

Prologue

First Endings - 1993

The last words I heard him say were: “Remember Poggiana”.

Poggiana is a small village in Northern Italy, about ½ hour north-west of Venice. To hear people who were born in Poggiana talk about it, you would think it was the centre of the universe. This is where my father was born and where my oldest brother, Larry, was born. In 1943, the year Larry was born, it had a population of about 200 people. But it had enough pride for a city of 200,000.

However, if you were to visit the place, it looks like a typical Italian village: a main street (Via Bernardi) goes through the heart of the village. It connects the similarly sized village of Ramon to the west and the larger town of Riese to the east. There are two other large roads that connect to Poggiana. Coming in from the north is the Via Brigata Martiri del Grappa (the Martyrs Brigade of Grappa) and Via Masaccio. Both of these roads are named after partisans who fought against the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy in World War II. The central focal point of the village located in the center of town on Via Bernardi is the Church of San Lorenzo and its adjacent bell tower. Nearby is the Poggiana cemetery where my grandparents are buried and where my father's brother, Stefano, a soldier who was killed in the dying days of World War II is also buried. The rest of the village is made up of small side streets where the houses are built right up to the side of the street. It is on one of these side streets where the Martinello homestead is found. A little further down is a

small patch of land that was purchased for Larry by his uncles when he left for Canada.

This is where my parents had planned to visit in the summer of 1993. They were going to be part of the “riunione degli immigranti”, the reunion of the immigrants which was to culminate with the Festa di San Lorenzo. The Festa di San Lorenzo is an annual multi-day street festival in honour of the village patron San Lorenzo (St. Lawrence). The festival includes outdoor Italian dinners, music, dancing, carnival rides and a pretty prestigious one day professional cycling race.

It had been a few years since my parents had been back to Italy and they were excited to return. No one in my father's immediate family was still alive but my mother, who grew up in the nearby town of Loria, still had 7 siblings who were still alive. Two brothers and a sister still lived in Loria and that was where my parents were going to stay during their return home.

My father was particularly excited to return home. He had just turned 74 earlier in the year and none of his brothers lived to be that old. He had a brother who immigrated to Canada when my father was a year old but he had died in New Jersey sometime in the 1930s when he was about 34. Somehow the family had lost track of him although they knew he had a daughter somewhere. The others all died in their 60s and 70s. The longest lived member of his immediate family was Suor Giuseppina (Sister Giuseppina – a nun) who died in 1982 at the age of 82. When he found out she was

sick and dying, my father went back to Italy to be with her when she died. She was his last living family member and the stress of that visit was so great, that he had a heart attack later that year. By 1993, he was beginning to look and feel frail and he probably thought this would be his last time visiting Italy. So, he really wanted to go. He didn't make it.

I was teaching when a phone call came into my classroom. The office told me that my mother had called and that my father had been taken to the hospital. They had been out shopping when he began to feel dizzy. The ambulance came and took both of them to the hospital. My wife, who also taught at the same school, and I left school early to go to the hospital where we found him resting and my mom by his side.

Since his heart attack in 1982 he had been to the hospital a few times. He had suffered bouts of dizziness that were serious but not life threatening. He was also suffering from poor circulation in his legs probably linked to the chemicals he had worked with for years when he was a master terrazzo craftsman. But every time he was in hospital he went there with a great attitude. Nurses and the family members of patients who shared his room went out of their way to tell me how nice a man my father was and how he made their days enjoyable. This time was different. He looked grey and lethargic. He still enjoyed company and talking to the nurses but he tired easily and slept a lot. The typical twinkle in his eyes was replaced by something else. I thought it was fear and resignation.

To help him recapture some sense of vitality, we talked about his upcoming trip to Poggiana and how exciting it was going to be for him. We even told him that my wife, Patricia and I would go with them to Italy; he started to perk up...as best he could. He began telling us what a wonderful place it was and how the people would welcome us warmly. He began to talk about the village: the beautiful church, the Martinello homestead, even Larry's little piece of property. He talked about Monte Grappa, a mountain that gained infamy during World War II and was visible from Poggiana, about a 30 minute car away. And he talked about some of his memories as a child. But this recovery was brief. On a weekend when my brothers were both visiting, the specialist wanted to have a meeting with us. With my mother present but not my father, he told us that his systems were slowly beginning to shut down. He was starting to experience kidney failure and his heart was not pumping very strongly. He didn't tell us outright that my father was dying but we knew. It felt like it was just a matter of time. Later that afternoon, when we were in his room, I could tell that my father was beginning to lose consciousness: it was like his eyes began to dim. I quickly rushed to the nurses station and they rushed to his room. We were whisked out as a doctor rushed in to treat him. He was revived but the episode took a lot out of him.

