

Merchants, Midwives, and Laboring Women: Italian Migrants in Urban America. *By Diane C. Vecchio*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x + 130 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-252-03039-7.

Reviewed by Hasia Diner

Immigration historian Diane Vecchio has performed an important service for students of at least three, possibly four, different subfields within the broader rubric of American social history. In *Merchants, Midwives, and Laboring Women*, she asks how the structure of the local employment markets in Endicott, New York, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped the lives of Italian immigrant women. This slim but useful monograph offers insights and material to those interested in women's history, immigration, and ethnic history, in particular Italian American history, urban history, and the history of business. Each one of these fields will be enriched by this book because of its careful scholarship, the clarity with which the author has stated her project, and the good fit between the questions posed, the evidence provided, and the answers offered.

Vecchio conducted her research in two very different places. In the first of them, the presence of a single large employer, the Endicott Johnson shoe factory, a classic "light industry" that provided some support for working mothers, made it possible for married Italian women to remain in the workforce even after they assumed hefty family responsibilities. In the case of the latter, Milwaukee, a city based on heavy industry that had few spots available for women workers, either with or without children, propelled Italian immigrant women into petty entrepreneurship and into certain women's professions, particularly midwifery. Italian immigrant women in this city of breweries and massive factories that produced farm machinery found few jobs to choose from. Instead, they developed a set of economic practices like keeping shop, taking in boarders, and for the more educated, delivering babies and providing maternal health care, which placed them and their work at the center of their ethnic community.

Vecchio carefully lays out the work experiences of Italian immigrant women in the two cities and indicates that in both places Italians lived in compact communities and

built those communities around family and “back-home” networks. But the very nature of the local employment sectors played profound roles in structuring the kinds of options open to women. In both places, Italian immigrant women found themselves limited by factors beyond their control, but at the same time they took advantage of the on-the-ground realities that they confronted. In both places, they did not, contrary to the prevailing historical truth and the common imagery, lead purely domestic lives. Vecchio’s subjects here saw themselves as active agents in their families’ economic circumstances. They did not eschew work in the marketplace but dealt practically and energetically with local circumstances in order to further their own personal agendas and those of their families.

The placement of this book in the University of Illinois’ Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Centennial Series is fitting, as it focuses on a particular immigrant group and explores an aspect of that group’s encounter with America. That ethnic-history focus reflects the author’s understanding of what she has undertaken. It seems clear that Vecchio considers her contribution here to be that of taking Italian immigrant women out of historical obscurity and demonstrating that they functioned as vigorous economic players. She has sought to show that most historians have erred in their assumptions about Italian women in the American marketplace, and she does so convincingly.

But this book may make an equal, or possibly greater, contribution to the history of small business, although its author did not specifically set out to fill a glaring void in the historical literature. Her chapter on Italian women’s ethnic entrepreneurship in Milwaukee deserves particular attention as a way of opening up a neglected but crucial aspect of American social and ethnic history. This subject has by and large received little attention from scholars, be they historians of business or ethnic historians. Scholars interested in immigration and ethnic history have studied almost exclusively factory employment and have paid attention to the shop floors of industries of all kinds. But possibly because of the dearth of archival records preserving the experiences of “mom and pop” stores—the myriad food, clothing, and other kinds of marginal establishments that made up the ethnic communities’ mercantile infrastructure—historians have tended to neglect these shops as places of work and community life.

Yet Italian immigrants, like those documented here in *Merchants, Midwives, and Laboring Women* and like so many others who came to America, found ways to go into business for themselves by serving their communities. In many ethnic groups, individuals decided to try making a living by selling to others within their enclaves as an alternative to industrial employment. We do not know yet whether they did so because they wanted to work for themselves in order to maintain a degree of independence, or whether they thought they could make more money more rapidly this way, or whether, like Vecchio's subjects, they had no other good alternatives. All might have been possibilities. But we know close to nothing about this, either from the point of any particular group or from a comparative perspective.

Yet studying small businesses opens up a range of analytic matters, including those posed by Diane Vecchio, about the role of petty entrepreneurship in making it possible for married women with children to remain economically active. Whether they would have preferred to work like the Endicott women did, or whether the Endicott women would rather have had the options that were available to their counterparts in Milwaukee, we do not learn in this book. But Diane Vecchio's serviceable and balanced account will allow students to ponder such matters.

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