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# 11 On Emigrating and Returning – Five Examples From the Aosta Valley

**Abstract:** The reasons for the return of emigrants from Valle d'Aosta can be grouped into five types: those who returned after getting rich, those who failed to integrate in the country of destination, those who returned to die in their native country, those who returned to get married, and those who wanted to engage in cultural and political life of the region for ideological reasons.

The article illustrates each case study with appropriate examples, highlighting the intertwining of the events of emigration and the political life of the region.

## Introduction

At the end of 2019, the government of the Valle d'Aosta Autonomous Region formed a workgroup to assess the possibility of creating a museum dedicated to the migrations that have affected the Aosta valley (both as a destination and as a place of departure) over the last three centuries.

The first step to achieving this goal was an analysis of the existing literature dedicated to the subject in the past. It thus emerged that, considering the large impact of migrations on the history of the region, there are surprisingly few studies on the subject. In fact, only two monographs have been dedicated so far to the general topic of emigration from the Aosta Valley: the book of Elio Riccarand and Tullio Omezzoli, *Sur l'émigration Valdôtaine: les données économiques et sociales (1700–1939): une anthologie de la presse (1913–1939)*, published in 1975; and *Emigration valdôtaine dans le monde: la diaspora d'un peuple au cours des siècles*, which presents the content of an exhibition curated in 1986 by the *Association Valdôtaine Archives Sonores* (Association for the Aosta Valley Sound archives).

The remaining 42 titles in the catalogue of the Regional Library of Aosta include the monographs of Pasquale Ciurleo, *Calabria emigrazione: la comunità sangiorgese in Valle d'Aosta*, and Giuseppe Ciardullo, *Dalla piana ai monti: cenni sull'immigrazione calabrese in Valle d'Aosta*, dedicated to immigration from Calabria to the Aosta Valley in the second half of the twentieth century; two books dedicated by their authors to an emigrant ancestor and based on family docu-

ments;<sup>1</sup> five collections of documents and histories related to a single municipality, often published on the occasion of the *Rencontre Valdôtaine*, the annual meeting of emigrants organized by the regional Administration since 1976;<sup>2</sup> five degree theses, written between 1966 and 2021; the seven articles published in the magazine *Le Flambeau*, the expression of a cultural association of Aosta, the *Comité des Traditions Valdôtaines* (Committee for the Aosta Valley Traditions); and the ten magazines of emigrants of the Aosta Valley in France, published since 1913.<sup>3</sup>

The remaining titles concern some articles or parts of monographs of varying scientific quality, published both in academic journals and in local publications but not specifically dedicated to the Valley, such as *Quelques aspects de l'émigration des savoyards et des valdôtains dans les pays alémaniques*,<sup>4</sup> written by the geographer Paul Guichonnet in 1951, or *Fam, füm, frecc: il grande romanzo degli spazzacamini: Valle d'Aosta, Valle Orco, Val Cannobina, Val Vigezzo, Canton Ticino* on the emigration of chimney sweeps from the north-western alpine valleys, written by the journalist Benito Mazzi in 2006.

This clearly shows that, over the years, the migrations that have affected the Aosta Valley have been the topic of impromptu publications or writings on specific and limited aspects of the issue. Moreover, the only two monographs that programmatically address the subject as a whole date back several decades and were followed only by one major study: Stuart J. Woolf's article *Emigrati e immigrati in Valle d'Aosta*, which was edited by Einaudi in the 1995 collective volume *La Valle d'Aosta*.<sup>5</sup>

After this, and for at least 20 years, no new study provided a global view of the migration phenomenon in the Aosta Valley until 2018 when Michela Ceccarelli

1 These are the works of Marco Jaccond and Marise Vuillermet, indicated in the bibliography, as are the other works referred to below.

2 On the *Rencontre*, accessed August 2, 2023, [https://www.regione.vda.it/Eventi\\_istituzionali/manifestazioni/rencontre/default\\_i.asp](https://www.regione.vda.it/Eventi_istituzionali/manifestazioni/rencontre/default_i.asp).

3 The large Aosta Valley community in France published the following periodicals: *L'écho de la Vallée d'Aoste: paraissant chaque mois à Paris: organe des valdôtains à l'étranger* (1913–1922), *La Vallée d'Aoste à l'étranger: organe libéral de l'émigration Valdôtaine* (1913–1914), *Bulletin du Secrétariat valdôtain d'émigration* (1917–1920), *La Vallée d'Aoste* (1920–1935), *L'écho de la Vallée d'Aoste: pour l'émigration et la Vallée d'Aoste* (1935–1940), *Bulletin de l'Union valdôtaine et Mont-Cervin réunies* (1937–1939), another *La Vallée d'Aoste* (1944–2004), *Bulletin de l'Union Valdôtaine de Paris* (1955–active), *La lettre valdôtaine* (1983–1984), *O Crierel Bulletin de l'Association des Levalloisiens d'origine Valdôtaine* (2009–active).

4 Paul Guichonnet, “Quelques aspects de l'émigration des savoyards et des valdôtains dans les pays alémaniques,” *Augusta Praetoria Revue Valdôtaine de pensée et d'action regionalistes* 1 (1951): 11–18.

5 Stuart J. Woolf, “Emigrati e immigrati in Valle d'Aosta,” in *Storia delle Regioni La Valle d'Aosta*, ed. Stuart J. Woolf (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), 621–643.

presented her *Émigrés 2.0*, a new overview of migration from the region dedicated to those who have left the Valley since 2000. This book includes a few pages summarizing the history of Valdostano (Aosta Valley) emigration from 1861 onwards, without adding notable information to previously-known elements. However, new data can be found in the *Rapporto Italiani nel mondo 2020*, edited by the Migrantes Foundation of Rome, which contains the most recent description of Valdostano emigration from the unification of Italy to the present day, based on new research findings.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it appears that for about a quarter of a century emigration was a theme of little interest to researchers. This neglect is due to one of the peculiarities of the local emigration: the important part the emigrants and their associations played in political events of the Region. This feature has made their history the subject of political debate rather than scientific research, thus discouraging further investigations on the subject by local researchers. Even return migration, in some cases motivated by ideological choices, has thus become a delicate topic to deal with.

