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Bottos
Italian Immigrant
Conte Biancamano
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CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



On August 29, 1953, I left Genova and boarded the ship Conte Biancamano. I was coming from a small town, Codroipo, Friuli (north east of Venice). I was on my way to meet my parents in Hamilton. They had been working in Canada since 1949. (I had not seen my parents since I was thirteen years old).



The war had destroyed our home and all of our possessions. Even the furniture factory was bombed where my father had worked as a furniture maker. I was seventeen years old and I was full of curiosity, to come and see

where my parents were living and what they were doing.

The passage through the Mediterranean began in Genova with stops in Naples, Balneari Island, the Strait of Gibraltar and Lisbon. Travellers on the ship were mostly Italians with the majority of people being in their twenties.

The first part of the voyage was full of sun and the sea was so beautiful that it helped to distract me from the sadness of leaving my home. My seventeen years of life in Italy became smaller on the horizon: farther and farther away, as my adventure unfolded before me.

Slowly, things changed. After two days of sailing on the Atlantic Ocean, there was a drastic change in the weather: high waves and rough sea. For days all



we saw was just water and more water. Seasickness set in, however, people were still full of hope and with positive spirits. There was joy, excitement and merrymaking with accordion music and singing to offset the seasickness. I have a vivid memory of the strong, pungent smell of the open ocean. I think that's why, to this day, a cruise ship vacation does not appeal to me!

After eight days of sailing, we heard some guys screaming "The birds, the birds!" That meant land was near. After a few hours, from far away, we saw the coast. Everybody was very happy and cheering.



When I arrived in Halifax, I recall seeing bare, bleak hills. I remember looking at the port, feeling some sadness and disappointment. It was so grey 'no flowers' just the cool, damp autumn air.

After we got off the ship, the government officials were managing the lines. The officials were polite but not smiling. They handled business in a very serious but courteous manner.

The male officials wore blue uniforms; women wore the same uniform but also had a strange hat that I'd never seen before. I know now that these officials were the Salvation Army. I remember sitting in a big hall, waiting to be called to have my passport stamped. None of us in our group spoke

English. We were following the line. There were no smiles, we all had that look of confusion in our eyes. We didn't know where to go.

After my passport was stamped, I entered another big room where on the floor, there were suitcases and trunks all over. After I found my single trunk, a customs official came over through and checked my things (generally; looked them over).

I saw one official going through the trunks of one woman (in the photo) who had three small children and he was pulling out very black frying pans from her belongings!

From there, I went to a store and selected a package of sliced bread which I thought was cake because it was so soft, and cans of sardines which I recognized. Coming out of the building, to go to the train, I remember turning my head, looking back and seeing a grey, white building. That moment, is a memory that remains to this day clear as a picture in my mind. Then I went on the train. We sat down on the rough wooden seats and the train headed for Toronto.

The journey was long - two days and one night. The steam engine smoked along and was not a comfortable ride. I avoided the washroom, using it only when absolutely necessary because of the conditions. During the journey, I saw only small, modest, wooden houses along the tracks. At a few brief stops at small stations, I remember thinking: "The whole country can't be like this?!" (but at the same time I was very anxious to see my parents so the housing was secondary.)

Sometimes, the occasional uniformed official would walk through the corridors of the train be he would just look without saying anything. In Montreal, I began to see some city movement and city buildings and some people got off the train. Then we proceeded to Toronto. My parents and uncle and come from Hamilton to pick me up. During the hour car ride to Hamilton, we had a joyous reunion. The comfortable car ride with cushy seats was quite a change from the hard wooden train seats! The ride was different from my accustomed mode of transportation in my town which was by bicycle, scooter or train.

When I arrived in Hamilton, the view of the city did not impress me but my parents apartment impressed me with its warmth and cosiness (Gas stove)(For the first time in my life, I was very happy to have my own room).

Right away, I started taking evening English classes that were government subsidized. I found the teachers to be very dedicated and patient. I found employment quickly but was thinking, "I'll stay here for a

little while but then I'll go back to Italy". Gradually I got into a job where I was required to speak English and that was very beneficial to me in speaking the language. (Dominion Glass hired only single women).

On more than one occasion, I witnessed people discriminating against immigrants. They used cruel and harsh words - fortunately not addressed to me because that would hurt very much. I made many friends in the workplace. The Eaton's department store impressed me very much with the elevators and lady attendants wearing white gloves.

In 1957, I got married, had two sons and in 1965, I became a Canadian citizen. I was very happy to have my sons in this peaceful country and they were able to get a scholarly education. I now have five grandchildren. Today, when I look back on my life, I am very satisfied about the decision I made in 1953, to come to Canada. I have made many visits back to Italy which will always be in my memories - those first seventeen years of my life.



After 54 years in Canada, I am very happy to be able to return to Halifax with my son to Pier 21 and I am happy to hear that they are going to conserve this very important passage of so many people.

Alberta Bottos

Editor's Note: Before Alberta left Italy she pressed a flower into the back of her passport. When she visited Pier 21 in 2008 she allowed us to scan the passport and the flower which was still perfectly preserved and as lovely as Alberta herself.