Two nights later, I was at the hospital with him in his room. My mother who was exhausted went home for a well deserved rest, she had been at his side virtually since he had entered the hospital. We began talking about Poggiana again and this time he talked about making sure my mother went back for the reunion. He knew he wasn't going but he

wanted to make sure that we were still planning taking her. All of a sudden, he began to lose that light in his eyes again. I called for the nurses again and when I returned to his room, he said: "Remember Poggiana." We immediately called for the nurses who rushed into his room who asked us to leave and wait outside in the hallway. They were soon joined by a doctor and I could see through the window to his room that they intubating him. He was then wheeled into another room where the doctor and nurses continued to work on him. A nurse came out to tell us that he was breathing and comfortable and that we should go home, get some rest and come back in the morning after he had good night sleep. She told us he was in good hands and that there was nothing for us to do. So, we took her advice and left for home. This remains the biggest regret of my life.

About 2 hours later, around 11:00 we received a call from the hospital. My dad had passed away peacefully. They were gentle and respectful in the phone call but it was devastating nevertheless. I then asked if they had called my mother but they thought it was better to call us so that we could break the news to her in a kinder more compassionate way. So, now I had to make the most difficult of drive of my life to deliver the most difficult message of my life. When we arrived, the house was dark but soon lights came on as we opened the door with our key. When my mother came out of the bedroom they had moved to the mainfloor only a few years ago, she knew without having to ask why we were there. After a long hug and hard tears, my mother who was exhausted wanted to make coffee for us but we convinced her to go to bed and try to sleep. When she said she didn't

want to be alone, we told her we would stay the night and be there for anything she needed. I then realized my night was only beginning. I now had the job of calling my brothers.

I first called Larry to tell him the news. Of the three of us, Larry always kept his emotions tight to his chest but when I told him the news, I heard a quiver in his voice when he said he would come first thing in the morning. This was the most emotion I had ever heard from him but considering the tough childhood he had in Italy before immigrating, I understood his insulation from sadness. My other brother, Steve, was much more open in his response and I could hear the sadness in his voice when he too told me that he would be home the next morning. The last call I made was to my uncle, my mother's brother, Mario, who lived in Toronto. He was a man who was always full of bluff and bluster but when I called him all he could say was that my father was a good man as he fought through his own tears.

The next few days were a blur as we began to prepare for a funeral. I didn't know what kind of shape she would be in for the handling these kind of things, but like my brother, she had endured lots of hardships during the war and was resilient to tragedy. I called the funeral home, arranged for an obituary to be written in the paper and then called the church to arrange for a funeral date. My mom began the process of calling all our family and friends and soon cars were lined up in front of the house with people offering their condolences. The most poignant moment was when the next door neighbour came to the house because they knew something was going on. When I gave them the news they

could only say what everyone else would say, that he was a good man.

The day of the funeral was hard as could be expected. Larry was there with his wife and three kids and Steve was there with his two kids. The limousine was full, so my wife and I, who had been married for less than 8 months rode separately. As we entered the church with my mom, we were taken aback as it was full from the front to the back. A lady who worked at the church later told me that it was the biggest funeral anyone could ever remember being held there. It was as if all of the immigrants from Poggiana, whether they lived in Toronto, Guelph, Windsor and even Montreal were there. My dad had asked us to remember Poggiana but we knew that Poggiana was remembering him.

The next few weeks were hard for all of us. I had to go back to teaching which was especially challenging as we were finishing off the school year and I had exams to prepare and mark. But things were harder for my mother. She had to deal with the loneliness and the emptiness of her house. My parents had settled into a nice routine that was now forever broken. So I suggested that she go to Italy as they had always planned. Her first reaction was that it wasn't proper to go on a trip soon after my father died but I reminded her of two things: first, she would be getting support from her sisters and brothers who would be with her throughout her stay and second, it was what my father wanted. When he said "Remember Poggiana" he meant for us to go, even if it meant going without him. So we finally convinced her to go with the understanding that we would join her there.