In order to explore the issue of emigration back to the Aosta Valley and to describe the relationship between the emigrants, their associations in France, Switzerland, and the United States, and the political life in the Aosta Valley, it is necessary to take a closer look at the complex migratory events that affected the region over time, from at least the end of the Middle Ages. Consequently, this article is divided into three parts, the first of which presents the Aosta Valley and the historical trend of migration since the fifteenth century, to highlight the quantitative and qualitative changes in this phenomenon, as recorded since the unification of Italy and with the use of some statistical data. The second presents some exemplary cases of return migration, collected by the workgroup. In fact, after surveying the available bibliography on Aosta Valley migration, the working group carried out an initial inspection of the historical archives out of some of the 74 municipalities of the Aosta Valley, especially those not yet sorted or without a reliable inventory. This is an operation which is still ongoing, but which has already led to the finding of a fair number of documents which allow us to reconstruct the dynamics of emigration and immigration in the various municipalities.

Until now, the archives of Aosta, Arnad, Arvier, Challand-Saint-Victor, Chamave, Charvensod, Châtillon, Introd, Nus, Perloz, Saint-Vincent have been visited, and the inventories of other municipalities have been consulted at the Regional

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<sup>6</sup> Alessandro Celi, "Aosta. Emigrazioni e immigrazioni tra necessità economiche e strategie politiche," in *Rapporto Italiani nel mondo 2020*, ed. Fondazione Migrantes. (Roma: Tau editrice, 2020), 85–93.

Historical Archive. In the latter, the documentary collections that belonged to politicians who had government responsibilities – such as Severino Caveri, long-time president of the Autonomous Region, and Ernesto Page, senator between 1948 and 1958 – were also viewed. Thanks to this investigation, important information was found, relating above all to the relations between the regional administration and the emigrants' associations. Furthermore, the working group had access to some private archives, such as those of the *Pro Schola* association of Champdepraz (active both in Paris and Champdepraz until 1967 and later only in Aosta Valley), of the already mentioned AVAS, or of the Historical Institute of the Resistance and the Contemporary Society of the Valle d' Aosta, as well as to ecclesiastical ones.

The survey promoted by Bishop Giovanni Vincenzo Tasso in 1912<sup>7</sup> was consulted in the archives of the episcopal curia of Aosta. It is a document rich not only in quantitative data, but also in qualitative data. For example, the parish priest of Quart, an important agricultural centre 8 kilometres from Aosta, stated that around 300 of his parishioners had emigrated, equal to 13 % of the population recorded in the 1911 census, but he also explained that it was not a permanent emigration, but of a *va-et-vient continu* ("a continuous coming and going"), which prevented any kind of organized assistance for migrants. Also in the ecclesial sphere, the documents relating to the last few years of activity of the *Secrétariat valdôtain d'Émigration*,<sup>8</sup> conserved in the Library of the *Grand Séminaire* of Aosta, were consulted. Further documents of the Secrétariat, preserved in the archives of the Chapter of Sant'Orso,<sup>9</sup> are currently being inventoried and will be the subject of a forthcoming study.

Finally, given the importance of France in the events of Aosta Valley emigration, the *Archives Nationales* de Pierrefitte were consulted, where a small but important fond related to the supervision exercised by the French Ministry of the Interior on the Valdostan emigration associations after World War II was found. The French authorities' surveillance on Valdostan emigration is also confirmed by other documents found in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in La Courneuve, while for the events related to the relationship with the diocese of Paris, some interesting documents concerning the *abbé* Petigat were consulted at the archive of the archbishopric of the French capital.

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7 The bishop asked all the parish priests of the Valley for a report on the migratory phenomenon affecting the communities entrusted to them.

8 The body for assistance to Aosta Valley emigrants in Paris and, more generally, in the Franco-Swiss area, founded by Auguste Petigat (1885–1958), a Catholic priest sent to Paris in 1912 by the bishop of Aosta to assist the numerous emigrants who lived in the French capital and neighbouring municipalities.

9 One of the most ancient church of Aosta town, served by a collegiate chapter of priests.

In addition to archival research, the working group has promoted a series of initiatives aimed at arousing interest in the project and attracting possible witnesses.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the attention given to these initiatives by the local press and the support of emigrant associations, over 50 people were interviewed and described both their own migratory experience and that of their ancestors, as well as the reasons that led some of them to return home, mainly from the USA and France.

These are testimonies differing in quality and number of details, which in any case allowed the collection of a fair amount of information. The latter have been crossed with the archival data and the statistics available in the sites of the Autonomous Region<sup>11</sup> and Istat,<sup>12</sup> in the reports of the aforementioned Migrants Foundation, as well as in the articles published in local magazines, such as *Le Flambeau*, and have allowed the creation of exhibitions,<sup>13</sup> television documentaries,<sup>14</sup> and academic articles, such the one published in the *Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo 2020*. This procedure made it possible to detect the constants linking the stories of different interviewees; in this way, it was possible to avoid reducing the research to the simple recording of personal memories and, instead, to identify the typologies allowing the individual stories to be grouped together in some macro-categories.

