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Notes for Remarks

“Some Reflections on Italian Canadians”

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INTRODUCTION

When Corrado Paina asked me to offer some remarks this evening, we both thought it appropriate for me to share some reflections on Italian Canadians especially since we are celebrating the sesquicentennial of Canada. Now I am not 150 years old but I am over one half that age and have witnessed great changes for Italian Canadians – much for the better.

I thought I'd give a brief overview of the settling in Canada of Italians interspersed with personal experiences of my family and myself. My personal experiences are not meant to be unique but simply to illustrate the events that occurred and the transformation that has taken place. Now for a little history.

I. EARLIEST ITALIAN CONTACT WITH NORTH AMERICA

Italians were among the earliest Europeans to have visited and settled in what is now Canada. Not counting Columbus, the earliest Italian contact with North America was Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), an Italian navigator from Venice, who in 1497 explored the coasts of Newfoundland on behalf of England and King Henry VII.¹ In 1524, Giovanni de Verrazzano charted the Atlantic coast of North America between the Carolinas and Newfoundland, on behalf of France. Also under the patronage of the Kings of Portugal and Spain, the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci is another early Italian explorer after whom America is named. Why so many Italians? They were great navigators in those times whose skills were practised on the Mediterranean Sea. But Italy unlike England, France, Spain and Portugal was not a colonizer nation mainly so it seems because it was not on the Atlantic Coasts. Other early

¹ Frank Iacobucci, "A Tribute To Giovanni Caboto"

Italians in Canada included those serving as mercenaries in the military of New France, or later in the British army during the war of 1812. Some of these latter mercenaries elected to stay, accepting lots granted by Britain in Quebec’s Eastern townships and Southern Ontario.²

Montreal was home to one of the country’s earliest Italian colonies. In the early to mid-19th Century, there were a significant number of Italians living in the city, many working in the hotel trade and others as street musicians.³ Overall, however, the numbers of Italian-Canadians remained very small—it is estimated that, by 1881, there were approximately 2000 people of Italian origin living in Canada. ⁴ Immigration from Italy to Canada gradually accelerated in the late 19th Century, as large numbers of Italian peasants began emigrating to Canada, the United States, South America and Western Europe. By the turn of the century, the number of people of Italian origin living in Canada had grown to almost 11,000. ⁵

II. FIRST BIG WAVE OF ITALIAN IMMIGRATION: 1900-1914

Between 1900 and the outbreak of World War I, almost 120,000 Italians entered Canada. Remarkably, about 80% of them were young males, most of whom went to work in seasonal and heavy labour jobs in mines, lumber-camps, building projects and especially the railways. Included in this group were one of my paternal aunts and her husband who went to Vancouver in I believe 1912. In Canada, a major part of these workers were absorbed into the two principal railroad companies, the Canadian Pacific and the Grand Trunk.⁶ These men came

² Canadian Encyclopedia, “Italian Canadians”,
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/italian-canadians/>

³ Kenneth Bagnell, *Canadese: A Portrait of the Italian-Canadians*, p.9

⁴ Canadian Encyclopedia, “Italian Canadians”,
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/italian-canadians/>

⁵Canadian Encyclopedia, “Italian Canadians”,
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/italian-canadians/>

⁶ Franc Sturino, *Forging the Chain: A Case Study of Italian Migration to North America, 1880-1930*, p. 100

predominantly from Italy's rural South, especially the regions of Calabria, Abruzzo and Sicily, beginning a trend that would continue with successive waves of Italian immigration to Canada. Friuli also joined the Southern regions as a major source of Italian emigration from Italy. As most of you know, factors inducing emigration from these regions included overpopulation, the fragmentation of peasant farms, poverty, poor health and education and political dissatisfaction.⁷

The largest center of Italian immigration in Canada remained Montreal, where the 1911 census recorded over 7000 people of Italian origin. Toronto followed, with over 4600. In Toronto, the College Street Colony emerged as Toronto's major Little Italy, bounded by Manning Ave in the East, Crawford in the West, College in the North, and Dundas in the South. While some of these urban immigrants worked as tradesmen, artisans or merchants, most were working physically demanding, dirty and dangerous jobs. The most common occupations were construction, excavation, brick and cement work.⁸

In addition to Montreal and Toronto, significant numbers of Italians went to northern Ontario during this period. Hundreds went to the twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William (now amalgamated as the city of Thunder Bay), filling jobs in freight yards, grain elevators, and coal docks. Between 1906 and 1909, Italian labourers in the twin cities were involved in numerous large-scale strikes in protest of the poor pay, long hours and dangerous working conditions to which they were subjected.⁹

Many of these immigrants were more properly labelled 'sojourners' than immigrants, as they did not anticipate settling in North America permanently. As the Canadian Superintendent of Immigration observed in 1910 "They [Italians] are usually looking for work as

⁷ Canadian Encyclopedia, "Italian Canadians", <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/italian-canadians/>

⁸ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, p. 109

⁹ Bagnell, *Canadese*, pp 23-30.

railway navies and are to a great extent birds of passage and have no desire to make Canada a permanent home¹⁰ Gradually, increasing numbers made the transition from sojourner to permanent settler.