Mid way through July we took her to the airport and made plans to join her in her home town of Loria which was just a couple of kilometers from Poggiana. We decided that instead of spending 4 weeks in these small towns that we would take some time for ourselves as well and planned a two week visit to Austria where we did some hiking through the mountains but eventually we caught up with her. It was clear that the trip was good for her. She was able to grieve with her family but also she was able to find time to relax and unwind from the stress of the previous 3 months. My cousins took care of us too and took us into the mountains for a couple of days. We also made side trips to Florence and Venice.

One day, about a week before the Festa di San Lorenzo, my wife and I decided to make the walk from Loria to Poggiana. It was a hot day and aside from my mother, we told no one of our visit. As we made our way into town, we found the church and then visited the cemetery where we saw the tombstone of my grandparents and my uncle Stefano. We then decided to try to find the Martinello homestead and Larry's small patch of land. My mother had given us a general direction to take to find the Martinello homestead so we made our way along narrow sidestreets which were lined by traditional lime-washed plaster buildings with terra-cotta tiled roofs. I had never been in the Martinello homestead but if it was like my grandmother's home in Loria, it would likely have stone floors, some living spaces on the main floor and a granary on the second floor. And if it was really like my grandmother's house there would be barn in the rear of the house with cows to give milk, a hayloft in the barn and a chicken coop for eggs and the occasional chicken for dinner.

Even though most of my father's family had worked the farms, their fields were on the outskirts of the village.

As we made our way further down this side street we saw a couple of women standing in the street talking. One was dressed in the stereotypical dress of an Italian widow: black dress and black stockings. She had her back to us but when she heard us coming and turned to see who we were. A sudden look of shock and sadness filled her face and she exclaimed in Italian: "You're Rino's son" and then with tears in her eyes, she gave me a big hug. I had no idea who this woman was or how she would know who I was. Somehow she saw the resemblance in my face and knew who I was. I stood there both stunned and emotional. The tears began to stream down my face as she told me in Italian what my father meant to her. It turns out she was my father's cousin and Angela and had heard about his death when the church bells had rung at the church a few months earlier. It was a tradition that when someone from Poggiana died, the bells at the church would ring and then soon after, the villager would come to know who had died. But that was months earlier and again, we told no one that we were coming. Maybe, just maybe, Poggiana was that magical place my father claimed it to be.

After leaving Angela, we passed by the Martinello homestead but did not go in. The house no longer belonged to my father's family so we just stood and looked at it. We then found Larry's property further down the road. It was a small piece of land that would probably be too small to build a house on. Someone was growing corn and every space of

land was used. I don't know whether Larry had given permission for this or whether someone just decided that no empty space would go to waste but regardless it was being used. If anything the space would have been good for a small parkette, or as I later joked with Larry, a good space for a French-fry stand. We then returned to Loria, still a little shaken up by our encounter with Angela but I began to feel what it meant to be part of a small community where everyone knew each other, even if they really didn't.

We returned to Poggiana for the Festa di San Lorenzo making sure we were there on August 10, the actual feast day. We rode the bumper cars, played some games and ate dinner with my mother at the outdoor tables. We also met up with some of my father's relatives, first and second cousins who treated us as it was our homecoming to Poggiana. Even though I was not born in Poggiana, I was a son of Poggiana.

My mother was planning to stay a couple of weeks more with her brothers and sisters but it was time for us to leave. We knew we were leaving her in good hands but more importantly we had fulfilled my father's wish

Introduction

No history, a secret, a mystery and a riddle

My mother lived a remarkable life, one filled with danger, heartbreak, tragedy, redemption and celebration. And she used to tell me that I had no history. I'd argue that of course I had history and would proceed to rhyme off all the things that had happened during my lifetime (the Kennedy Assassination, the moon landing, the 72 Summit Series). But she would just look at me with a shake of her head and once again say that she had history but I didn't. I knew she meant that she had a lived history and that I hadn't. She also knew that wasn't a bad thing, in fact it was probably a good thing but it took me until I turned 60 to fully understand what she meant. But even then, she lived much more history than I could ever imagine.