In carrying out this operation, the workgroup benefited from the considerations expressed by Jay Winter about the dynamics of memory in his *The generation of memory*<sup>15</sup> as well as by Gabriella Gribaudo in her *Nel laboratorio dello storico biografia e grande storia s'incontrano*,<sup>16</sup> whose contents were then taken up and developed in her *I ricercatori, i soggetti e la polifonia delle voci nella storia*

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, an online form has been prepared, accessed August 13, 2023, [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdewoM\\_LSIjbRmc7OrTrAem1yXLSV1f7Su2BIAAJeMpBICQ-g/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdewoM_LSIjbRmc7OrTrAem1yXLSV1f7Su2BIAAJeMpBICQ-g/viewform).

<sup>11</sup> Autonomous Region Aosta Valley, accessed August 10, 2023, [https://www.regione.vda.it/statistica/osservatorio\\_economico\\_e\\_sociale/default\\_i.asp#:~:text=Per%20eventuali%20approfondimenti%20in%20merito,indirizzo%20statistica%40regione.vda](https://www.regione.vda.it/statistica/osservatorio_economico_e_sociale/default_i.asp#:~:text=Per%20eventuali%20approfondimenti%20in%20merito,indirizzo%20statistica%40regione.vda).

<sup>12</sup> ISTAT, accessed August 10, 2023, <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=11694>.

<sup>13</sup> List of initiatives accessed August 10, 2023, [https://www.regione.vda.it/Eventi\\_institutional/memoiredelemigration/calendrier\\_evenements\\_i.aspx](https://www.regione.vda.it/Eventi_institutional/memoiredelemigration/calendrier_evenements_i.aspx), accessed 10 August 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Seven episodes made by Frank Vanzetti with the title “Mémoire d’émigration,” accessed August 10, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/user47993026>.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Winter, “The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the ‘Memory Boom’ in Contemporary Historical Studies,” *Canadian Military History* 10, no. 3 (2001).

<sup>16</sup> Gribaudo G., “Nel laboratorio dello storico biografia e grande storia s'incontrano,” *L'indice dei libri del mese* 7–8 (2020): 6.

*Oltre I confine delle discipline.*<sup>17</sup> Winter's considerations on the relationship between family histories and the "times universal context"<sup>18</sup> and the consequent repercussions on museum systems have directed the action of the researchers. Gribaudo's papers highlight – also in response to criticism received from Marcello Flores<sup>19</sup> – the need for a methodological approach that combines oral memories with archival sources in a continuous dialogue that allows the data collected to be confirmed or corrected, in the awareness that oral sources have "la capacità di informarci, più ancora che sugli avvenimenti, sul loro significato . . . non solo sui fatti, ma su quello che hanno voluto dire per chi li ha vissuti e li racconta," according to the acute observation of Alessandro Portelli.<sup>20</sup>

This last observation turns out to be particularly fitting in a context such as the Aosta Valley, where – as already mentioned – the migratory fact was, throughout the twentieth century, one of the central elements of the local political dialectic, eventually influencing, in some cases, the testimonies of the people interviewed.<sup>21</sup>

This approach is confirmed by further considerations of other historians, like Bruno Bonomo or Alessandro Casellato. The former considers that "prestare attenzione al vissuto delle persone, portarne in primo piano le storie, ascoltarne magari con empatia ma sempre con spirito critico le narrazioni . . . può essere una strada maestra per affrontare le grandi questioni dell'età contemporanea,"<sup>22</sup> a judgment that is also valid for the history of Aosta Valley given the relevance of the migratory phenomenon. For his part, Casellato points out that oral history could again help the political history, "nella disponibilità a intervenire sui temi caldi del dibattito pubblico, come le migrazioni,"<sup>23</sup> a statement that, even with the dutiful adaptations, is also valid for the Aosta Valley.

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17 Gribaudo G., "I ricercatori, i soggetti e la polifonia delle voci nella storia. Oltre il confine delle discipline," *Meridiana* 100 (2021), 179–206.

18 Winter, "The Generation of Memory," 62.

19 Marcello Flores, "Storia e memorie soggettive: un sincretismo possibile? La memoria dei traumi e la storia," *L'indice dei libri del mese* 6 (2020): 5.

20 "The ability to inform us, even more than about the events, about their meaning . . . not only about the facts, but about what they meant for those who lived through them and recounts them": Alessandro Portelli, *Storie orali. Racconto, immaginazione, dialogo* (Roma: Donzelli, 2007), 11–12.

21 In this sense, the nickname "*les curés*" ('the parsons') attributed to the leaders of the Catholic-oriented emigration associations reveals the anti-clerical orientation of the emigrants who use it.

22 "Pay attention to people's experiences, bring their stories to the fore, listen to their narratives perhaps with empathy but always with a critical spirit . . . it can be a main road to addressing the great issues of the contemporary age": Bruno Bonomo, "Storia, memoria, soggettività, fonti orali: un nodo non sciolto?" *Meridiana* 106 (2023): 264.

23 "In the willingness to intervene on the hot topics of public debate, like migrations": Alessandro Casellato, "Strabismi e convergenze tra Clio e la DEA," *Lares* 85, no. 2 (2019): 345.

The workgroup also benefited from the considerations contained in the collective volume *Faire musée d'une histoire commune*.<sup>24</sup> In this work, 40 researchers and experts discuss the new layout of the *Musée national de l'immigration* of Paris. Given the objective for which the workgroup was set up, it was deemed useful to deal with an experience of research and musealization that was not only consolidated but was already being reconsidered.

In addition, some training sessions were organized with anthropologists and researchers who worked on the history and memory of emigration.<sup>25</sup> These meetings helped the interviewers in their work, both in the formulation of the questions and in the analysis of the answers.

The third part focuses on the dialectic between associations of emigrants and local political parties, to explain why, despite living abroad, the emigrants remained a constant present in local life even without considering the issue of “return emigration.” A short conclusion then opens the door to new research paths that could be explored in the study of this central phenomenon throughout the history of the Aosta Valley.

