

## From seasonal emigration to the Americas

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP  
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),  
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

In the middle of the nineteenth century the pattern changed. Rising population, crop failures and the decline of some traditional trades pushed emigrants from the Sopraceneri to more distant destinations. From 1854 about two thousand people, many of them from the Vallemaggia, left for the gold fields of Victoria in Australia.<sup>1</sup> From the 1850s onwards a larger and more durable emigration went to California. Half of those who left in the mass departures of 1854 and 1855 lived in the Locarnese or the Vallemaggia, and in California, once the gold rush was over, they found work as dairymen and cattle-farmers, shopkeepers, clerks, waiters and confectioners, some of them later owning ranches and businesses of their own.<sup>2</sup> Argentina, Uruguay and other South American countries attracted further emigrants. This transoceanic emigration was mostly permanent, although many emigrants returned or sent money home for decades. Its remittances financed houses in the valleys, paid debts and filled the savings accounts of the first Ticinese banks, which are discussed in Chapter C.IV. The Canton of Ticino documents this phase on its portal OltreconfiniTI, founded in 2013 and run by the information and communication service of the Council of State. The portal presents the lives of emigrants and their descendants, a guide to the reference literature and films on Ticinese emigration, and seeks to strengthen the bond between Ticinese abroad and the canton.<sup>3</sup>

In figures. The first federal census of 1850 counted 117,759 inhabitants in Ticino, and the census of 1900 counted 138,638, an increase of less than a fifth in half a century.<sup>4</sup> Over the same period the population of Switzerland as a whole grew from about 2.4 million to about 3.3 million, or by some two fifths. The difference reflects, above all, the continued emigration from the Ticinese valleys. About two thousand Ticinesi took part in the Australian gold rush of the 1850s alone, and in the decade 1850–1859 a total of 4,437 left for North America or Australia. Departures reached almost 9,000 in the 1880s and some 4,000 in the 1890s, and continued at about

600 a year in the early twentieth century until the world wars and the depression of the 1930s interrupted them. Between 1850 and the Second World War some 50,000 Ticinesi emigrated, about 30,000 of them from the Sopraceneri to California and at least 12,000 from the Sottoceneri to South America.<sup>5</sup>

The humbler emigration thus shared the basic structure of the artistic one. Both relied on kinship and village networks, both combined absence with a continuing stake in the home community, and both produced flows of money that were invested in the village. They differed in scale of individual earnings, in the role of children and in the legal instruments used. The architect of St Petersburg was recruited by the tsar himself, whereas the chimney-sweep's father shook hands with a *padrone*. The next section turns to the organization of this work and to the documents that made it possible.

## 1 Notes

1. Swiss National Museum, blog post "The Ticinese and the Australian gold rush" (December 2023), <https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/en/2023/12/the-ticinese-and-the-australian-gold-rush/>. See also Giorgio Cheda, *L'emigrazione ticinese in Australia* (2 vols, Locarno 1976). ↩
2. Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, OltreconfiniTI, "Il grande esodo dell'Ottocento", <https://www4.ti.ch/can/oltreconfiniti/dalle-origini-al-1900/storia-dellemigrazione-ticinese/il-grande-esodo-dellottocento>, and "Una vita umile in California", <https://www4.ti.ch/can/oltreconfiniti/dalle-origini-al-1900/storia-dellemigrazione-ticinese/una-vita-umile-in-california>. The standard work is Giorgio Cheda, *L'emigrazione ticinese in California* (Locarno 1981). ↩
3. Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, OltreconfiniTI, home page, <https://www4.ti.ch/can/oltreconfiniti>, and "Testi di riferimento", <https://www4.ti.ch/can/oltreconfiniti/dalle-origini-al-1900/testi-di-riferimento>. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Ticino", <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ticino>, and "Demographics of Switzerland", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Switzerland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Switzerland) (both used as a last resort); the underlying figures are those of the federal censuses. ↩

5. On Australia see the Swiss National Museum blog post cited above; for the other figures Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, OltreconfiniTI, "Il grande esodo dell'Ottocento" (cited above) and "Questione di numeri", <https://www4.ti.ch/can/oltreconfiniti/dalle-origini-al-1900/storia-dellemigrazione-ticinese/questione-di-numeri>. ↩

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