This is a history: of my family: of my mother, my father, my two brothers and of me but it's mostly a history of my mother. We used to tell her that she needed to write a memoir but she thought no one would be interested in the story of an old immigrant Italian woman. "Who would care" she used to say but she finally wrote her memoir, all 20 pages of it. And there was more history in those 20 pages than I could truly absorb, especially when I knew it involved my mother, not some fictional character in a book. And in a real way, I realized that her history formed part of my history because I became a product of who she was, what she experienced and who she became. So, she was wrong, I did have history but it wasn't all mine.

This is a telling of our story through my recollections and through her memoir. None of this can be fully accurate or even fully real because I know my memories are subject to interpretation and shadings of grey as time and age alter my recollections but they are my truth. And the same has to be said about my mother's memoir. It cannot be fully accurate but it is her truth. So, I did not seek to verify my recollections from other family members because then their truth would intrude on my truth. And outside of verifying some dates and locations, I did little to no research. So, I don't mean to take liberties with our history but this is the best I can do.

This is ultimately a story of hardship, unimaginable tragedy, survival, and ultimately triumph. But it is also cloaked in secrecy, some mystery and a touch of a riddle.

I know all families have secrets and I can only speculate as to why they have them. In some cases secrets are kept because they need to hide things from those outside the family, things that are embarrassing, or things that are hurtful or harmful, or things that are meant to protect those in the family. My parents kept a secret from me, mostly at the insistence of my father, and none of the reasons I listed reasons applied to me. The odd thing was that the secret that was kept, first from my middle brother and then from me, was something that was actually known to most of my relatives outside my immediate family. And the secret that was being kept was not anything that was embarrassing, harmful or anything I needed to be protected from. To this day I still don't know why this secret was being kept from me and once I found out what the secret was, nothing changed,

absolutely nothing. But it was a secret my parents wanted to keep from us until they thought we were ready to know.

The mystery and the riddle are sidenotes to the story but they existed and they add to the richness of my family history. Unlike the secret, the mystery that was revealed was not purposely hidden, it just was solved through something out of our control. And the riddle that was presented to us was just really a poignant manifestation of my parents love for all three of their sons. Regardless, the secret, the mystery and the riddle will all be revealed as integral to my family history.

My beginnings

Growing up the son of Italian immigrants in a “German” city

I don't have any research to prove this but in my experience, most immigrants move to a city or town where there is already an established immigrant group. In my Italian experience this would include Toronto, Guelph and Windsor. I know there are other cities and towns with established Italian populations but these three cities are where my relatives established themselves. When we visited relatives in these places, I swear I rarely heard a word of English unless I was playing with my cousins outside. You would almost think that you were in a small town in Italy. You could invariably tell you were in the Italian part of town, not only by the language you heard, but by the fact that you would see a variety of statuary in the front lawn of many houses. This would include statues of the Virgin Mary, sometimes a statue of drunk leaning against a lamp post and often some type of water fountain. You would think that I am exaggerating an Italian stereotype but I remember driving down Victoria Street in Guelph and on the corner of one of the city blocks was a life sized statue of Zorro on his horse; on the other corner at the end of the block was a life statue of the Lone Ranger on his horse. They must have been Italians.

Me, I grew up in Kitchener, the most “German” of all Canadian cities. To claim it to have anything resembling a rich Italian heritage is laughable at best, so I grew up in a traditional Italian family in a non-traditional community. No words of Italian were spoken except in the house as there was only one other Italian family on my block. The only

Italian families I knew in the city were the Toffolos, the Miottos, the Marinis, the Cuzzis, the Favrans and the other Martinellos who lived across town. The rest were, what my parents would call, the “English”. Anyone who spoke English was “English” as far as my parents were concerned.

As I said, we were a traditional Italian family. My father’s name was Rino and my mother’s name was Luigia, although she went by her middle name, Palmira. My brothers were named after my father’s brothers. My oldest brother Larry was actually named Ilario Ettore Franceso. Ilario was my father’s oldest brother. He left Italy when my father was a year old and then, sort of, disappeared. All my family knew was that he died somewhere in New Jersey and that he had a daughter somewhere. Ettore was my grandfather on my father’s side and Francesco was my grandfather on my mother’s side. My middle brother’s name is Steve but his actual birth name is Stefano Rogero. Stefano was my father’s brother who was killed in World War II and unfortunately we don’t know where the name Rogero came from. And me, my name is Ron and my birth name is Ronald George, not Ronaldo Giorgio, but Ronald George. When I was born, my brothers convinced my parents that since we were now established in Canada I should be given an “English” name. I guess there was a cool kid who lived up the street whose name was Ronnie, so brothers convinced my parents to call me Ronald (Ronnie for short). I have no idea where the name George comes from but my brothers used to tell me that they liked the cartoon George of the Jungle. I guess their choice of names was better than the alternatives. My remaining uncles were named Achille (otherwise known as