## The Multiple Migration Waves of the Aosta Valley

Aosta Valley is a small region in the north-west of Italy, which extends from the Mont-Blanc massif to the higher part of the Po Valley and is surrounded by the highest peaks of the Alps. The population was about 40,000 people after the great plague of 1630, with this figure doubling only on the eve of unification of Italy (80,000 people according to the 1861 census); it is 124,000 today, after a peak of 128,000 in 2014.<sup>26</sup> As a mountainous region, marked by the absence of plains, it has always experienced the traditional seasonal emigration that is typical of Alpine countries.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Romain Bertrand et al., *Faire musée d'une histoire commune Rapport de prefiguration de la nouvelle exposition permanente du Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

25 In particular, the working group met with experts from the Musée de la Porte Dorée, the Musée de la Vallée of Barcelonnette, the Museo regionale dell'emigrazione dei Piemontesi nel mondo of Frossasco, as well as research managers at the M9 museum in Mestre, the director of Centre d'études franco-provençales in Saint-Nicolas (Aosta), and the manager of the travelling exhibition *Ciao, Italia!*.

26 “Annuari statistici” (“Statistical Yearbook”) of Autonomous Region of Aosta Valley, accessed March 12, 2023, [https://www.regione.vda.it/statistica/pubblicazioni/annuari\\_statist\\_i.asp](https://www.regione.vda.it/statistica/pubblicazioni/annuari_statist_i.asp).

27 Pier Paolo Viazzo, “Migrazione e mobilità in area alpina: scenari demografici e fattori socio-strutturali,” *Histoire des Alpes = Storia delle Alpi = Geschichte der Alpen* 3 (1998): 37–48.



In fact, since the middle of the fourteenth century at least, the presence of several masons from the lower Valley was registered in Savoy, while during the fifteenth century, the Aosta Valley began to provide teachers to Savoy, and the seasonal emigration (which mainly concerns the agricultural community and peasants) gradually became more important. Departures for other countries were not uncommon in the dominant social classes; the cadets of noble families and cultured persons, who found it difficult in the Valley to secure a political, legal, ecclesiastical, or military career, went abroad in the hope of brilliant success.<sup>28</sup> Thus, a difference between nobles and commoners also emerged in this phenomenon; the noble emigration was often permanent whereas, until the nineteenth century, the working-class emigration assumed the characteristics of a seasonal move, with men leaving their villages in the autumn to return in the spring, in time for the busy farming period.

The activities carried out by the emigrants were varied but characterized by a specialization linked to the area they came from: clog-makers came from Ayas, hemp combers from Champorcher, cheesemakers and mountain-shepherds from Nus and Quart, and pit-sawyers from Rhêmes, among others. The communities of Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La Trinité deserve a separate mention: their inhabitants – Walser, of Germanic mother tongue – headed mainly towards Switzerland and Southern Germany, where they practiced peddling, specializing in fabrics. These peddlars were the first to turn their seasonal emigration into a permanent emigration; they made a fortune, formed an association, and settled abroad, especially in German countries, as early as the end of the seventeenth century.

In the same period, the percentage of seasonal emigrants with respect to the total population of the Valley rose to about 5 %: in 1667, the *Conseil des Commis*, the executive body of the local government, estimated there were more than 3,000 emigrants out of a total population of perhaps 60,000. Yet, according to the local authorities, permanent emigration did not involve more than 252 people in 1734, which amounts to 0.4 % of the population.<sup>29</sup>

From the fifteenth century onwards, the Valley also became a destination for immigration, welcoming groups of artisans or religious communities from different regions of the Rhine corridor, from Flanders to Franche-Comté. Since the Valley was a French-speaking area, many religious orders and congregations from Transalpine countries here founded monasteries and communities, thanks to the

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28 Jean-Pierre Ghignone, "L'émigration valdôtaine Aperçu historique," *Nouvelles du Centre d'études francoprovençales René Willien* 43 (2001): 15.

29 Ghignone, "L'émigration valdôtaine", 18.



common language. Thus, there was a community of Flemish priests and artisans in the fourteenth century,<sup>30</sup> of nuns from Savoy and Lorraine in the seventeenth,<sup>31</sup> as well as priests from various congregations who established their houses and colleges in Aosta throughout the modern age.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the Italian peninsula supplied entrepreneurs and workers specialized in specific production areas. For example, a colony of metallurgists from Bergamo was present in the Valley from the second half of the seventeenth century<sup>33</sup> while, at the end of the following century, several architects, and painters from the Sesia Valley and from Campione d'Italia, such as the Artari brothers,<sup>34</sup> settled there permanently. This period is therefore one of the key moments in the history of Valdostano migrations, as it shows contemporaneously the first examples of permanent emigration – the Walser peddlers – and numerous arrivals of permanent immigrants.

This is a unique phenomenon, a peculiarity of the Aosta Valley which became more and more significant, especially between the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, from the unification of Italy onwards, the Valley recorded a considerable increase in permanent emigration, while waves of immigration grew increasingly massive. While at the end of the nineteenth century – along with the railroad – just a few hundred people from Piedmont arrived<sup>35</sup> to monopolize the local trade, World War I brought thousands of immigrants who settled in the Valley to work in the factories built to support the war effort.

So, as Stuart J. Wolf explained in his article, the Aosta Valley is the only Italian region that experienced two waves of migration in the same period during

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30 On the Flemish presence in Aosta in the late Middle Ages, see Alessandro Celi, “La Valle d'Aosta e i Paesi Bassi una relazione plurisecolare,” in *Tra Francia e Spagna. Reti diplomatiche, territori e culture nei domini sabaudi fra Tre e Settecento*, ed. Alessandro Celi and Matthew Vester (Roma: Carocci editore 2017), 142; Raul Dal Tio, *Il chiostro della Cattedrale dal 15 al 19 secolo* (Aosta: ITLA, 2016), 36–37; Alessandra Vallet, “Calici, ostensori e reliquiari: Jean de Malines e la produzione orafa ad Aosta nella prima metà del XV secolo,” in *Corti e città: arte del Quattrocento nelle Alpi occidentali*, ed. Enrica Pagella et al. (Milano: Skira, 2006), 225–33.

