Brez, who, as mentioned, was a link to the community despite the distance.

Upon returning, and due to the new social and economic organization imposed by ASARCO, the couples rented the only housing option they had – wooden houses reserved for families known as *balloon frames* and owned by the company – while single men were lodged in so-called exclusively male hotels.

As could be expected, families began to grow and their children, although born in Mexico, were considered foreigners under immigration laws, since at the time in Mexico the principle of *jus sanguinis*, or right of blood, prevailed over *jus soli*, by which citizenship is based on place of birth (Yankelevitch, 2014, pp. 113-155). In this case, the recording of the birth or even death certificate of a descendant was another way of strengthening ties as they would take their closest countrymen with them as witnesses ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1899](#)).<sup>18</sup> Naturally, as part of their identity and in anticipation of a return to Brez, the mothers, who were deeply Catholic and conservative, taught their language, Nones, to their children, who also picked up Spanish by taking part in social life in the mining community.

Circumstantially, through numerous letters written in Italian, women provided information on the new social organization in the mining town and their inner feelings of yearning or joy, and exchanged family photographs, which have now become historical. We know about them officially from ship records and records of death, which is indicative of their role as housewives and mothers who never worked outside the home. The data shows that changes in marital patterns did not occur until the second generation of (male) migrants who began their lives with Mexican women. Nevertheless, due to the patriarchal system that continued to wield its influence, women had to marry foreigners or remain single.

### SMALL-SCALE BUSINESS OWNERS

By 1906, not only had they learned the mining trade empirically, but, as a benefit of working together to increase profitability, they formed partnerships, although these were

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place Ernestina Prevedel, who arrived in New York on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1906, married Victor Ruffini on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1906, along with Anna Atzinger, who arrived accompanied by Fidel Zueck in 1896 and married José Zueck on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1896 (Texas County Marriage Index, 1903).

<sup>18</sup>The civil registry judge Marcelino Moncibaiz registered Juan Ruffini's daughter Sofia in 1899; he was accompanied by Pedro Ruffini and Eustaquio Zueck. When Fidel Zueck registered his children born in the Esmeralda smelting plant, he invited the same Eustaquio, Agustín Ancelmi, Don Nicolás Fabela de Turín, and Agustín Prevedel as witnesses.

soon absorbed by the monopoly. One example was the mining company La Tirolense, which exploited the El Porvenir mine (Official Gazette of the State of Coahuila de Zaragoza, 1906, p. 3), in which Juan Menghini, J.G. Osuna, and Wilhelm Hageman held shares. Independently, Víctor Ruffini (Official Gazette of the State of Coahuila de Zaragoza, 1907, p. 1) and Augusto Prevedel de la San Francisco de los Ángeles (Official Gazette of the State of Coahuila de Zaragoza, 1909, p. 3) declared to the tax collection agency of the state of Coahuila that they had extracted material containing copper. Another example is Zueck Stottner, who exploited the Tiro San Antonio mine (Official Gazette of the State of Coahuila de Zaragoza, 1909, p.1) and took out a lease from the company La Esperanza to mine copper, lead, and limestone in 1909. One year later, through the company La Constancia, he sold the slag (smelting residue) to Compañía Minera Fundidora y Afinadora de Monterrey, S. A., in which Ferrara was a shareholder (General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1910b),<sup>19</sup> while Juan Ruffini, as representative of La Constancia (ASARCO), applied for permission to extract silver, lead, and copper in 44 mining claims named La Unión (Official Gazette of the State of Coahuila de Zaragoza, 1904, p. 2).

As part of a global community, and thanks to their financial condition, they made several trips to Trentino. On one such visit in 1911, Zueck – perhaps as a way of burning his boats or simply to release capital – sold his home to the consumers’ cooperative (*famiglia cooperativa*) of Brez, established by Lorenzo Guetti and Lorenzoni, and returned to Mexico with substantial capital (Ruffini, 2005, p. 225). However, on their return to La Esmeralda, they found that most of the unrest caused by the re-election of President Díaz was concentrated in the north of the country. From another perspective, one sign of the economic and cultural exchange facilitated by these trans-Atlantic journeys was that those arriving in Brez began to build their homes with a new architectural design they called *messicano*, featuring long iron beams, central corridors that provided access to individual bedrooms, and early tin-glazed ceramic tiles (*azulejos*) and concrete floor tiles instead of traditional terracotta tiles (Ruffini, 1994, p. 127). They also introduced new varieties of grapevine.