Archie), Giovanni Batista (John the Baptist) or Fioravanti (I have no idea what the English counterpart is but they called him Ante for short so I guess I would have become Andy).

My family lived in a few locations around Kitchener before I was born but they finally settled on a small side street that crossed a larger main artery. One block away from our house was the Catholic elementary school and one block in the other direction was the public elementary school but in those days, without knowing any better, we called it the Protestant school. The house they chose had a nice front lot with a walkway from the sidewalk to the front door. My father had wanted to put a fountain in the front yard but we convinced him otherwise. Instead our statuary was in the back yard: a concrete deer and two concrete lions which “protected” a stone patio that served as a parking spot behind the house. The backyard was a great yard for kids. It was long and wide with a plum tree, and two cherry trees which were behind the detached garage. As a kid, I would climb those cherry trees and eat cherries I would pick while sitting on the roof of the garage. I’d throw the stones across the patio on to the roof of the house and watch them roll down into the gutter. The rest of the yard was bi-sected by a flower bed with a walkway that connected two separate pieces of lawn. But the jewel of the house was the garden. No Italian worth their weight in salt would do without a garden. This one was about 60 feet wide by 40 feet deep and my parents would grow everything from tomatoes and beans to garlic, onions and peppers.

The house itself was not large but it was big enough. The main floor consisted of a living room, a bathroom, a kitchen, a front bedroom that was eventually turned into a dining room and a smaller room that acted as a bedroom until Larry went to university where it became his study. There were only two rooms upstairs and both were bedrooms. Finally, there were three rooms downstairs: the furnace room, the laundry area that also acted as a second kitchen and the “rec” room which had a sewing area for my mom on one end and a large table and chair at the other where my parents hosted parties if there were too many people for the kitchen. The most important part of the downstairs however was the fruit cellar which was located directly under our front porch. That’s where my dad hung the salami, stored his wheels of parmeggiano cheese soaked in buckets of wine and the demi-johns which were 12 gallon glass containers that held the wine he would make every year. My dad had 6 of these demi-johns as well as various pop bottles and gallon bottles filled with wine to be brought up in case of visitors.

The main room for entertaining visitors to the house was the kitchen. There was always enough salami and bread to host anyone who came to visit. If there was supper to be made, my parents had frozen Bolognese sauce stored in the top freezer of the refrigerator and of course enough wine in the fruit cellar. Because of the Bolognese sauce there was always a homey smell that greeted me when I entered the house.

Unlike the stereotypical Italian family, we did not have a separate living room that housed our good furniture and which was covered in plastic. We did have a plastic runner

over the carpet that ran the length of the hallway from the backdoor to the main hallway on the first floor. And we did have the seat covers in the car covered in thick plastic which was freezing cold in the winters and boiling hot in the summers.

Finally, we had the detached garage that was at the end of a long driveway. It was in the garage where my dad would make his wine. Every year, around the beginning of October (typically the Thanksgiving long weekend) he would order crates of red and white grapes from a local supplier and begin his process. It was illegal for most homeowners to make their own alcohol but an exception was made for wine so that immigrant homeowners could carry on some old-world traditions. On the first weekend we would put a grinder over top one of the large oaken wine barrels my father kept behind the garage through the year and we would dump crates of grapes through the grinder until the barrels were about 2/3 full. One of my jobs was to pull the stems and leaves off the grapes before they went through the grinder. No additives like yeast were ever added to the volume of crushed grapes that were held in each barrel. Every night my father would come out and stir the crushed grape skins as they began to ferment. He would then poke a large handle through to the bottom of the barrel to allow fermenting gas to escape. If he didn't do that, the crushed grapes would begin to rise and overflow the barrels. Finally, after a week of fermenting it was time to syphon the juice from the barrels into one of the demi-johns or smaller bottles that we would struggle to carry to the basement. When the juice was all syphoned we would put the remaining grape

