

Saggi

The Children of Immigrants; Who Speaks for Them?

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Let me start by saying that I am not an academic, I am a high school teacher and a writer and as such the thoughts that I am going to share with you today are deeply personal, anecdotal, observational and not backed by academic research. They also speak to the Canadian experience.

The focus of this talk will be on the children of immigrants, children who were displaced in their formative years. I propose that they, more than anyone else, paid and continue to pay the price of immigration, and that the Italo Canadian community has minimized that price and not done enough to differentiate the experiences of these children who were forced to come here by virtue of being children or teen-agers, from those of their parents who came to Canada, to a certain degree, by *choice*.

Let me start with the personal.

I was a child of double immigration, and as such every new culture tried to make me one of theirs and tried to make me abandon the culture I was coming from. Every cultural experience sent me into a metaphorical bridge suspended between where I had been and where I was going. The bridge that we know as the hyphen in the word «Italo-Canadian».

My personal journey on this bridge started when my father became a guest worker in France after WWII. Later, when I was old enough to travel, my mother and I joined him in Lyon, France's second largest city. We stayed in France for about ten years and then came to Canada. In Toronto, we settled in the Italian neighbourhood of St. Clair and Dufferin (your little Italy here). I had a difficult time connecting with the Italo-Canadian community, since I spoke no English, little Italian, only French and some broken Sicilian.

I knew the Sicilian/Italian culture, in terms of the language, food, traditions and expectations; I understood it but was at odds with it. As I became more immersed in the culture of the host country, I became more of an outcast from the community and from my cousins who were more interested in hanging around the pool halls and obeying their parent's resistance to change. For me, it was either Italian or English and I veered out of necessity towards English.

Off course, all of that had disastrous consequences in my relationship with my parents. The faster I tried to assimilate, the more I was thought of as a betrayer of Italian/Sicilian culture and of everything my parents stood for. And yet I was following the pattern I knew best. I was following my French example. My experiences in Lyon were different. Their Italian community was unlike the one in Toronto. In France, it was instant integration into French language and culture. My parents learned to speak French quickly since they had no choice. In Canada, my parents worked, shopped and lived in Italian, after forty years my parents still have difficulty speaking and understanding English. Their Italian ghettoizing in Canada created in them a form of arrested development. They became more Italian, or at least more like the Italians that they had left behind in Sicily many years prior to going to France. Interestingly, my uncles and aunts in France became more French and less Italian as time went by, while my uncles and aunts in Canada became more Italian and less English-Canadian as time went by. Here I was a Sicilian-born kid, steeped in French culture dropped into an Italo Canadian ghetto, desiring to be part of the dominant English culture, which my parents and their community perceived as a personal betrayal. By talking to children of immigrants, Italians and others, I realized that my experiences were not unique

Immigration takes a heavy toll on every person in the family, but I think that we must differentiate the experiences of the parent from those of the child. The immigrant parent focused on making a living within a difficult environment. They were for the most part economic refugees. As such they had a concentrated purpose; *economic gain*, and everything else was secondary to that goal. Because of that, they were less affected by cultural truncation, they had an easier time ignoring the dominant English culture, and their sacrifices were rewarded materially by an increasing standard of living, and psychologically in the belief that they were creating a better life for their children.

They had another advantage; the parents had deep roots in their Italian culture, century old roots that sustained them in those challenging moments. They had a like-minded community to support and encourage them; they had an Italian-Canadian media mostly led in Toronto by Johnny Lombardi and Dan Iannuzzi to tell them they were doing the right thing. They could circle the wagons and fend off the demands made of them by the host English-Canadian culture.

But what about the children? They were suddenly dropped-off at a local school, dropped into a foreign English culture, dropped into a bastion of English immersion, often placed several years below their academic levels in lieu of ESL (English as a second language) classes. And there, they were left to cope with the truncation of the old, and to bear the brunt of this new culture. And after a day of English culture immersion at school and the schoolyard, they went home and were asked to pretend that everything was fine. It wasn't. And for children who immigrated twice, who changed direction twice, there was a doubling of the frustrations, of the alienation, and of the hurt. All these children were suspended on this bridge between their parents' culture and the host country's English dominated culture, without a safety net. The faster they tried to get to the other side, the more it caused friction with their parents and the Italo-Canadian community. This desire to quickly cross the bridge was not so much out of love for what was English and a rejection of what was Italian, but a pragmatic position, one necessary for survival, and something their parents did not understand.