Like many immigrant communities before and after them and like many other countries, the Italians were victims of widespread prejudice and discrimination. In the popular consciousness of the time, immigrant—and specifically Italian—quarters were usually associated with dirt, diseases, overcrowding, ignorance, immorality and vice. In 1911 Toronto's medical officer of Health, writing in the *Globe*, suggested Italian neighbourhoods represented a threat to the rest of the city, noting the "congested districts of unsanitary, overcrowded dwelling which are a menace to public health, affording hotbeds for germination of disease, vice and crime".¹¹ The Port Arthur Daily News had described the Italian working-class as "a horde of ignorant and low-down mongrel swashbucklers and peanut vendors"¹². This sentiment found expression among Anglo-Saxons across the political spectrum: even Canadian socialist icon J.S. Woodsworth warned in his book *Strangers Within Our Gates* that "we must see to it that the civilization and ideals of South-eastern Europe are not transplanted to and perpetuated on our virgin soil"¹³.

III. INTERWAR PERIOD AND WORLD WAR II: ITALIAN IMMIGRATION DRIES UP

Immigration was slowed by the outbreak of World War I, and remained low throughout the inter war period and the Depression. My father went to Vancouver from Abruzzo in 1922 and my mother from Calabria in 1925, well before Pier 21 in Halifax. When Mussolini

¹⁰ Sturino, *Forging the Chain*, p. 94

¹¹ From Bagnell, *Canadese*, p.51

¹² From Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 26

¹³ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 42

joined the Axis powers in World War II, Canadian hostility towards fascism became directed at Italian Canadians, who were designated 'enemy aliens'. As enemy aliens, my mother and father had to report monthly to the RCMP. When I was 5 or 6 years old, I remember going with my mother on some of the monthly visits. Many men lost jobs (including my father who had been working at the airport), had their businesses vandalized, and found their civil liberties suspended under the War Measures Act.¹⁴ Most infamously, hundreds of Italian-Canadians were interned for years at Camp Petawawa in Ontario. Included in this group was my older brother's father-in-law who was in Petawawa for over two years and lost his bakery business in Vancouver. While a minority of these men had connections to fascist groups in Canada, most were not: the large majority of naturalized Canadians were not disloyal to Canada, and most simply had (often tenuous) connections to various lodges and clubs of the Italian-Canadian community.¹⁵ For example, my brother's father-in-law joined a fascist club because he was selling Panini from his bakery to club members. Of course they were not given any due process whatsoever in the loss of their liberty. The interned men had to work on roads, or deep in woods clearing brush and cutting timber, for which they were paid 20 cents a day; as I said many lost their businesses, and letters from home were censored and no family visits.¹⁶ Among those interned was James Franceschini, Canada's first Italian-born millionaire, who had made his fortune after founding Dufferin Construction in 1918. Franceschini ultimately had many of his properties confiscated by the government.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 78

¹⁵ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 78

¹⁶ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p.82

¹⁷ Bagnell, *Canadese*, pp 65 & 87

Because of the stigma associated with Italian heritage during this period, many Italian-Canadians chose to anglicize their names: Rossini became Ross, Riccioni became Richards, Giacomo became Jackman.¹⁸

IV. SECOND BIG WAVE: 1950-1970

As Italy joined the ranks of liberal democracies and was integrated into Western security arrangements following WWII, the barrier to further Italian immigration to Canada was removed. The number of Italian immigrants to Canada exploded, with approximately half a million arriving between 1950 and 1970. The large numbers were a result of ‘chain migration’: Italian families, immediate and extended, were large and links extended to neighbouring villages. Thus, as one writer notes, an entire *comune* would sometimes come, over the course of a decade or two, from Italy to a new home in Canada.¹⁹ Each year tens of thousands of Italian immigrants moved through the port of Halifax, with as many as two-thirds bound for Toronto, which overtook Montreal as the largest Italian-Canadian community, and ultimately one of the largest settlements of Italians living outside Italy.²⁰ A great many went to work on the Gardiner expressway, or other construction/labour jobs in the Toronto suburbs, since Italians were shunned by British or Irish dominated unions, and not recruited to work in prized downtown Toronto jobs.²¹

Like the immigrants in the Northern Ontario twin cities at the turn of the 20th century, Toronto’s Italian labourers played a significant role in labour rights struggles. A major turning point was 1960: a tunnel was being dug under the Don River along the route of the aqueduct intended to serve the then burgeoning urbanization of North York. The tunnel

¹⁸ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 101

¹⁹ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p.114

²⁰ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 129

²¹ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 142

collapsed during a night shift, killing five Italian workers. Only two months later, in a dockyard near Weston Road, an Italian digger was buried alive in a landslide.²² These incidents came to be seen as emblematic of the mistreatment of Italian workers, leading to major strikes and demonstrations that were covered by the English-speaking press as the “revolt of the immigrants”²³ Ultimately the labour agitation resulted in to government commissions and reviews of lax labour regulations, and ultimately embryonic collective agreements.