skins into a wine press where we would squeeze the rest of the juice out of the skins. The pressed skins were so compacted that we would have to saw through them to load the next bunch of skins into the press. This wine tended to be a little harsher and stronger than the juice that was syphoned directly from the barrels. In a typical year, my dad would make about 120 gallons of wine, much of which he would give away to neighbours or the auto mechanic down the road who did minor car repairs for us. Occasionally, he would re-ferment the skins from the press in order to make “grappa”, a clear coloured version of Italian moonshine. It had a strong alcohol content and was harsh to the taste but my dad liked to add it occasionally to coffee, especially when we had visitors. The grappa was often stored in old 7-Up bottles and kept in the fridge. I remember once when I was about 7 or 8 going to the fridge and taking a sip directly out of a 7-Up bottle that I foolishly thought contained 7-Up. Luckily no one was around as I almost vomited into the sink.

My parents were able to maintain the house through work. My father worked as a master terrazzo technician and before I was born, my mother worked at Smiles and Chuckles, a local chocolate factory that made a variety of products including the original Turtles. My brothers were soon sick of chocolate as my mother would bring home bags of broken pieces of chocolate from the assembly lines. I always envisioned my mother in that famous I Love Lucy episode where she was stuffing chocolate in her mouth to keep up with the assembly line. Unfortunately, I was never the beneficiary of these broken pieces of chocolate but fortunately, I never grew tired of the taste of chocolate. We also had a final source of

income. As one of the “established” Italian families in the city, my parents were approached, likely by Italian consul in Guelph, to take on borders, Italian workers who were new to the community. So until I was about 3, my parents would take on 3 borders who would be fed and given room to sleep. This arrangement only lasted until I got big enough to need my own larger bed. I don’t remember too much about the borders except when one of them, I think his name was Tony, bought me a big traditional Pasqua (Easter) Egg. It was a chocolate egg wrapped in foil and it stood almost as tall as I was. We had a picture of it somewhere but that’s been lost to time. What I do know is that my parent’s provided a home away from home for these new immigrants to Canada, some of whom had no family in the region and who had come from impoverished backgrounds. My mother told me about the first night for one border. He had come from a small backward Southern village. When my mother checked on him in his first night, she was surprised to find that he wasn’t in the bedroom he was to share with the other borders. She found him lying on the ground behind the garage. She told him that was not how things were done in Canada and she led him back to the bedroom where he was supposed to sleep. I guess in this way, my parents were more than “landlords”, they were a surrogate family who taught these largely uneducated men the ways of their new world.

When I was four, my mother returned to Italy for the first time since immigrating. She took Steve and me along with her while my dad and Larry stayed home to work through the summer. Their return to Italy would not take place for a few more years. I don’t remember much about that trip but

apparently I was terrible. I wanted every toy I saw in a store front window or on the tourist stands we would see when we went to Venice or the beach. I guess I made things so bad for my mom that when my uncle took my mom and Steve on a trip to Rome, I was left behind with my Nonna (my mother's mother) and my aunt and uncle. My grandmother was the last living grandparent I had. Both my father's parents had died before I was born and my maternal grandfather died shortly after I was born. I had met my Nonna, however, soon after I was born. She flew from Italy to Canada to be there when I was born. Unfortunately, no one remembered or had decided who was to pick her up at the airport but somehow she made her way from Toronto to Kitchener. Apparently she was waiting on the front porch just as I was brought home from the hospital.

While I was in Italy, two things happened:

The first thing is something I later learned from my mother's memoir. My aunts and uncles began to say some things to my brother about their experiences during the war, things he never heard before. He realized that a secret had been kept from him by my parents. When he asked my mother about it, she finally told him the truth. I guess my father was really upset when he found out that my mother told him the truth but for Steve, it made no difference to how he felt about things. I would not learn about a family secret for another 11 years.