Intuitively these children knew what their parents seemed to deny. They knew that their parent's immigration implied a tacit agreement to change the direction of one's culture, to transform it into something different, and they were doing just that. They knew, consciously or subconsciously that they were part of this great change. A transition that was not coming easy and that no one seemed to understand its deeply alienating circumstances.

How did this transition manifest itself?

It took different forms for different people. For me, it made it difficult to identify with my history; was it the history of the Romans, the Franks, or that of Upper and Lower Canada? Each culture showed me different history books, and none seemed to belong to me. I can't say that I like pasta, or maple syrup, or frog legs any better; none for me are cultural comfort foods. My musical or literary heritage is neither Italian, French, nor is it Canadian. I can't participate in their collective memory. I still have problems with spelling, being confused by linguistic rules I missed while moving about. In all that constitutes culture, I have pieces and fragments of three, sometimes contradicting, cultures, but the ensemble was not a positive multiple, it does not cradle or nourish me, there are no strong roots buried deeply in a common past that I can tap into when I need psychological and emotional support.

What made the crossing of this metaphorical bridge more difficult than it should have been is what I call the eulogizing of Italian culture by our parents, by the Italo-Canadian community, and by the Italo-Canadian artists who recorded and continue to record this passage.

Let me explain the parallel. At funerals we eulogize the person who has passed away, we feel bad and out of respect we minimize or keep quiet about

the negative points, as the mourners we keep silent about any feelings or truths that may be contrary to what is being presented. I believe that, for the most part, the Italian-Canadian artistic community, in particular the literary one, has internalized that state of mourning and continues to eulogize the Italian culture in their art.

This eulogizing can be both subtle, (the use of a word, the turn of a phrase) or heavy-handed such as when it permeates the whole piece. It is the idea of reverence for all that is Italian (or Sicilian or Calabrese or Chuchiaro). It is the underlying theme that Italians in general are the best, that Italian food and clothes are the best. It turns the making of homemade wine, gardens, sauces, and preserves into warm and wonderful myths. It professes that Italian families are loud, loving and tight knit, that mothers are saints and can do no wrong, that fathers do not need to express their emotions because we know they love us. It minimizes the negatives that may exist in the Italian community, things such as the physical and emotional abuse of children and spouses by the *padre/padrone* mentality, the effects of mental illnesses that were hidden from view, the alcoholism, the backbiting and feuds of a small town mindset within a big city context. There have been a few attempts at showing that reality but for the most part the artistic community along with the community at large perpetuates those myths.

I am not criticizing Italian culture. I only take umbrage with this over-used tone of reverence because the more it is used the more it belies the pain of those who were assimilating out of necessity and not out of betrayal. Any attempt at assimilation was seen as an insult, and made worse by this eulogy. How could we, the recipients of our parents' sacrifices be so ungrateful as to contradict them, and to betray them by becoming more English and less Italian and by committing other cultural crimes? (Maybe dating an English girl) And yet it was inevitable that would assimilate. In fact the inevitable outcome of immigration is one of assimilation and morphing, just look at your children or grandchildren, but we were being punished for following this inevitable path that we HAD not even asked for.

I believe that my experiences are not unique, that there are parallels with those of other new immigrants that come to Canada. Each group brings their own in-between generation, and those people, the children, the teens, caught in between cultures continue to suffer the same effects of cultural truncation that I and my friends suffered. I see it in the schools and I see it in the streets.

As to the question, *Who speaks for the children?* No one. In effect no one ever does, they must speak for themselves since their experiences are unique and different from those of their parents. The good news is that I think we are at the cusp of a new Italo-Canadian literary voice, one that is less sentimental, less nostalgic, less eulogistic, and more honest. It is the voice of those children,

like myself and my friends, who are now grown-up and feel strong enough to speak up, to write, and to publish those voices.

A Tale A Glass Of Wine

Juliano approaches the newly built Italo-Canadian enclave of houses hiding behind a thick brick wall. Woodbridge, squatting above Toronto, is a pristine community of different houses, and identical homes, with clean driveways and meticulous front yards laid out along intertwining and immaculate crescents.

