

# ALTRE VOCI

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### THE ITALIAN SLAVE CHILDREN OF NEW YORK

Dressed in rags, his dirty hair in tangles, the little boy tinkled a melody on a brass triangle; the cap at his feet, catching coins tossed by passers-by. Only six years old, Francesco already was a veteran of the tough streets of 19th century New York City. He was one of thousands of Italian street children, playing musical instruments and begging for pennies in America during the winter of 1873.

By 1870, the migration of Italians to America had been on the rise for decades. Italian pioneers, drawn by the Gold Rush, had settled in northern California in large numbers beginning in the 1850's and the establishment of Little Italy's in America's major cities was well underway across the nation. Between 1880 and 1920 more than 4 million Italians voluntarily settled in America.

While black slavery in America had been abolished in the 1860's after the Civil War, a new system of involuntary servitude among Italian children took root in America. During the 1870's, between 7,000 and 8,000 children were kid-napped from Italy and kept as slaves in America's biggest cities.

Most were from small towns in Italy, snatched from their beds or given up by their parents to Italian agents who assured them that their children would have a better life in America. In reality, once in the United States, the children were sold into bondage at private auctions for \$100 to \$300 for boys and \$100 to \$500 for girls. Enslaved by their masters, they were given rudimentary lessons on the triangle, violin or harp and sent out daily as street musicians.

This travesty gripped the headlines of the New York Times in 1873 when a reporter, who spoke Italian, discovered three boys around a garbage can in an alley. As he approached the nervous boys and spoke to them in Italian, he learned the boys, aged 6, 8 and 12 had been kidnapped and put aboard a steamer bound for America. Once in America, the pirated children were installed in dreary quarters under the rule of padroni (bosses) in the poorest neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Manhattan and sent into the streets and ordered to bring home a quota of fifty to eighty cents or be beaten.

The slave trafficking in Italian children reached a peak in the 1870's. In May, 1873 An Italian newspaper in Genoa reported that three children were stolen from Milan, printed their names and descriptions and noted they were likely in New York. Driven by grief, some parents made the journey to The United States to search for their children. A mother from Basilicata crossed the Atlantic with her two young children to search for her four other children who had been kid-napped. Her fate is unknown.

Media stories in Italy and the United States drew attention to the plight of the young Italian street musicians. But it took the combined efforts of Italian American organizations, the federal government and finally the U.S. Congress to end it. In June, 1873 the Italian American Societies of New York joined forces to protect the street children. In December, 1873, the Italian Parliament passed legislation making the selling or employing of abducted children a felony.

In April, 1874, The Consul General of Italy in the U.S. called upon the New York City Police to apprehend any Italian children found begging or playing musical instruments in the streets. This afforded the children some protection from their padroni and facilitated their return to their families in Italy. The New York Children's Aid Society even set up Italian schools in the worst neighborhoods to help keep the children off the street.

Finally, In June 1874, The U.S. Congress passed an "Act To Protect Persons Of Foreign Birth Against Forcible Constraints or Involuntary Servitude," a federal law known as the "Padrone Act" that carried fines, prison sentences and even deportation to enforce it. In 1876, New York State passed a law forbidding children under 16 in public entertainment. These laws diminished the slave trade from Italy and by the late 1880's the Italian street musicians had all but disappeared from the sidewalks of New York City. To this day, their fate is not well known.

*This article was written by David McCormick and is reprinted from the Winter 2012 issue of Italian America Magazine, a publication of the Order Sons Of Italy In America. See their website at [www.osia.org](http://www.osia.org) for more information.*



"Wandering Minstrels," painted in 1883 depicts the plight of street musician slaves.

The New-York Times JUNE 17, 1873.

#### CHILDREN AS SLAVES.

The Little Ones Kidnapped in Italy and Sold in New-York—Horrible Treatment by Their Masters.

It has been learned that at the present time there are between 7,000 and 8,000 children kid-napped from Italy held in this state of slavery in the large cities of the United States, New-York being the great central entrepot. The children are brought here and sold daily by private auction, prices varying from \$100 to \$500 for boys, and from \$100 to \$500 for girls. Where girls are exceptionally pretty, the prices are considerably higher. It is said that two little girls, who are frequently to be seen playing in Wall-street, were sold to their present owner for the sum of \$1,500.

The New York Times article that helped expose the trafficking of Italian children