

Giovanna (Joanne)
D'Agnolo (nee Iannetta)
Italian Immigrant
Conte Biancamano
September 19, 1955



Canadian Museum of
Immigration at Pier 21
Musée canadien de
l'immigration du Quai 21

For some time I have wanted to document the story of our arrival in Canada. I believe it is important for our children to have a starting point on their roots in Canada.

My name is Giovanna D'Agnolo (nee Iannetta) and I was born on



December 3, 1954 in the small town of Mignano Montelungo in the Province of Caserta, in the Region of Campania. My parents Domenico & Rosina Iannetta (nee Teti) were married on October 5, 1953 in Mignano Montelungo and were living with my paternal grandparents as was customary in those days. Our family farmed the land and as one can imagine the years following World War II in Italy were not very prosperous. There were very few jobs and although my father worked as a general labourer whenever possible, and my mother worked on the farm, there was barely enough money for the bare necessities. As the future did not look very promising in Italy, my parents accepted an offer by my

mother's brother in Windsor, Ontario Canada to sponsor our family in Canada.

Our journey to Canada started in Naples on September 10, 1955, when my parents and I boarded the ship Conte Biancamano destined for Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The story really starts with my mother's uncle, Olindo Castaldi, who came to Canada through Ellis Island on May 12, 1909. Uncle Olindo was my maternal grandmother's brother. Many years after Uncle Olindo passed away, my mother's brother Ludovico Teti was sponsored by Uncle Olindo's family. My Uncle Ludovico then sponsored my family in 1955. And so our journey begins.

My father recounts our departure day of September 10, 1955, as a beautiful day in Naples. Of course my grandparents were devastated at our departure. I was the first and only grandchild on the Iannetta side of the family and I can only imagine the heartbreak of taking your only grandchild away to places unknown. One must remember that in 1955 communication across the ocean was not so easy. Letters would usually take a couple of weeks to arrive. No one in our home town in Italy had telephones even if we wanted to call them. Today we can reach people across the world by internet in the matter of seconds and everyone has cell phones on both sides of the continent, so the world no longer seems monumental. Of course, leaving our little town of Mignano Montelungo, was a very dark day for our family. My parents were excited at the prospects of life in Canada, however they were only 25 years old with a 9 month old child and were very much afraid of what laid ahead. I am always amazed at the courage and determination they possessed and continually demonstrated throughout their lives.



The journey across the Atlantic took 9 days. My father recalls stopping at Gibraltar although they did not disembark. He recalls the waters were quite rocky and they experienced sea sickness throughout the journey. My father also told me that although he and my mother were travelling as a family, the men were separated from the women and children as

far as sleeping quarters were concerned.

We finally arrived in Halifax on September 19, 1955, and my father recalls that once we were processed at Pier 21, they were given \$10.00 Canadian cash for their journey by train. Immediately after going

through customs we boarded a train and began our journey across Canada to Windsor Ontario where my uncle Ludovico was waiting for us.

The early years in Canada were quite challenging to say the least. My mother's cousins only spoke English so communication with them was difficult. Fortunately, her brother Ludovico spoke some English and he would interpret for us.

Life in Canada was not always easy and there were moments in the early years when my parents considered returning to Italy. In the 1950s Canada was not the multicultural society of today. Not everyone looked kindly upon Italians. We endured many hardships, and generally felt displaced. We were fortunate enough to have met other Italian immigrants through work and through socializing and eventually the City of Windsor reached a large community of Italian immigrants. Canada didn't seem so foreign to us any more. Most Italians have extended families because of the fact that we were all here, looking for a better life, having left family behind, and so we looked to our Italian friends for support in times of need and to celebrate in times of joy. We connected to each other in many ways because of our common language, culture, customs and spiritual beliefs. The Italian Church, St. Angela Merici, was and still is the heart of the Italian community in Windsor. It was always a safe haven for people of Italian origin. It is where I was married and where our children were baptized. We are still a part of that parish today.

On December 3, 1958, my 4th birthday, my brother Pasquale was born in Canada. Pasquale would be the first Canadian born in our family. I recall my first year at school. I didn't speak a word of English, because of course my parents only spoke Italian. My first days of school were spent sitting by myself and crying. I did however, survive those early years, and eventually learned the language, made friends and going to school finally became enjoyable. In those days we were renting an apartment from a Polish gentleman by the name of Peter on Bruce Street. We later purchased our first home on Curry Avenue, where I lived with my parents and brother until I married my husband, Eddy D'Agnolo in 1982. My parents later built the home of their dreams in 1990, however, my mother was not to enjoy this home because she became ill shortly after and passed away in January 1995.

On November 1st, 1962, my parents and I became Canadian citizens. My parents worked very hard so that we could afford a family trip to Italy to meet our grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Our first trip to Italy as a family was in 1968. I realized then how fortunate we were to be living in Canada and how we took simple things like electricity and indoor running water for granted as our small town of Mignano still did

not have these amenities. We would return for another visit in 1973 and again in 1978. I believe each trip back only reaffirmed my parents' decision to immigrate to Canada. Although they loved visiting, they were very happy to return to our little house in Canada.