The older Italian immigrants have come here to their final destination, a reward for a hard life. Their children marry the children of other Italians and move a few streets away into barely finished homes paid for by their proud parents. It is also here that the municipality has installed speed bumps to slow down the ungrateful children of their children, young people who drive too fast in brand new cars, and who have no qualms running anyone over, including their grandparents, even if it is by accident. Plastic wreaths mark the spot.

And then there is Juliano, coming all the way from his small downtown condo, hunched over in the driver seat of an older model Toyota.

There are five speed bumps, at equal intervals between Poinsettia Drive and Blue Jay Crescent where his Italian parents live. The anxiety really takes over between the second and third street bump. Preoccupied, Juliano fails to notice that there has been a speed change, only perceptible if one looked closely and gauged the slower time it takes him to cross the evenly placed speed bumps. His foot, of its own accord, rises negligibly, restricting the amount of gas that keeps the engine going.

The car slows down another notch and it takes him longer to get to that fourth speed bump. But it is only as he turns into his parent's crescent and spots the small fig tree, a particular pride and joy of his father, a plant whose malleable trunk must be buried under a thick blanket of black dirt in the winter, does Juliano notice that he is crawling at less than ten kilometers per hour.

He rings the doorbell even though the front door is ajar. Juliano contemplates pushing the screen door and screaming a big, «Hello, I am here» going in, and surprising his parents with an avalanche of hugs and kisses. He does not.

He politely and quietly stands at the door, waiting to be recognized.

Inside, he can see his father moving about, but being hearing impaired, the older man ignores the doorbell, turns his back on his son and walks towards the kitchen. Juliano waits until his mother heeds the doorbell and rescues him.

She comes to the door with a big smile, looks past him to see if he has come alone, and since he has, she registers her disappointment by taking back the smile. He is always alone. She had hoped to see a girlfriend behind him,

someone to bring home to meet his parents. At this point even an English girlfriend would have been acceptable.

He comes in and takes off his shoes.

She offers a pair of slippers and says, «The floor is cold, they *are* ceramic tiles after all».

He would have liked to refuse since he doesn't like slippers and he would have liked to answer, «Mother, the whole house is cold, even in the summer», but he doesn't and puts them on to make her happy.

As he walks into the family room, he looks at the old photographs huddled against each other in various sized frames, sitting on top of the TV cabinet.

There are no pictures of him as an adult, only of him as a child. His two sisters, their husbands and numerous children are there, displayed in full familial bliss.

He sits at the kitchen table, the same seat he takes every time, the one against the wall.

His mother removes the doily and the centerpiece from the table, and replaces it with a nicer one, the one reserved for guests. Solemn, with an exaggerated sense of gravity, she brings out a plate filled with homemade cookies that she keeps in the fridge and another smaller plate with roasted almonds. He watches her as she moves around the kitchen and he listens to the sound of the cupboards opening and closing. Mesmerized by the precision of her routine, he follows the serving dishes as they, in the quiet of the house, smack the surface of the table. The fridge door creaks open again and she comes up with a fruit platter that include peeled and diced prickly pears, a dish she has prepared well in advance, and just for him. She sets each plate on the table without a word. It is a ritual of silent activities that he knows too well.

His father, as if suddenly waking from a deep sleep, grunts, remembers something and slowly shuffles down the hallway to disappear into the cellar. He resurfaces with a bottle of homemade Red, the same wine he brings out each time Juliano comes to visit. He sets it on the table, also without saying a word. His mother gets the glasses.

In his parents' house, there is nothing out of place; there is no dirt anywhere. Everything has a place in this house, including conversation and silence, the type of familiar silence that comes after there is nothing left to say. His mother finally sits down. And now there are three people quietly staring at each other.

«What have you been doing?» Juliano asks in a fractured Sicilian that they find difficult to understand. His parents lament openly that he doesn't speak it better and quietly blame it on this foreign land. Although Canada has given them all the comforts they ever wanted, it is also a country that corrupts those who are weak. They fear for Juliano, he is so impressionable.

«Nothing much, you know how it is, we're getting old, we have nowhere to go, we just stay home, until someone takes us somewhere else», his mother bemoans in perfect dialect.

«Have a drink», says his father, pointing to the bottle, «It's good».

«I just want a coffee».

«Have some wine».

«I don't really feel like wine, just a coffee. Thank you».

Juliano surprises himself at the firmness of his rejection. Tonight he doesn't want to drink of his father's wine.

«Nonsense», his mother interjects, «Coffee is served at the end of the visit, if I made it now, it would mean that I wanted you to leave».

