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Papaiz
Italian Immigrant
Castel Felice
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'My Pier 21 Story, or How I Vomited My Way From Tajedo to Timmins'



There are many things I remember about the 'old country'. However one of my most vivid recollections is that of my father bursting into the kitchen on a bright and sunny day announcing excitedly and determinedly, 'Andiamo in

America' ('We are going to America'). What a grand pronouncement filled with such promise!

Now, my father had told us a lot of stories about America (he seemed to particularly miss 'flapjacks' and 'apple pie'). In 1927, as a teenager, he had immigrated to Canada from Italy along with his father and two brothers. They headed straight for Manitoba where my father worked on a cattle farm for a year (my grandfather would darn his sons' socks at night in the barn), laid track for the Hudson Bay railroad to Churchill for two years (saw bears that were white), worked in a smelter in Flin Flon ('claimed the heat 'cooked' his eyeballs and ruined his eyesight), drove wagons in lumber camps (whence his fondness for pancakes), became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1934 and eventually, ended up in Schumacher (later, Timmins), Ontario working as a motorman at the Hollinger gold mine. He remained there until 1947 when he returned to his native land to settle down with an Italian wife.

In Italy my father resumed the hard agricultural life he had known prior to his departure for Canada. He married in 1948. Two daughters arrived shortly after, the arrival of the second somewhat of a disappointment. Then, after years of back-breaking labour on the farm, a failed crop, the

birth of a son for whom a future had now to be securely provided and an escalating family feud had made him decide to return to Canada. It was the summer of 1955. I was four years old. After my father's thrilling announcement I remember running to the field behind our house to climb the big hill there. I lay on my back to look at the clouds in the sky vigorously trying to imagine what America would be like.

Many, many months later in May 1956, the interminable paperwork finally in order (there seemed to be endless visits to government offices), my father, Erminio Papaiz, my mother, Ida Gerometta, my sister, Enrichetta (six years old), my brother, Bruno (one year old), and I, Maria Luisa (just turned five) left our village, Tajedo di Chions, in the Veneto/Friuli region of Italy and drove in someone's very crammed car to Genoa. (My mother had even had a perm - first time - because my father said that was the way women wore their hair in America). It was my first family trip in an automobile (my family's mode of transportation had been a motorcycle) and to my, or perhaps, more importantly, to the other passengers' chagrin, my introduction to motion sickness. It made an unpleasant lasting impression on all concerned.

On May 2, 1956, after I had been retrieved unharmed following a backwards fall onto the conveyor belt carrying our trunks down to the cargo hold, we boarded the Castel Felice in Genoa and commenced our transatlantic crossing stopping to pick up passengers in Naples. Unfortunately, my memories of the voyage are primarily negative (the 'castel' was anything but 'felice' for me). I was seasick all the time or so it seemed. Being an extremely shy child I refused to spend my days with the other children in what appeared to be a day-care or play centre (my sister was happy to go). Also, children ate at different sittings than their parents. Of course, I was having none of that. My mother would smuggle me under my parent's dining table while the adults ate and would pass me oranges under the table as they were the only food I could keep down. There were drills for donning lifejackets and abandoning ship (a happy thought). Finally, my mother almost lost her thumb when it became caught in our cabin door.

On the meager positive side the porthole in our cabin offered two images that were magical for a five year old and that still endure in my mind - that of an armada of tiny white sailboats slowly vanishing in the distance, the last one seeming to take forever to disappear on the horizon and of a looming, gargantuan Rock of Gibraltar. Years later I also learned from my parents of another very fortunate aspect to our journey. It appears we had originally been booked to sail on the Andrea Doria in July of 1956. However, the unexpected deaths, in rather quick succession, of my two grandmothers and my father's exasperation with an increasingly bitter family feud that portended dire consequences

prompted him to advance our departure date. In short, we were spared the catastrophic fate of the ship bound for New York. And that was certainly a good thing.

So, Halifax it was. We landed at Pier 21 on May 13, 1956. It was a cold, rainy day. Everything about the arrival was gray - the weather, the city, our mood. My mother, still mourning the very recent loss of her own mother, took one look at that depressing port city and wept. Her home in Italy was so beautiful and this city of the 'promised land' was so ugly. When we disembarked, there was an ice-cream vendor strategically stationed at the bottom of the gangplank just to its right. My sister and I begged for cones but my father said they cost too much. We eventually entered a cavernous hall where we waited for a train which took us to Montreal and provided me with another disheartening revelation. Where I had been sick on the ship, I was now mortified to discover that I could be equally ill on the train. We changed trains in Montreal and arrived in Timmins on May 15, 1956 in the middle of a blinding snowstorm – a very dramatic ending to our voyage but not a very auspicious beginning to our new life in Canada.

Fifty years later I know my father made a good decision, even for his daughters, although he came close to reversing it yet again a few years after our arrival. In her new country my mother developed such severe and debilitating migraine headaches that my father felt his only recourse was to return to Italy. (I can still hear the sorrowful refrain from one of my mother's favourite records, 'Terra staniera che malinconia...' which underscored those early years). Fortunately, another son, Piergiorgio, was born in 1960 and with his arrival my mother's headaches stopped. So that was it. We were now firmly rooted in Canada, in America. And, yes, in the end this land would more than live up to its grand promise.

Additional note: Presently, the author only suffers from motion sickness on long train trips. However, she has refused to set foot on a ship since 1956.