31 Alessandro Celi, “La Visitation Sainte-Marie,” in *Les Institutions du Millénaire*, ed. Ezio E. Gerbore et al. (Quart: Musumeci, 2001), 329–32; Maria Costa, “La Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Lorraine,” in *Les Institutions*, 85–88.

32 Maurizio Bergamini, “Les ordres religieux,” in *Les Institutions* (Quart: Musumeci, 2001), 237–42; Maria Costa “La Congrégation du Saint-Sauveur de Lorraine,” in *Les Institutions*, 89–91.

33 Carlo Sapegno, *I Gervasone Breve storia dei mastri ferrai bergamaschi in Valle d'Aosta* (Aosta: Le château, 2002).

34 Lucia Pedrini Stanga, “Artari,” accessed March 2023, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/043744/2009-04-22>.

35 Woolf, “Emigrati e immigrati,” 628.

the last century: one of emigrants, which peaked between 1920 and 1940, and one of immigrants, which began around 1915 and lasted until the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> The first saw the departure of about 20,000 people, corresponding to at least 25 % of total residents in 1911, who moved mainly to France, a country that needed to boost its labor force after the demographic decline caused by World War I, and where the Valdostano migrants enjoyed the important advantage of knowing the local language, unlike other emigrants from the Kingdom of Italy.<sup>37</sup> The second was the arrival of some 36,000 immigrants, first from Veneto, and later from southern Italy, mainly from Calabria.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, over the last hundred years, the region has undergone major ethnic changes due to the replacement of its previous population with immigrants.

Exemplary evidence of this substitution is the fact that in 2012, the three most common family names in the regional capital, Aosta, were Mammoliti, Fazari and Giovinazzo, all originating from the province of Reggio Calabria, while the previous most popular surname (linked to a local toponym), Bionaz, only ranked sixth.<sup>39</sup> However, some of the numerous emigrants who left the Valley at the end of the nineteenth century or during the first half of the twentieth eventually returned, a few decades later. We shall now try to explain why, not only through an exploration of their reasons for coming back, but also by looking at the relationship between emigrants, their associations in France, in Switzerland, and in the United States, and the political life in the Aosta Valley.

Because the specificity of the Aosta Valley case lies within the continuous political dialectics between its citizens who are abroad and those at home, this is a context where – given the small size of the local population and the characteristics of the Statute of Autonomy granted to the Region in 1948 – any social or political phenomenon spreads rapidly. As far as politics are concerned, for example, majorities may shift swiftly even if only one or two seats change side after the election of the regional council, a result that could depend on a few dozen votes.

This premise is necessary to understand the importance of the relationship between the emigrants and those who remained at home, the reciprocal influence of both groups, and the reasons that brought some people back to the Valley after the experience of emigration. From a methodological point of view, the consider-

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<sup>36</sup> Woolf, “Emigrati e immigrati,” 627.

<sup>37</sup> Their knowledge of French also benefited Valdostano emigrants in the United States. They did not suffer many of the discriminations the other subjects of the Kingdom of Italy had to face, as they could pass for French citizens.

<sup>38</sup> Woolf, “Emigrati e immigrati,” 628.

<sup>39</sup> “I cognomi più diffusi ad Aosta?”, accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.lastampa.it/aosta/2012/04/17/news/i-cognomi-piu-diffusi-ad-aosta-br-mammoliti-fazari-e-giovinazzo-1.36486738/>.

ations presented are not based on quantitative data but (mainly) on qualitative data, such as family memories and documents collected by the workgroup as well as testimonies shared by the emigrants' descendants. It is therefore not possible to be certain of the numbers we are dealing with, except for specific cases of emigration, but the recurrence of some constants in the various narratives allow us to develop a model and an interpretative grid to distinguish and register the various types of "return."

## The Winners

The first category of "return" could be defined as that of the "winners," those who managed to earn enough money to come back home and buy a farm, where they could settle down and live, in better conditions than those they had prior to emigration.

One example of this is the family of Vittorio Berthod (1863–1943), who left his native Valtournenche for the United States in 1893, working on several farms, first in Nebraska and then in Colorado where he was joined by his wife and children (others would be born in the United States). In Colorado, Vittorio managed to accumulate a certain amount of money, thanks to the sale of land and springs to a company that intended to build a dam. He then came back to the Valley where, in 1912, he bought a large farm in Saint-Pierre that is still managed today by his descendants. The interesting element of the story is that, in turn, three of his five children opted to emigrate again, settling permanently in the United States. There, they became involved with the association that brought together the Aosta Valley emigrants in New York, "La Valdôtaine Mutual Aid Society," and which never lost contact with the homeland as long as it was in operation.

The story of the brothers Louis and Humbert Favre, Henry Fassy, and the Bougeat family are similar.

The Favre brothers made their fortune in Mexico City, first by running a farm, then a rental car company at the end of the 1910s, before returning to the Ayas valley and opening a hotel with the money they earned. Their case is interesting because it documents the transition from the exploitation of skills developed in the agropastoral context of the country of origin to those acquired in the place of emigration. Once back in the Valley, these latter skills were exploited to undertake a different activity linked to the growing tourism industry, where the availability of car transportation between railway stations and holiday resorts was crucial.

Meanwhile, Henry Fassy was a *cocher de fiacre* (the coachman of a public carriage) between the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century in Paris. With his savings, he built a house in his native village of Pont-Saint-Martin, where he returned shortly before the outbreak of World War I.