She is surprised that her son is still unaware of these basic social rules.

«But, Ma, I am not a stranger. I'm your son», Juliano pleads.

He tries to reason with her but she sidesteps his logic.

Meanwhile, Juliano's father pours his first-born a full glass of his best red wine, and one for himself. Juliano's mother gets herself a glass of water.

His father turns to him, leans very close and says, «Can I ask you something? You don't have una girlfrienda?».

«Pa, I've told you, I am fine the way I am».

His father tries for another question, creases his eyebrows but can't think of one.

He mumbles, «Oh... at you're age».

His mother comes to the rescue and asks Juliano, «How is work?».

«Good, I got a raise last week, I am doing well there», he lies. He does not tell them that he hates his job, but is afraid to quit.

His mother has no idea about what he does, what he earns, or any of his likes and dislikes as an adult. She does remember that he has recently become a vegetarian, and excuses herself to go to the backyard, leaving father and son alone to wait for her.

«How are your knees, Dad?».

«Well you know, so-so. You want to see?».

Before Juliano can answer, he shows his son a skeletal knee, devoid of any cartilage, the result of years of pressing down on a jack-hammer, causing a bone-grinding pain that he stoically keeps to himself.

Juliano does not see anything wrong with the knee.

His father rolls down his pant leg and accidentally hits the un-mute button on the remote control.

Teletatino, the Italian TV channel, suddenly bursts into the room, at a volume adjusted for his father's progressive deafness and startles Juliano.

Juliano's father notices his jumpiness, laughs at him, and in Sicilian calls him a little «Scaredy-cat», reminding his son that as a child he was afraid of his own shadow.

The father laughs again.

His mother comes back from having harvested the small vegetable garden, and joins in the laughter.

She gently drops her load in the sink and joyfully pronounces that they are all for him.

Juliano resists such a large crop. He knows he will never be able to consume them all, but mostly he refuses her generosity so that he will not feel indebted to her kindness, to a love he finds solely confined to overfeeding him.

His mother insists that he should take them all, will not take no for an answer, and that if need be, he can share them with his neighbours. Juliano accepts the offer although he doesn't know his neighbours.

He watches his mother wash the dirt away from the Boston and Romaine lettuces, from the plum tomatoes, from the Asian eggplants, from the thin cucumbers, from the green and yellow zucchinis and from a variety of herbs whose names and use he does not know. The longer she stands at the sink, the more annoyed he gets.

His father breaks the stare, and the silence, «Drink. Go ahead. What is the matter with you? You quit drinking too?».

Juliano tries to assess the meaning of his father's words, a task made the more difficult because he finds it tricky to interpret the Sicilian nuances, the in-betweens of that harsh language.

«I don't feel like having wine».

«Come on».

«I am tired, you shouldn't have poured it».

«Come on».

«No!».

Hurt, his father looks away.

His mother springs into action, turns to Juliano, and very sweetly says, «Make your father happy. It's a small thing. Have the drink. Do it for me».

She does a «Go-ahead» nod with the head and waits for him to make the right decision.

She stares, his father stares, he stares back, and all three wait, embroiled in an unexpected standoff.

Juliano grinds his teeth, furrows his eyebrows and feels that if he held his ground just this once, he would prove something to them, and to himself. Not too sure as to why he had chosen tonight to be stubborn, he lets his parents wait and plays with the simplicity of the word «No». He lets the small word flail around, entangled somewhere between thought and language. He tries

again, but those two letters are reluctant to come out, no matter how much he pushes. He says nothing.

He looks at his parents. Their eyes locked on him in anticipation, supportive, smiling, surprised that it is taking him so long.

With his hand shaking more than usual, Juliano picks up the glass of red wine, looks at its dark colour, resists the overwhelming temptation to smash it against the wall, hesitates one more moment, looks at the wall, looks at his parents, and then quickly brings the glass to his lips, draining the wine with two long gulps.

Juliano puts the empty glass down, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, stands, grabs the care package of fresh vegetables that his mother has slipped into two over-filled plastic bags, and quickly moves towards the front door. His parents accompany him to the entrance. His mother offers him a waxy cheek, which Juliano barely skims, and there is even a momentary, awkward jostle for a half-hug that does not go anywhere. His father offers a weak handshake.

Juliano gets back into his Toyota and drives away, knowing that he will be back.