In addition to Toronto, the Italian immigrants would go to established Italian communities in Montreal, Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay. Large numbers also made their way to British Columbia, where 40,000 had settled by the late 1950s, including 20,000 in Vancouver, with men at work in lumbering, mining, fishing and farming. In contrast to the general pattern of Italian immigrants coming largely from the South, the Italian community in B.C. comes mostly from the North (Trentino, Friuli, Veneto).²⁴

Men ostensibly arrived under one year contracts for hard physical labour, but the great majority in fact were coming as permanent settlers, later sponsoring their wives, children and other relatives. Family “chain migration” from Italy was so extensive that by 1958, Italy surpassed Britain as a source for immigrants. In fact, the Italians were marked as the largest ethnic group in the nation after the English, French and Germans.²⁵ This massive wave of Italian immigration only slowed when new regulations were introduced in 1967 that based admissibility on universal criteria, and confined family sponsorship to a limited range of relatives.

Unfortunately, Italian immigrants continued to be the subjects of discrimination and prejudice.. As Bagnell notes, even in the 1960s, “so many decades after the ignominy of the

²² Alberto Di Giovanni, *Italo-Canadians: Nationality and Citizenship*, p. 35

²³ Di Giovanni, *Italo-Canadians*, p. 36

²⁴ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 131

²⁵ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 129

war years, the derision lingered, less coarse or explicit, but fixed and ingrained”.²⁶ One of the more endemic (and harmful) manifestations of this prejudice found expression in the education system, where vocational guidance counsellors steered Italian-Canadian children away from university academic study and instead to trades and clerical jobs (euphemistically labelled ‘streaming’).²⁷

Here I inject another personal episode. In 1957 while at UBC I was an undergraduate in Commerce. I was asked by my Economics Statistics professor (Tadek Matuzewski) what I wanted to do in life. As I had done well in his statistics course, I was one of his lab assistants. When I told him I wanted to be a lawyer, he said I shouldn’t because “I didn’t have the right name.” He suggested we go talk to John Deutsch, then Chairman of the Political Economy Department and later President of Queen’s University. Fortunately Deutsch said Canada “was changing” and I should go to law school if that is what I wanted. But I still wondered why would anyone’s last name be a barrier to what career he or she wished to pursue.

Now let me come to Italian Canadians in contemporary Canada.

V. PROFILE OF ITALIAN-CANADIANS TODAY

According to the 2011 census (the most recent statistics I found) , just under 1.5 million Canadians claim full or partial Italian ancestry.²⁸ About 60% of Italian-Canadians live in Ontario, 21% and Quebec and 10% in B.C. By far the largest concentration of Italians immigrants is in Toronto, where there are nearly half a million people of Italian origin. The second largest community is Montreal, where there are over a quarter million. As a percentage

²⁶ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 177

²⁷ Bagnell, *Canadese*, p. 178

²⁸ Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Data=Count&SearchText=canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

of population, the Canadian community with the highest proportion of Italian residents is Sault Ste. Marie, where fully 20% of residents claim Italian heritage. In descending order, other large concentrations of Italian-Canadians are found in the following communities: Vancouver, Hamilton, St.Catherines-Niagara, Ottawa, Windsor, Calgary, Edmonton, London, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Oshawa.

Of the Italian immigrants who came following WWII, over 75% of the first generation were employed in low-income occupations. However this changed dramatically with the second and subsequent generations. Already by the 1980s, the children of Italian immigrants had achieved a level of higher education equal to the national average. Today, Italian-Canadians are well-represented across professions, especially business, academics, education, politics, law, and medicine, and have a higher rate of homeownership than the national average.²⁹ While certain stereotypes persist (e.g., that Italian-Canadians are indelibly associated with the mobsters), the level of prejudice against Italian-Canadians has lessened dramatically as they have advanced and become fully integrated into broader Canadian society.

As a small example of the transformation of both the attitudes and engagement of Canadians of Italian origin, I point out that I was appointed successively by then Prime Minister Mulroney to be Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General of Canada, Chief Justice of the Federal Court of Canada and a Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. I mention this for two reasons. First, without the outstanding record of contributions and achievement of Italo-Canadians I don't believe I would have been appointed to those positions. Second, the appointments reflect the importance of diversity and equality as a reality for Canada. As Italian Canadians we must all do our part to ensure that Canada continues to go forward not backward in that respect. To conclude, I wish to say that I profoundly cherish my Italian ancestry and I

²⁹ Canadian Encyclopedia, "Italian Canadians",
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/italian-canadians/>

am immensely proud of my fellow Italian Canadians. And on July 1 I will celebrate not only Canada's 150th but also those Italians who came to our country to contribute to its growth and development and paved the way for us and succeeding generations.

Thank you.