The Bougeat family emigrated in the early 1930s to the Canton of Vaud (Switzerland), where they found an already large community of Aosta Valley emigrants. They came back to the Aosta Valley at the beginning of the 1950s, when the economic situation in the Valley appeared more favourable and their accumulated savings allowed the family to find better accommodation than that which had originally prompted their departure.

## The Losers

The second category can be allocated to those whose migratory experience turned sour and who can be classified as “losers.” Most cases of this type are probably connected to the United States, for which we have a more precise statistical picture due to the smaller number of people who chose that destination.

At this point, we must stress that the widespread knowledge of the French language by the Aosta Valley population has always favored immigration to French-speaking countries and, particularly, to France, so much so that, even today, this country is the destination of choice for young emigrants from the Aosta Valley, with Switzerland coming in second, while the United Kingdom ranks third despite being the first destination choice in terms of overall Italian emigration.<sup>40</sup>

Research carried out by Enrico Tognan, and published by the *Le Flambeau*, reveals that about 3,000 people from the Aosta Valley migrated to the United States between 1850 and 1930, with a peak between 1905 and the Great War. More than half of these came back after a few years while only 15 % of them died in America.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, not all of those who came back did so because the migratory experience defeated them, but it is certainly true for some. Among these, we highlight Victor-Emmanuel Cheraz (1878–1972), who showed up at his brother’s house one day in

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<sup>40</sup> Fondazione Migrantes, *RIM – Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo 2020*, ed. Delfina Licata (Roma: Editrice Tau, 2020), 93.

<sup>41</sup> Enrico Tognan, “Les Valdôtains au Montana (Éléments pour une histoire de l’émigration Valdôtaine aux États-Unis),” in *Lo Flambò/Le Flambeau Revue du Comité des Traditions Valdôtaines* 254 (2021): 76.

1952, with a small suitcase and a cage in which he kept a bird. He had worked as a *chauffeur* at the Drake Hotel in Chicago but, when he was no longer able to drive, he found it impossible to secure an adequate pension in the States and could not rely on the support of family or friends. He therefore chose to return to his country of origin, asking for help from his remaining relatives.

## Return to End Life in the Valley

The third category can be fitted halfway between the first two and comprises those who returned at the time of retirement. Once their active life was over and they had accumulated sufficient savings, these emigrants chose to return to their homeland, to end their existence where it had begun. In this type of experience, the fact that, while living in another country, they managed to maintain some properties and, above all, the family home, plays a fundamental part. This is the consequence of various factors but above all, of the fact that in Valle d'Aosta, it is customary to divide the family heritage between all the children, instead of passing the bulk to the eldest son.<sup>42</sup> Scholars trace this practice to both Celtic heritage and Roman law, in addition to the mountain environment and consequent economic organization.

In fact, until the middle of the twentieth century, most of the population of the Aosta Valley worked in subsistence agriculture, which involved altitude shifts depending on the season. In winter, the families remained at lower altitudes and moved to higher altitudes with the warm season, to exploit the fields and meadows as the snow progressively melted.<sup>43</sup> This system implied owning houses and other structures at different altitudes and, generally, almost all families owned at least one property, while itinerant laborers or wage-earners were almost never isolated figures but always inserted in a family system, which was linked to a house and a property plot. For this reason, even if the emigrant had brothers who remained in the Valley, he would retain the right to a part of the family properties. Thus, a link with the native country was maintained and the immigrant was almost always certain that he would still have a home when he came back.

The presence of family properties constituted an important motivation for maintaining contacts with the Valley, and still does to this day: grandchildren and

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<sup>42</sup> Book II, Title XII articles II and III of *Coutumes generales du Duché d'Aoste proposées, et rédigées par écrit en l'assemblée des trois Etats, gens d'Eglise, nobles, praticiens, & coûtumiers* (Aoste: Estienne Riondet imprimeur, 1684), 247.

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Pierre Ghignone, *Civilisation valdôtaine* (Aosta: Duc, 1982), 52.

great-grandchildren of immigrants, born in another country and citizens of the latter since birth, for example, continue to visit the Valle d'Aosta precisely because they own a house here, which they may now use only for holidays but was never completely abandoned. This is the case of the Honorary Secretary General of the French Senate, Jean-Louis Hérin (born in 1952), who regularly comes to Val-tournenche where his ancestors' house is located, or that of Doris Berthod (born in 1951), niece of the aforementioned Victor Berthod, who spends her summer holidays in Saint-Pierre, where she inherited an apartment.

## The “Lovers”

Those who returned for sentimental reasons, out of love for a given person or for their native country, fit into yet another category. Among the people interviewed, some reported cases like this: a person born in France to parents from the Aosta Valley returned to the Valley for holidays during which he or she met their future husband or wife and therefore decided to settle here.

This choice is not without consequences: also, the parents, who have now become citizens of another country and intended to spend the last years of their lives there, may instead decide to follow their child and return to Italy. This is especially true when the son or daughter is the only child of the couple, with the parents tending to follow the one person who can offer them support in their old age.

Another decision linked to an emotional choice is that of those who, despite having completed their working life and acquired a certain quality of life abroad, do not intend to sever the link with the Aosta Valley. They thus move back there not only because they own the family home but also, and more precisely, because of a choice that could be defined as ideological.

Exemplary in this sense is the story of Ernestine Branche (1890–1969), as told in her autobiography *La Race qui meurt*.<sup>44</sup> Ernestine was a Romance languages teacher in colleges of the East Coast of the United States, but upon her retirement, she returned to the Valley, where she no longer had her parents. Almost all her brothers and sisters, who emigrated too, would also gradually return home to spend the last years of their life in their country of origin.

It appears clear from her autobiography that Branche actually “mythologized” the image of the Aosta Valley as she knew it before leaving for the United

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<sup>44</sup> Ernestine Branche, *La Race qui meurt*, book attached to *Lo Flambò/Le Flambeau Revue du Comité des Traditions Valdôtaines* 247 (2019).

