

Robert Sapienza  
Italian Immigrant  
Saturnia  
May 25, 1955



I was seven years old when I made the crossing from Naples to Halifax on board the Saturnia (Italian Line). I was accompanied by my mother and two-month old brother. My dad had left the year before and sailed from Southampton on the Samaria (Cunard). Our final destination was Montreal, where I have lived ever since and still can recall our docking on a hot May day at Halifax. I was astounded at the small size of the city, as I was a native of Rome. During our processing, my little brother was put in a baby's nursery manned by what seemed to be red cross personnel. I can still remember my mother's panic as she thought she had lost her baby. She spoke no English and some time later, through the help of an interpreter we were able to locate my little lost brother.

We said our good-byes to Halifax and were "loaded" on board a rickety, coal-burning immigrant train for our onward journey to Montreal. We were shocked by the inhuman conditions on this train which resembled the ones we'd see in cowboy movies in Europe. I remember arriving in Montreal's Central Station covered in soot!

Today I look back on that ocean voyage and my arrival at my adopted country with warmth and gratitude for the life I have made for myself as a proud Canadian.

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### Italian Origins

On June 24, 1497, Giovanni Caboto, otherwise known as John Cabot, became Canada's first Italian visitor. Our "accidental tourist," of course, arrived here while en route to Asia. He'd sailed from Bristol, England, on May 2, 1497, along with 18 crew members in the small bark "Matthew," contracted by the British Crown to find a northerly route to Asia, not unlike his fellow Italian explorer, Cristoforo Colombo, had done in 1492. Caboto went on to explore the coastline of Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador - formally claiming the region on behalf of King Henry VII of England.

Fast-forward to the present day. How would Caboto react if told that the very area he had explored now boasted the presence of over 850 Italian Canadians - establishing Italian restaurants and cultural institutions worldwide?

After John Cabot, came the first settlement of Italians in Canada, dating back to 1665, when Italian mercenary soldiers joined up with the French Army's Carignac-Salieres Regiment. After their tour of duty, many chose to stay behind and settle in New France (now Quebec).

Italians also served under the British in the de Meuron and Watteville regiments, in lower Canada during the War of 1812 against the United States. When the war ended in 1816, some Italian soldiers also settled here.

Over the next 70 years, Italians arrived in small numbers, mainly artists and educators, primarily settling in Toronto and Montreal. As post-Confederation Canada focused on industrialization, many young Italian males came here via the United States for work opportunities on the railroads, and in mining, forestry and construction. Others went to work on fruit picking in Ontario's Niagara region. Often, workers sent most of their earnings back to their families in Italy. By 1881 there were only 2,000 known Italians settled in Canada.

"First Major Waves: 1880-1913 and 1918-1929"

The first major wave of Italian immigration occurred between 1880 and 1913, when over 60,000 new settlers arrived in such urban centres as Toronto and Montreal. During this era, major cities began to experience an economic boom, and Italian workers were instrumental in the evolution of the infrastructure in these urban centres. As a direct result, "little Italies" began to spring up and flourish. Toronto's first "Little Italy" appeared in the area around College and Grace Street and the third one in the area where today's city hall stands and the hospitals on University Avenue are located. World War I put a sudden halt to immigration. Canada virtually shut its doors as Europe suffered the effects of the war to end all wars.

When the war ended in 1918, the doors of immigration opened wide and the flow of new immigrants increased more than ever. The Italians, much like most Europeans, left their country to come to the Americas in search for their families. By the early 1920s, the flow of Italian immigrants was so strong that the fascist government of Benito Mussolini enacted laws in an attempt to impede it. Xenophobic feelings in Canada also resulted in immigration policies that limited the number of Southern Europeans in Canada and. Consequently, the Italians.

Other interruptions to immigration arose, first as north America spiraled into the quagmire of the great Depression on 1929, and second, because of the declaration of World War II. North American politicians and industrialists first saw Mussolini as a positive force due to his stand on law and order. This, however, changed when Italy invaded Ethiopia and declared war on Canada in 1940. Consequently, all Italians, no matter how long they lived in Canada, were viewed negatively. The government saw them "enemy aliens" and interned them at Camp Petawawa, Ontario.

A fitting conclusion to these events finally arrived in 1990, when the Canadian government recognized its mistake and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney officially apologized to the Italian community at a reunion of the National Congress of Italian Canadians.

Most Italian immigrants to Canada arrived through the port of Halifax, Pier 21- Canada's version of Ellis Island. Pier 21 is now a Canadian National Historic Site that celebrated its 75th anniversary this year. Between 1928 and 1971, Pier 21 processed some 1 million immigrants, 471, 940 of which arrived from Italy.

#### The Next Major Wave 1947-1971

From the cessation of hostilities in 1945 and the repeal of the "Enemy Alien Act" in 1947, Italians resumed their immigration to Canada as Europe suffered the effect of war and the burdens of reconstruction.

More than ever, Italians saw opportunities in North America. To them, Canada offered as much potential as the United States, if not more.

