

Maria Harvey nee
Nobile
Italian Immigrant
Queen Frederica
August 21, 1961



The Trans-Atlantic Passage of Rosa (Mulé) Nobile and Daughters Maria & Carmela

When my sister Carmela and I found out that we had been accepted to immigrate to Canada, we climbed on the bed and jumped and jumped for joy. In my 10 and her 8-year-old



minds, Canada was the land of infinite riches.

We left from the port of Messina on August 11, 1961.

Our father who had been working in Australia had moved to Montreal and

then sponsored us. Our maternal grandparents had emigrated the year before. There was also an inexhaustible collection of aunts, uncles, cousins and assorted relatives and 'paesani's.

Our home up to this point had been a tiny hilltop town of 700 inhabitants named Bombile, in the Comune of Ardore, in the Province of Reggio in Calabria. Bombile is about 4 kilometers inland from Ardore Marina which lies on the Ionian coast facing Greece, in the back of Italy's big toe.

The original plan was to make the voyage on the ship Leonardo da Vinci on an earlier date, but since my father had only arrived in Canada in April, the paperwork was not ready and so the travel agent in Bianco advised us that we would make the crossing on the Queen Frederica.

My mother packed three or four large trunks, one of which had to be custom-made for a treadle Singer sewing machine. The rest were filled

with clothing, household goods, and linens. A large part of the linens consisted of my and my sister's dowry. As was the custom, almost as soon as we were born, being girls, my mother started a dowry for us. These items were made largely of homespun cloth, made from flax and the broom plant (ginestra). Once in Canada, they could not possibly compete with the softness and absorbency of terry and cotton and so today lie unused in our closets, but a strong link to our roots. Every so often I will look at one of these items and marvel at the time, energy, patience and intense labour it took to produce it, from growing the plant to turning it into cloth.

As we left the little town, townspeople lined the road to wish us a good trip. Although we had been waiting to leave with great anticipation, tears formed in my eyes and a lump in my throat as we traveled the few kilometers to the train station in the back of a truck. My uncle Domenico accompanied us to Messina where we would embark on the Queen Frederica. I have a vivid memory of standing at the ship's railing, watching my uncle waving a white handkerchief, and fixing my eyes on him so that I could keep the connection to those left behind for as long as possible. I was so focused on him that I never noticed the ship pull away from the dock. When I finally realized we were moving, my uncle had disappeared amongst the throng waving white handkerchiefs on the pier.

On the ship we made the acquaintance of a large family. There were six children in the family. The oldest was about 16 or 18 and the youngest about 5.

While in the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar, peddlers in boats climbed aboard to sell all manner of objects. My mother bought a couple of rugs.

I have some good and some unpleasant memories of the voyage. One bad memory is of how desperately seasick we became crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. The ship pitched violently, and my mother tells me that for a few nights she made my sister and I sleep on the bottom bunk with her. She was afraid that we would be tossed off of the top bunk. Another memory that stings a little is that any time we tried to sit on deck chairs, a steward would come along and tell us to leave, telling us that those chairs were for the "tourists". I had no idea what a "tourist" was, but I guessed that they must be more important than us. The other memory I have is of the distinctive collection of cooking smells in the stairway. Even today, 43 years later, the cooking smells in apartment buildings can take me back to that ship's stairway.

We were fortunate enough to be able to afford an inside cabin with bunk beds, a washroom and shower. My mother slept on the lower bunk and

my sister and I shared the upper bunk. Back in the old country we did not have indoor plumbing, or any kind of plumbing for that matter. This cabin was the top of luxury to us, even if it was very cramped. Not so for the family that we met. One day they took us down to see where their quarters were. This was what I eventually came to learn was 'steerage'. Berths stacked four or five high lined the walls of a large room. For privacy, each bunk had a curtain. The floor was strewn with all manner of baggage. The room emitted a nauseous smell of food, urine, dirty diapers, body odor, vomit, etc.

We could not believe the variety of food, the amount, and the number of times a day that we were fed. I especially remember the desserts. The days that we were seasick were especially sad, since we could not partake of all the delicacies. My mother tells me that all we lived on during those days was boiled eggs.

One evening we snuck a peak in the ballroom (I don't think we were supposed to be there either) and looked in at the dancers. I remember women in gorgeous evening gowns and ship's officers wearing impossibly white uniforms with gold braid. They danced around an ornate ballroom.

We arrived in Halifax on August 21, 1961. My most vivid memory is of a small, pretty island on the right side of the ship. It's emerald green grass and small size just floating there in the water left an impression on me.

I don't remember disembarking. The one memory I have is of standing in line in a very large room, and a commotion going on a little farther away. A woman who had brought salamis in her suitcase was the cause of the commotion because the customs officer was confiscating them. After going through customs we boarded a train for Montreal. The summer of 1961 must have been very dry. The scenery from the train was in total contrast from the pretty green island in Halifax harbour. I remember dry, brown, scruffy fields much like the ones I left behind in Southern Italy and run down barns and shacks. In Italy we grew up with a very popular song:

"Ci stava una casetta piccolina in Canada,
con vasche e pesciolini e tanti fiori di lillá.
E tutta quella gente che passavano di la,
dicevano 'che bella la casetta in Canada' ".
"

which roughly translates to: "there was a little house in Canada with pools and little fish and so many lilac flowers. And everyone that went by would say, 'how beautiful the little house in Canada is' ".
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I guess that was what I was expecting to see from the train. I was sorely disappointed.

On the train I discovered potato chips, a delicacy I had never tasted before. My mother tells me that not knowing the language and the money, she would pay for everything with a paper bill. She arrived in Montreal with a very heavy pocket full of change.

We arrived in Montreal late in the evening of August 23. My father and my uncle Joe were at Windsor Station to meet us.

The years since our arrival have been very good to us. We have prospered, married, and are raising the next generation of proud Canadian citizens.

This is just one part of a book that I am writing for my children. I want them to have a written account of the Italian part of their heritage.

Maria (Nobile) Harvey
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