My father, Domenico worked many hard and strenuous jobs to make a living for his family. Jobs were not plentiful in the earlier years of our arrival, and Italians were generally given the worse jobs that no one else would take. However, in the early 1960s my father was fortunate to be hired by the City of Windsor, Public Works Department, where he worked until his retirement. He learned the trade of cement finish and always did his work with great pride. My father brought his passion for wine making and sausage and prosciutto making with him from Italy and enjoyed sharing his talents with many friends and family. Over the years we have watched and learned from our father, and today he is passionate about sharing his talents with his grandchildren. My father made several lifelong friendships with co-workers and their families. Although many of these friends have passed on, we still remain friends with their families. My father is very proud of his children and grandchildren and takes a very active part in their lives.

My mother, Rosina, also worked so very hard for her family. She not only made a comfortable home for us, but worked in various jobs, from the tomato cannery, press operator, and fruit packer at a produce distributor. She always made time to help others who needed her, especially some of the women who immigrated long after us – my mother was a pioneer among the Italian women in our family since she was the first to arrive. She always prepared our traditional home meals especially on Sundays, who could forget the aroma you would awaken to of the traditional pasta sauce, and the several entres served with it. I always remember her homemade bread, pasta, and pizza, and taralle (a traditional savoury biscuit made in southern Italy usually shaped in a ring). Our children were blessed to have her in their lives at least for a little while. All of these traditional foods were products of her upbringing in a large Italian family of 12 children. She was the second youngest of the children and having lost her mother when she was only 4, my mother always had to sacrifice more than other girls in her town who had a mother. Her sacrifices continued in Canada, although she never once complained and was always grateful for this adopted homeland. She never spoke of returning to Italy to stay. She was so proud of her children and grandchildren and would always say how fortunate we were to be able to go to school and be whatever we dreamed.

My brother Pasquale would be the first one in our family to go to University. He earned a Law Degree and later an Education Degree. Pasquale married Anna Vannelli, also the daughter of Italian immigrants

and they have three beautiful children, Benjamin, Adam and Daniel. I graduated from grade 12 and worked as a legal secretary for many years and now work as a secretary at the University of Windsor. I married Eddy D'Agnolo in 1982 and we have two beautiful children Sarah and Laura. Eddy was born in Windsor but his parents also immigrated to Canada from the Friuli and Treviso region of Italy in the early 1950s.

In July of 2006, my husband and I fulfilled a lifelong dream of taking a trip to Italy with our daughters. It was a memorable trip for us and the girls learned a lot about their Northern and Southern roots. They came back to Canada with a new found sense of appreciation of who we are as a people and who they are because of the courageous acts of their grandparents, some of whom are no longer with us. Life in Italy is much improved since my last visit of 1978, however, I found that the true culture and traditions that our parents so valued when they were in Italy no longer exist, but rather, have been rooted in the Canadian Italian families and their children in Canada. We have a much greater sense of family and tradition than Italians in Italy. The hard work ethics our parents demonstrated as immigrants has carried on to us and our children. It was always a priority for our parents that their children receive an education. Even though education in Italy is free even at the University level, there doesn't seem to be a great desire to go to University. The students that are in University appear to become perpetual students and there doesn't appear to be any urgency in completing a degree. We are fortunate to live in a country that encourages education and rewards academic excellence through scholarships and bursaries. I'm very proud of our children and their academic achievements. Our daughter Sarah received a Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Education and now teaches music in the elementary schools. Our daughter Laura is still in University and hopes to graduate next year with a degree in French and Modern Languages.

Although our parents left behind homes, family and a country rich in history, culture and beautiful and picturesque landscapes, they started new lives based on love and trust and hard work ethics, keeping the values they learned in Italy during desperate times. They truly appreciated the gift of freedom and peace in Canada especially after surviving the devastations of World War II. They "the first immigrants" were a different breed of Italians who learned how to survive against all odds and were determined to succeed because going back to Italy for most of them was not an option. We who were among them were privileged in having witnessed first hand their strength and unconditional love and endless dedication to family. Italians in Italy to this day do not understand the hardships and sacrifices our parents endured. We, their children, are the fortunate ones. We are forever in their debt.

My mother passed away in January of 1995 after a three year battle with cancer. My father retired from the City of Windsor and is enjoying his retirement. He still visits his brother and sister in Italy every couple of years but is always happy to come home to his family in Canada.

Like my mother before me, I have a new sense of appreciation and pride for my Canadian citizenship. I realize now more than ever how blessed we are to have made Canada our home. Although I speak Italian fluently, I didn't feel a sense of belonging in Italy on my last visit. As Canadians we are a tolerant people, open to the ideas of others, and not so judgmental or arrogant. These are qualities greatly lacking in Italy. I will always be an Italian by birth, but I am proud to say that I am a Canadian by choice. Canada is a country that has allowed me to keep my traditions while accepting and encouraging diversity and where we can all be called Canadians.

It is my hope that the sacrifices our parents made will instill in our children the desire to follow their dreams without fear and to always be proud of their heritage and pass these stories along to their children so that our parents and their courageous spirit may always be alive in them.



In 2010 I fulfilled another dream to return to Pier 21 where our journey in Canada began. I was very grateful to have Carrie-Ann Smith accompany me on a tour - the entire experience was very moving - I hope to visit again with my family.

Posing with my aunt Maria Pagano's pots from Italy at Pier 21.

Joanne D'Agnolo (nee Iannetta) April 19, 2010