States, at the age of 22. The interesting element of this case is the disappointment she felt as she faced the huge changes that had occurred in the Aosta Valley between the year of her departure, 1912, and the year of her definitive return, 1958, although she came home at least four or five times on vacation during the time she spent in the United States.

Her journeys from one side of the Atlantic to the other have been reconstructed and it cannot be said that she was completely unaware of the economic and social development experienced by the region between the 1930s and 1960s. Nevertheless, her disappointment was indeed severe, as revealed by the title she gave her biography. *La Race qui meurt* is borrowed from the French title of a 1925 film by George B. Seitz, *The vanishing American*, which illustrates the consequences the arrival of Europeans had on the Amerindian people, who are compared to the inhabitants of the Valley. This reference explains the tone of the writing, half-way between an elegy for a lost world and a pamphlet denouncing the betrayal of both their culture and roots by those who remained in the Valley and accepted the language and culture of the newcomers, the immigrants from Italy.

## Return to Act

The last type of return is linked to an attitude like that of Ernestine Branche, but not expressed in terms of regret and condemnation; it is rather an active commitment to a specific idea of the Aosta Valley identity. This evolution is well represented by the story of Claudine Chenuil (born in 1946), the daughter of Aosta Valley emigrants who settled in the western suburbs of Paris, at Levallois-Perret. Today this is one of the richest residential cities in France but, 100 years ago, it was a small suburban village for the working class.

In Levallois, the Aosta Valley community was particularly numerous, and its members often came from the lower part of the region (Arnad, Donnas, Perloz, Pont-Saint-Martin, Fontainemore, and Lillianes). The reason for this was that, as is frequent in migratory phenomena, a network of relatives and acquaintances among fellow villagers ensured mutual support. In addition to this, Levallois offered two interesting economic advantages; Citroën opened its second factory near Levallois as did Baron Marcel Bich, the inventor of the disposable pen bearing his (shortened!) name and of many other low-cost everyday objects. Bich's family was originally from the Aosta Valley and the businessman favored employment of people from the Valley in both companies.

Also, Levallois was located beyond the customs and excise restrictions of Paris, meaning that a series of taxes (including those related to the possession of



cars and petrol) were not due there. As a result, many garages and taxi companies, along with their mechanics and coachbuilders, moved to Levallois.

The people from Valle d'Aosta were already active as coachmen in Paris by the end of the nineteenth century and recycled themselves as *chauffeurs de taxi* or *garagistes* (mechanics), which allowed the next generation, precisely that of Claudine Chenuil, to take advantage of a more advanced school system than the Italian one and thus paved the road to other types of work, such as (in this case) becoming an actress. Claudine's story can be seen as exemplary because it is closely linked to the migrants' associations. This emigrants' daughter decided to become an actress thanks to a passion born within an initiative promoted by the *Union valdôtaine de Paris (UVP)*, the mutual aid society of Aosta Valley emigrants founded in Paris in 1897.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the young members of the UVP founded an amateur theatre company, *Le Rideau valdôtain*, of which Claudine was the last president before its dissolution at the end of the 1990s after over 40 years of activity. Meanwhile, Claudine had acquired enough skills to make acting her profession and she thus founded her own theatre troupe, the *Groupe Approches*,<sup>45</sup> which specialized mainly in French-language entertainment for schools. Therefore, she returned to Valle d'Aosta at a time when the Regional Department of Education was intensely promoting the use of French, especially focusing on a very early approach to the French language, starting from kindergarten. This way, the circle was closed: the daughter of Aosta Valley emigrants, born in an environment we could describe as proletarian or, at least, underprivileged, acquired professionalism in a very sectorial field and made it her profession, deciding to settle back in the Aosta Valley to help maintain the French-speaking identity of the region.

## The Dialectics Between the Emigration Associations and Politics

Reference to the emigration associations and the regional political decision to rely on the children of immigration in order to maintain the use of the French language in the Aosta Valley allows us to illustrate one last characteristic of the relationship between emigration and return emigration. One of the main features of the history of emigration from the Aosta Valley has been – and still is, in part –

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<sup>45</sup> Biography of Claudine accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.cieles3plumes.art/it/artisti/che-nuil-jouglet>.

the presence of many mutual aid associations among the emigrants, all of which were created between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first large wave of migration from the Aosta Valley occurred and was consolidated, in the period between the two world wars.

In addition to the aforementioned *Union valdôtaine de Paris*, there were three other associations, whose main purpose was to support the schooling of children remaining in the Aosta Valley: the *Pro Schola de Challand-Saint-Victor*, heir of *Les Challandins de Paris*, founded in 1900 but which disappeared in the 1930s; the aforementioned *Pro Schola de Champdepraz*, founded in 1919 and still active today; and, as we said before, *La Valdôtaine Aid Society* of New York, founded in 1909 and whose last representative – Oscar, one of three sons of Victor Berthod who chose the U.S.A. – died in 1992. All these associations always stayed in touch with the Valle d'Aosta and constantly intervened in the local political debate.

In the 1920s and 1930s, this involvement took the shape of a weekly newspaper published in Paris by the emigrants, *La Vallée d'Aoste*, which made considerable efforts to support the maintenance of French as a vehicular language in primary schools following the reform promoted by the fascist minister Giovanni Gentile. Afterwards, the newspaper became, albeit with some yielding, the voice of the Catholic anti-fascists and of those who called for administrative autonomy of the Aosta Valley.

This is how, during and after World War II, these associations became the place where the ideology of independence for the Aosta Valley developed and rooted.