By 1951, Italian immigration escalated, and between 1951 and 1961, mushroomed from 150,000 to 450,000. Immigrant communities grew culturally as they created social clubs, cultural centres and business associations, helping ease feelings of alienation resulting from the immigration process.

#### The "Lost" Baby

Ornella Fizialetti was one of these immigrants who arrived at Pier 21 on a hot, muggy May 25, 1955. She came to join her husband, Agatino, who had arrived the year before. Ornella, already mother to seven-year-old-boy, gave birth to a son only two months before her sea voyage to Canada.

"I was very scared. I was alone with two young children, without my husband to look after us. But, we were committed and I had to be brave and make the move," she says, as a tears well up in her eyes. "After all, I was leaving my mother, sister, cousins, uncles - everything that was familiar to me," she reminisces.

Her route was long exhausting. She sailed from Naples on the Saturnia via Genoa, Barcelona, Lisbon and finally to Halifax. The worst, however, was yet to come. Upon arrived at Pier 21, the unthinkable happened - Ornella lost her baby. In the confusion of the processing, someone offered to hold her infant while interpreters helped her out. After this was completed, she was horrified to discover she had misplaced her precious newborn. Thankfully, it was a simple misunderstanding. Red Cross volunteers had taken the child to their nursery. She then boarded an immigrant train for the overnight trip to Montreal and into her waiting husband's arms.

"I tell you, there were many times during the trip that I cried and wished I was back in Italy - but I know we did a good thing because my children would have the greatest opportunities in Canada - so everything worked out very well," she says smiling with pride.

Others like Ornella have similar stories to tell. A passenger who arrived on the ship Conte Biancamano painted a vivid picture of the arrival formalities: "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 colorful still life of that mountain of sausages, loaves of bread, wheels of cheeses, fruit and other perishable items."

### The Wind-Down

Pier 21 closed in 1971 as the airliner replaced the ship as the main means of immigrant transport. At this time, more than 20,000 Italians came to Canada each year. In 1966 alone, over 30,000 Italians chose Canada as their new home. The number of Italians increased from 150,000 to 450,000 over this period.

Until World War II, Montreal was the Italians' first choice in which to settle. After the war, however, Toronto began to take over as the favourite destination for Italian immigrants.

According to the latest census figures (2001) 206,325 Canadians of Italian heritage live in Toronto, compared to 127,190 in Montreal. More

than 1.3 million Canadians claim Italian ancestry today - making Canada one of the largest Italian population centres outside of Italy.

As Italians settled into their new country, the road was not always easy. As in most of North America, there was distrust of newcomers and, consequently, like most other ethnic groups, Italians had to combat stereotyping and discrimination. Canada was evolving due to the influx of immigrants, through, and the nation prioritized establishing an accepting and multicultural society, affording newcomers the opportunity at a better life.

Today, acceptance of other cultures is encouraged and enshrined in our laws. In the late 1970s, the National Congress of Italian Canadians was established with regional chapters throughout Canada. It has taken the responsibility of promoting Italian identity and rights

Italian Canadians not only contribute to Canada's growth and prosperity, but are also at the forefront of our national life. Prominent Italian Canadians are involved in every discipline - business, academics, sports, the arts, politics and the overall cultural fabric of the land.

What might Giovanni Caboto say today if told that the Commissioner of Canada's converted Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Guilano Zaccardelli, is an Italian - Canadian? The same is true of Julian Fantino, Chief of Police of Canada's largest city. Caboto would be proud to learn that Frank Lacobucci was the first Italian Canadian appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada.

In the arts, Italian Canadians are second to none. One need only mention famous names as Bruno Gerussi, one of Canada's best known Shakespearean actors and television personalities. In the field of fashion, Canada boast international supermodel Linda Evangelista, And, how many are aware that the world renowned big band leader Guy Lombardo was Italian Canadian?

Italians are a shining example of taking the opportunities afforded them in order to prosper and strengthen our nation. Moreover, Italian Canadians have not limited themselves to Toronto and Montreal. From St. John's New Foundland, to Victoria British Columbia, there are scores of Italian Canadian communities that are part of the richness of Canada. Whether it is in "Little Italies" scattered across this land or in major corporations dealing internationally, or athletics, politics, arts and entertainment, fashion, cuisine, literature and communications, Italian Canadians play a vital role in these institutions. This new breed of Italian Canadian is now an established group in the Canadian mosaic.

Canadians of Italian heritage are proud of a culture that continues to flourish.

Italians have come a long way in Canada from that day in 1497 when Giovanni Caboto first saw our majestic coastline. Although he'd reached the Asian continent, he was unaware he had just pointed the way to a new paradise in which Italians would one day live and prosper.

In a recently published article in the magazine Panorama Italy (2002), Carrie-Ann Smith, an employee at Pier 21, relates the story of one Italian Canadian who made her pilgrimage to Halifax: "Last summer Bruna Bretoni returned to Pier 21 for the first time since she was a frustrated teenager stepping off the ship Vulcania and attempting to tune in an Italian radio station! She did 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."