



"The Irish and Italian roots" of the New York Police Department.

Paul Moses (January 05, 2015)



It's true enough that Italian Americans have deep roots in the NYPD, but therein lies another story: how they achieved acceptance after years of tense relations with police

A New York Times story in December on the funerals of Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, two police officers assassinated in Brooklyn, referred to "the Irish and Italian roots" of the New York Police Department. It's true enough that Italian Americans have deep roots in the NYPD, but therein lies another story: how they achieved acceptance after years of tense relations with police.

I encountered this story as I researched my upcoming book, *An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians*. Newspapers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered many accounts of tension and distrust between the police and the minority community of the



day—Italian immigrants. We can hear their echo in today's news of frayed relations between police and minority communities in Ferguson, Mo., New York and elsewhere.

From the Italians' point of view, police not only failed to protect their community, but when they did act, the criminal justice system was stacked against them. "When a murder cannot be unraveled the police always find that 'an Italian-looking tramp' was seen in the neighborhood, or, 'a knife was found resembling an Italian stiletto,'" Italian American journalist Gino C. Speranza wrote in 1904. ". . . A number of lawyers, when assigned by the Court to defend Italians, induce their clients, if they do not force them, to plead guilty."

Part of the solution was greater diversity in the criminal justice system, and Italian community leaders called time and again for more Italian American cops to be hired. They also pushed for Italians to be appointed as prosecutors and judges.

From the police point of view, the Italians were uncooperative and prone to violence. Many agreed that the problem was not with the criminal justice system, but the Italians themselves. "The trouble now is that an Italian criminal at once seeks refuge behind racial and national sympathy, and many of his countrymen, otherwise honest, believe it a sort of patriotic duty to shield him from the officers of the law," The Times editorialized.

We can sense the undercurrent of this police-community bitterness in the 1899 case of a mentally unstable Italian saloonkeeper named Michael Farrelli who shot a popular Irish American officer in East Harlem, 25-year-old Patrick O'Keefe. Farrelli opened fire on O'Keefe as he prepared to write up a violation of the law barring sale of liquor on Sundays. After police arrested him, thousands of people surrounded the police station, trying to break through to lynch Farrelli. The same occurred when Farrelli was arraigned, but this time some Italians from East Harlem came out to show their support for police, hoping to avoid retaliation and demonstrate that their community was law-abiding.

"Several outrages by Italians have occurred within a short time in that part of the city, and the feeling of the citizens is bitter," The Times commented. "The police say that some day, if the Italians do not curb their powers for evil, there will be a large-sized lynching bee in Harlem, and the affairs that claimed Italian victims in the South will be tame in comparison."

That was no idle threat, as the lynching of 11 Italians cleared in the 1890 slaying of New Orleans Police Chief David Hennessy was still fresh in mind. Indeed, police claimed to reporters that Farrelli had ties to the men who allegedly killed Hennessy in New Orleans, essentially alleging that he was connected to the Mafia.

As it turned out, Farrelli was no conspirator. He was simply deranged. O'Keefe, though blinded, survived to testify against him. The saloonkeeper was convicted and sentenced to ten years in Sing Sing. He was then judged insane and moved to an asylum.

It's not exactly parallel, but the case reminds me a little of the debate over the motives of Ismaaiyl Brinsley, the mentally unstable man who murdered officers Liu and Ramos as they sat peacefully in their patrol car and then committed suicide. Was he acting on an anti-police agenda, as early reports suggested? Or was the violent conclusion to his life "probably less political and more accidental than initially portrayed," as The Times said his mother and friends maintained?

Many news reports have noted the fact that Liu was Chinese American and that Ramos had roots in Puerto Rico—a sign of how much more diverse the Police Department has become, in part due to the efforts of former Commissioner Ray Kelly. They were, as Governor Andrew Cuomo said in a eulogy at Ramos's funeral, "members of a force with officers from over 50 different countries who speak 64 different languages who protect a city with people literally from every country on the globe living in it."

Some 105 years before, the funeral of another police officer was a landmark in the long and bumpy road toward acceptance of Italians in the NYPD and the city at large. A massive cross-section of the city joined Italians in mourning the death of Detective Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino, who became



perhaps the greatest hero in the department's fabled history after he was slain while on a mission in Sicily in 1909.

In his eulogy at St. Patrick's Old Cathedral on Mott Street, Monsignor Michael J. Lavelle, a son of Irish immigrants later to be honored by King Victor Emmanuel for aiding Italians in New York, praised Petrosino as hero and martyr. "May it teach to the rest of the people the debt and the love that we owe to these strangers on our shores, so that we may not wrongly discriminate," he declared. "Let us make every one as welcome in our hearts as they are under our flag."

Likewise, Governor Cuomo preached unity at Officer Ramos's funeral. "At the end of the day, we are one," Cuomo said. "One people, one state, one community, one family. Somos uno. Somos uno. Somos uno." We are one.

Paul Moses is a professor of journalism at Brooklyn College/CUNY. His book *An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians* will be released by NYU Press in June.

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