Particularly important in these dynamics was Fidèle Charrère (1906–1991), born in Aymavilles, who emigrated to France; he was a member of the editorial staff of *La Vallée d'Aoste* but also the author of the pamphlet *Notre Pays d'Aoste*, which presented the Valley to Parisian public opinion in 1946. Charrère was the main ideologist of this group that, between 1944 and 1948, advocated the annexation of Valle d'Aosta to France. In the 1960s, Charrère became the leading promoter of the Aosta Valley associations abroad and the first president of Co. Fe.S.E.V., the *Comité fédéral des Sociétés de l'Émigration Valdôtaine*, a federal body created by the emigration associations to become the sole interlocutor of the Valle d'Aosta autonomous Region, which still supports it today with a specific proportion of the budget.

Yet why did the regional public body support these associations? There are at least three possible answers to this question, which all intertwine to form a single thread. Firstly, many of the emigrants had not abandoned their Italian citizenship, so they could vote whenever there was an election in Italy, including at re-

gional level. This meant that despite their living abroad, emigrants constituted a far from secondary component of the electorate of the Aosta Valley.

A second element was the strong communist component within these associations. The preference for the Communist Party among emigrants stemmed from the political emigration drive during fascism; numerous anti-fascists from the Aosta Valley took refuge in France and spread their ideas in working-class circles, such as Levallois. In this regard, it is significant that, between the 1960s and 1980s, the son of Aosta Valley emigrants, Parfait Jans (1926–2011), became the mayor of Levallois and a deputy for the French Communist Party in the National Assembly. The documents and testimonies collected report that in Levallois, the descendants of migrants from Valle d'Aosta constituted an association, which held a festival, the *Fête de la chèvre* (the Feast of the Goat); the main dish they served on this occasion was precisely the meat of this animal, reminding the emigrants of the place they came from. In fact, the breeding of goats and sheep was more widespread in the lower Aosta Valley, whereas cattle breeding prevailed in other areas of the region. More than a thousand people gathered for this feast and there was even a delegation of regional politicians led, of course, by those belonging to the Communist Party. On this occasion, they collected subscriptions to the weekly newspaper of the Aosta Valley communist federation, *Il lavoro – Le travail*, which is how a political newspaper in Italy came to be financed by French subscribers.

The third element linked to politics, even though less evident, was the networks of contacts and personal friendships that these emigrants and children of emigrants constructed over time. This trend has only recently received attention from historians, thanks to some apparently significant archival fonds that have become available for research.

Among other examples, the case of another member of the Jans family stands out: Marcel (died 1997) whose father was *chef de service* (stage manager) at the *Comédie-Française*. Marcel had attended his preparatory class and studied at *École Normale* alongside Georges Pompidou, to whom he wrote placidly even when the latter was prime minister of General De Gaulle, recalling their time on the school benches and the street clashes against the right-wing students, the *Camelots du Roi*, members of Charles Maurras' *Action Française*. Other children of immigration may also be mentioned in relation to important figures of the French Republic, such as the prefect of Paris Maurice Papon, often present on the other occasion that brought together the Aosta Valley emigrants in Paris, the *Arbre de Noël*, the Christmas party organized for the first time by *abbé* Petigat in 1920, which is still today the main meeting occasion for the *Union Valdôtaine de Paris*, the mutual aid society of Valdostan emigrants in French capital.

The proximity between children of emigrants and high-ranking French figures explains, or rather constitutes, the background of dialectics between outgoing and return emigration of the Aosta Valley. As mentioned, this return was essentially supported, from the outset, by the possibility of maintaining a base in the valley – a house, for example – but the real driving force was the dialogue maintained throughout the twentieth century between the emigrants, the population, and the authorities of Valle d'Aosta.

## Temporary Conclusions and New Research

With the beginning of the new millennium, the sociological and political foundations of the situation, described as it was in the twentieth century, have gradually changed. The progressive disappearance of first generations of emigrants and that of mass political parties in Italy after the end of the Cold War, the loosening of family ties, and the changes in economic organization as well as in daily life requirements have contributed to significantly changing the role of migrants in the contemporary Aosta Valley.

However, as evidenced by the *Rencontre Valdôtaine*, we can still find the annual summer meeting between the local population and the emigrants who return to the homeland for their holidays.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the first cases of a new return emigration are recorded; young people, who left during the last 20 years to study or to work, have decided to return for the most varied reasons, from the need to look after elderly parents to new employment opportunities.

These latter cases are worthy of study, together with the new emigration wave as a whole and an aspect of twentieth century emigration that, so far, has not attracted the attention of researchers: emigration from the Valley to other Italian regions. The demographic preponderance of emigration to France, as well as some political rhetoric – which have long favored ties with the *République* and other French-speaking countries – have until now hindered a thorough analysis of the movements of Aosta Valley citizens towards Ivrea, Turin, Rome, and other Italian locations.

Therefore, these aspects of the Aosta Valley emigration of the past, as well as the dynamics of the most recent emigration, which began in the early 2000s in a context decidedly different from that of the last century, remain to be explored. Sped up by technological development, work mobility has become a necessity, al-

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<sup>46</sup> Regione autonoma Valle d'Aosta. "Rencontre Valdôtaine," accessed March 12, 2023, [https://www.regione.vda.it/Eventi\\_istituzionali/manifestazioni/rencontre/default\\_i.asp](https://www.regione.vda.it/Eventi_istituzionali/manifestazioni/rencontre/default_i.asp).

most a norm of daily life, although cases of multiple displacements were quite frequent even in the past; after all, the aforementioned Favre brothers from Ayas, for example, did not end up in Mexico City directly from their country of origin but rather after spending some time in Chicago, where they worked as plumbers and thermo-hydraulics.

The element to bear in mind, however, is the persistence of political and emotional ties to their region of origin that, today still, characterizes the Aosta Valley emigrants and their descendants, a basic element in making the decision to return to the Valley even after living abroad for one or two generations.

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