

Italian Immigration at Pier 21 By Carrie-Ann Smith

For many Italian-Canadians, Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was their introduction to a new country. They came seeking adventure, employment, and greater opportunities for their children. Many newcomers were happy just to be off the ship after a long and harrowing crossing; others were heartbroken as precious homemade food was confiscated by Customs Officers. Nervous and excited at the same time, no matter how much they had heard about Canada no one knew exactly what awaited them. Only that it was a second chance, an opportunity, and for better or for worse everyone seems to remember the moment that they

stepped into the shed and knew for certain that they were not in Italy anymore. Bruna De Giuseppe's moment of truth arrived when she, then a teenager, realized that she could not pick up Italian stations on her portable radio. It sounds like a small matter but to her it meant the end of a way of life. Her parents had made a decision to emigrate and now it was up to the whole family to stick it out, stick together and thrive in Canada.



Italians had been arriving in Canada since the late 1800s. Between 1861 and 1900, seven million people had emigrated from Italy, traditionally radiating towards three major areas; western Europe, South America, and North America. The United States did not open its doors to large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe until the 1880s, but accepted nearly four million Italian immigrants between 1880 and 1920. Canada, experiencing an industrial boom, also became a popular destination. The early Italian presence in Canada was generally concentrated in Montreal although smaller communities soon began to appear in other large Canadian cities.

The early 1920's witnessed an increase in Italian immigration numbers, but it was only after the Second World War that it became a major movement. The tremendous expansion of the Canadian labour market in the post-war era contributed to many Italians decision to emigrate. Their decision was also influenced by the policy of sponsorship enacted by the Canadian government whereby prospective immigrants could be admitted to the country as long as residing relatives agreed to act as sponsors and assume financial responsibility for the newcomers during the period of their settlement. Of all immigrant groups, Italians made the most of this system. More than 90% of the Italians, who entered Canada between 1946 and 1967 were sponsored by Canadian relatives.

Gaetano Rossi returned to Pier 21 last summer to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival in Canada. His nephew, Rocco Rossi, joined him and wrote an account of his uncle's return as well as his immigration story. The following quote illustrates the significance of the sponsorship program and its legacy:

“Despite the hardships, he endured and grew to love his new home and to build a family and a life here. He was the one who encouraged and sponsored others to come to Canada including my father. Today there are over 300 people in the Greater Toronto area of *nzanese* descent who can thank my uncle for, directly or indirectly, their being here. Countless others who are touched by those 300 labourers, teachers, lawyers, professors, pharmacists, entrepreneurs, students, fellow citizens and exceptionally cute babies all owe him a debt of gratitude.”

Unlike earlier waves, Italian immigration to Canada after the Second World War was permanent in nature and was generally composed of families rather than single men. The majority of these immigrants were drawn from the rural and southern areas of Italy and were destined for the province of Ontario, although the prairie provinces and British Columbia also experienced a dramatic increase in their Italian populations.



All immigrants brought little pieces of home with them: a favoured book or snapshot, a family bible. The Italian immigrants that passed through Pier 21 brought all of these things but in addition to them was food and drink. Wine, beautiful breads, cheeses and homemade salami or prosciutto were comfort food as well as gifts for family members already

settled in Canada. Stories about the sweet white bread that the children refused to eat had made their way back to Italy and Italian immigrants were coming prepared. Here Maria Rosaria Pagano describes her adventure at customs:

“We had to find our luggage, call a Customs Officer to have him check them and have him mark it as having been checked by Customs. I had put a bag of beans in one of my trunks. I remember seeing beans on the floor around the luggage and thinking that they looked like the beans I had put in my trunk. Sure enough, when I found my trunk I saw that it was damaged and my beans had leaked out all over the place. I remember people saying "Where are all these beans coming from?"”

A passenger who sailed out of Italy aboard the Conte Biancamano described the sights and smells of the crowded Immigration Hall:

“Behind long tables immigration personnel directed the newcomers luggage to be put along one wall. Food belonging to the immigrants was confiscated and piled up in a heap in the middle of the hall. Rays of sunshine painted a colourful still life of that mountain of sausages, loaves of bread, wheels of cheeses, fruits and other perishable items. We had only two suitcases and two handbags. We were allotted to the first group to be seated on rows of chairs. While we were waiting, our vivacious fellow immigrants entertained us: Children were running around the food pile in the center, Girls were fetching little ones who were lost, Mothers tried to clam down crying children, while holding babies in their arms. Men were carrying and pushing luggage, calling to each other across the hall. All these men gesticulated with both hands, trying to make themselves understood by the officials.

Finally all immigrants were seated and all was quiet. An immigration officer greeted and welcomed us to Canada. My English was not good enough to understand the exact wording. But the atmosphere of that moment will always be in my mind; everybody was looking up and listening to the speaker, while the rays of the late afternoon sun filled the hall.”

The numbers of Italian immigrants remained high well into the 1960s but by then more and more immigrants were choosing to fly to Canada rather than make the North Atlantic crossing by ship. Canadian immigration officers were splitting their time between meeting ships at Pier 21 and meeting planes at the airport. It was finally decided that



the number of immigrants arriving by sea was not large enough to justify the facility and, on March 28, 1971, almost exactly forty-three years from its official opening, Pier 21 closed.

During the Pier 21 years 471,940 individuals came to Canada from Italy making them the third largest ethnic group to immigrate between 1928 and 1971. Pier 21 National Historic Site reopened to the public on Canada Day 1999. The museum celebrates the immigrant experience and strives to tell the stories of immigrants through multimedia exhibits and films. It is the last standing immigration shed in Canada and has become a touch-stone for thousands of Italians who chose Canada. Last summer Bruna De

Giuseppe returned to Pier 21 for the first time since she was a frustrated teenager stepping off the Saturnia

and attempting to tune in an Italian radio station. She did not expect to be moved, to feel an emotional connection to an old building, but she did. As Bruna explored the exhibit she remembered, not only the crossing and arrival but what it meant, her parents bravery and their sacrifice.



Pier 21 is operated by a small non-profit Society that, in addition to educating the public about the significance of immigration, is motivated by a desire to provide Pier 21 alumni with a place to return to. Some sit quietly reflecting on everything that has happened since they were last there, others talk excitedly and relay tales of seasickness and shipboard adventures. Everyone who immigrated through its doors has a story to tell. It

was just a beat-up immigration shed on the Halifax waterfront, but for thousands of Italian Canadians it marked a new beginning - the way that all great stories start.