## REVOLUTION AND WAR

This section begins with the following question: What political and social circumstances led the Trentino miners to decide to leave the Mexican Republic? To understand the circumstances that contributed to their return to the municipality of Brez, it is worth

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<sup>19</sup> Fidel Zueck, resident of this town, informs the governor of the state of Coahuila that through a contract with the mining company Fundidora and Afinadora de Monterrey, S.A, he sold a part of the greases and smelting wastes, whose taxes are paid according to the proportions of silver, lead and copper they contain. This payment is made every month, and it’s paid by the company, so the wastes are free of any other payment. For those reasons, Mr. Zueck is asked to declare that a second tax payment should not be done for those greases.

mentioning that the movement against the authoritarian regime that Porfirio Díaz had upheld for over three decades made its mark in 1910. As an example, according to Mr. José R. Taméz Canales, interim mayor of Sierra Mojada, the region found itself besieged by groups that were, in his opinion, bandits, which led business owners to sponsor a local armed force; others believed these wrongdoers belonged to anti-reelectionist armed forces like those of Gustavo I. Madero ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1910c](#)),<sup>20</sup> and later, the anarchist Magonist movement ([General Archive of the State of Coahuila, 1911](#)).<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the social and environmental conflicts caused by the ASARCO company, which obtained numerous concessions from the regime, they channeled their anger toward company executives, who were for the most part from the United States, and then, by extension, all foreigners. In this context, Juan Ruffini decided to send his wife and children to El Paso, where he would catch up with them to start over in Brez, with significant capital. A few days before his definitive departure, at a farewell gathering at the home of the chief surgeon of the town and diplomat, Dr. William March, his friends gave him a gold watch. In a show of social clientelism and the link between regional political power and foreign capital, the gathering was attended by the political leader José Ramos Carranza, the stamp tax administrator Juan García Peña, and Antonio D'Stefano and Juan Menghini.

Also present were others who specialized in mining processes and held managerial roles, such as the representative of the smelting plant of Torreón, Andrés Lasaga; the supervisors W. Hagerman from the mining company La Constancia and George Cornaham from the Compañía Metalúrgica Mexicana; Mr. Whitelock from the Mexican Northern Railroad, the supervisor Walter Benjamin Gates, cashier Davis from ASARCO, and accountant Chávez; the engineer Brady Master, the mechanic Tomlinson, and foremen Eustaquio Zueck and Víctor Ruffini ([The Mexican Herald, 1906, p. 15](#)). Finally, in October that year, friends Prevedel and Zueck crossed the Río Grande from Ojinaga to Presidio and headed to Frontenac, Kansas, and as evidence of how closely they remained tied to the Trentino community, *Il Trentino* informed its readers that:

Fidel Zuech and his wife and four children, together with Basilio Zuech and his wife María Menghini and brothers Augusto and Ruggero Prevedel, left the Sierra with a group of children because the Revolution has endangered their lives – they had to bribe their way out – but as soon as the Revolution is over, they will return to the Mexican Republic, where they own vast possessions (*Il Trentino*, 1913, p. 3).

Meanwhile, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Sierra Mojada requested protection for ASARCO employees and that they be issued a safe conduct to reach the United States

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<sup>20</sup> File containing reports on the revolutionary movement led by Francisco I. Madero, dated from November 29<sup>th</sup> to December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1910.

<sup>21</sup> They were aware that to the north there was an armed group calling itself Magonists.



(General Archive of the Nation, 1913),<sup>22</sup> as was the case with the Gates family (Gates, 1978). In the meantime, the heads of households were able to return to the mine of La Esmeralda or remain in Kansas. However, they chose to continue their journey to the port of New York, where they boarded a ship to a European port and then reunited with family members in Trentino. One of the advantages of returning to Brez was that they could capitalize on the cooperative system and make use of the low-interest loans offered by the cooperatives to restart their lives as farmers.

The repatriates from La Esmeralda, who were identified as Mexican and had worked under a different economic system, left their mark on the Cassa Rurale di Brez and attempted to win them over by arguing that it was not advisable to provide credit to anybody unable to furnish collateral. Eventually, the *Cassa* had to close and became the Cassa di Risparmio e Prestiti di Brez, with limited loan guarantees, and the Banco Popolare di Brez, the founders of which included Eustaquio Zuech and Juan Menghini, along with a priest (Ruffini, 1994, pp. 175-179). Nonetheless, they continued to support social causes that were ongoing at the time of Lorenzoni's death, such as the construction of an orphanage.

However, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914, triggered the outbreak of the Great War. One year later, the Kingdom of Italy went to war with Austria. The Dolomites became a battlefield for warring armies, leading to displacements that divided families, with some families remaining trapped in the town of Brez and some men able to emigrate to Sierra Mojada. Meanwhile, on the surface, the inhabitants of Brez were able to continue their daily lives. The mothers of children born in La Esmeralda, in the hope of returning to Mexico and reuniting with relatives who had stayed there or returned, now spoke Spanish to them, with Nones reserved for family events and Italian for classes at the Scuola Generale Popolare, which, despite the circumstances, continued to provide education.

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<sup>22</sup> The Secretariat of Foreign Affairs transcribes an official letter in which a representative of the American Smelting and Refining Company requests that orders be issued allowing employees of the company in Sierra Mojada to leave.

## EPILOGUE

Finally, with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italian troops recovered the irredentist areas of the Trentino region and interoceanic travel resumed. As a result, thanks to the previously established social network, the farmer-miners – now officially Italian – moved back to the Mexican Republic with the goal of reuniting their families and/or seeking better living conditions.

In this new setting, this second flow of migrants registered as being of Trentino origin in the José López Atlantic liner, and the new route ran from Genoa to New York via Barcelona and Cádiz, but due to new U.S. migration policies, they then traveled to the port of Havana, and finally to Veracruz, linking up with the Mexican Central Railroad, which took them north. However, the Sierra Mojada that had thrived during the boom was no longer the same, and some mines had even been exhausted and abandoned. Consequently, the mining monopoly employed them at other locations such as Santa Eulalia, Santa Bárbara, San Francisco del Oro, and Parral, in the state of Chihuahua.

However, the political and economic conditions no longer worked in their favor, and they were unable to start or continue with their small mining businesses. Some had to work in unfavorable conditions, leading to early deaths from silicosis, as was the case with Victor Zueck Covi in the Parral mine ([Concepción Zueck, personal communication, August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017](#)). In 1920, Augusto Prevedel, a survivor of the armed conflict, decided to settle with his wife Paolina Menghini in the Santa Bárbara area, located 240 kilometers from the city of Chihuahua, where he perished in a mining settlement in 1934 (Ruffini, 1994, p. 113). Fidel Zueck was hired to work in the San Pedro mine, in Nadadores, from Parral, and from there went to work in Nicaragua in 1942, and died from a lung condition, while Ruffini, the forefather of migrants, died in Fondo, Trentino. The members of the failed second, and last, generation of migrants to Mexico (Tommasi & Zilli, 2005) were no exception. As they spread from the state of Jalisco, they worked in several mines, such as the Los Lamentos mine in the municipality of Ahumada, until they reached Ciudad Juárez, where they waited for a member of the previous social network to help them emigrate legally to the United States, as was the case with Vigilio Poletti and Jacob Bugna from Bersone ([Esther Bugna, personal communication, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016](#)).

## CONCLUSIONS

The information presented in this paper reveals opposing international migration policies. While in Brez, the migrants' place of origin, mechanisms were established to discourage the population from emigrating or, as the case may have been, to foster the economic and social conditions to enable them to reintegrate into the community, in Mexico, the receiving country, it was hoped that they would come and populate the towns and integrate into society.

However, we now know that this movement of people was due to the needs of a multinational mining company, which required a skilled workforce to structure its industrial processes. Although their lives depended on large-scale armed conflicts, the migrants had the freedom to decide which migratory route and destination best served their interests and whether, for those few who returned to Coahuila and/or Chihuahua, to continue to work in the hazardous mining industry. This work has confirmed the key role played by networks of family members and friends in determining the best strategy to travel to the various ports and border posts on both continents safely and effectively, and the importance of establishing social networks in the mining towns of northern Mexico, which provided support for the following flow of migrants, whether they intended to come on a permanent or temporary basis.

This work has shown that they maintained family and cultural ties to Brez, not just through correspondence, but also return trips that led to them introducing cultural heritage associated with architecture, enology, and the new capitalist economic system they experienced in northern Mexico. Meanwhile, in the opposite direction, as a natural consequence of a supportive social organization, the emigrants from Brez unwittingly developed and managed to form partnerships, although due to the way in which the mining enclaves were organized, it was impossible for them to purchase real estate to build a church or community club. The only evidence of them is to be found in archives and the cemeteries of the major mining settlements in northern Mexico, and in their descendants.

Translator: Joshua Parker

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