The second was that I was so immersed in Italian that I become fluent in the language...well the Trevisan dialect of

the Italian language. I guess I became so proficient that I had to re-learn English when I returned home. And then as I grew older, not only did my proficiency of the Italian language begin to dim, I realized that I was learning a whole new language, one that only existed in my Canadian experience; I was learning “Italiense”, a mongrel hybrid of Italian and English. Italian immigrants began to Italianize English word by simply putting a vowel at the end of a word, and as that was all I heard, for the longest time I thought I was speaking pure Italian. For example, going to the store was going to the “storo”, cooking on the stove was cooking on the “stova”, and most famously, going for a ride in the car was going for a ride in the “caro”. To make matters worse, my parents Italian was the dialect of the Treviso region of Italy and as anyone who is Italian knows, there are virtually dozens of different dialects in Italy. So different that it was difficult to understand someone from a different region. Each dialect had their own unique words and pronunciations. And to add to this mishmash of languages, my parents dialect was based on 1930s and 1940s slang. So I truly spoke a unique language that any home grown Italian would shake their heads at. My lack of the understanding of the language almost resulted in a serious mishap. One day, when I returned from playing outside, my mother had written a note on the kitchen table. It told me that she would be gone for a couple of hours and could I “spegni la stufa”. This was written in direct Italian and I had no idea what she meant so I did not “spegni la stufa”. My mother returned two hours later to discover that the stove that she had left on, at a fairly high temperature, was still on. She asked me why I hadn’t turned the stove off and I told her I didn’t know what “spegni la stufa” meant. If she

had written “stova” I might have figured it out. After realizing that no harm had taken place, my mother had a good laugh. It also gave her a funny story that she repeated a number of times through my life.

And as much as I had adventures with the Italian language, my parents had their adventures with English. Of the two, my mother was probably the most fluent. This might be because during her years at Smiles and Chuckles she worked along people of all backgrounds while my father worked mostly alongside Italian co-workers while laying terrazzo. So while she was forced into having English conversations with her co-workers, he spoke mostly Italian at work. He did have one fellow “English” worker that he would bring home for supper every so often by the name of Robert. Robert was a pretty young guy who seemed to a hard worker who was also very polite and likeable. We found out later that his real name was Wilbur. My father couldn’t pronounce Wilbur or had a difficult time understanding his name to be Wilbur so he called him Robert, likely thinking this was his real name.

One of the issues that my parents faced with the English language was that it was not fully phonetic, there were too many consonant combinations, variations on how vowels were pronounced and there were always exceptions to the rules. The Italian language, as my mother would say, was nice and simple. It was written as it was sounded and vowels were easy: “a” was pronounced as a soft “a” in English, “e” was pronounced as a soft “e” in English, “o” as a hard “o”, “u” as a long “u” and “i” as a hard “e” in English. One day, my father went to city hall to get a bicycle license for my brother Steve,

who everyone called Stevie. When he came back with the license it was spelled Stivi Martinello. At Christmas time, I still sign his Christmas presents “To Stivi”. A few years ago, I was listening to an Italian comedian talking about his Italian upbringing and he said his father’s favourite show was Wheel of Fortune. He said he knew his father couldn’t solve any of the puzzles but he watched it regularly. That was my father. Every night he would watch Wheel of Fortune and grumble when the contestants got the answers wrong even though he wouldn’t have been able to answer correctly himself.

The year after I went to Italy, I started school. My brother Larry, who was 16 years older than me was still at home, studying at university. Steve, who was 8 years older than me, would be in grade 8 at the same school. I guess I was a bit of a ruffian when I was young so during one of my first days at school, I came home crying with a bit of black eye. Larry asked what had happened so I told him that another boy punched me in the eye. He said next time that happens, punch him back. The next day I came home with another black eye but I was smiling. Larry again asked what had happened, so I told him that I got punched in the eye again, but I punched him back. That was the end of my fighting career. Regardless, school was obviously going to be a change and one of the first things I noticed was that I was the only Italian in my class. In fact, all through grade school, I was always the only Italian in my class except for the last couple of years when a young girl, Angela, moved to my school. I made some great friends with names like Steve, Glen, Tom – typical English sounding names with typical English speaking parents.

I know that I felt like I stood out because I was usually the lone Italian kid in virtually any setting I was in. And in some cases, I was directly pointed out because I was Italian. One semi-embarrassing occurred one year in class. I'm not sure why but my class was having a spaghetti dinner and the principal was invited to class. He confidently told the class that I would teach them the proper Italian way to eat spaghetti, so I did what we always did at home when we had spaghetti. I took my fork and stuck it into the mass of spaghetti and twirled it until I had a nice mouthful. The principal stepped in and corrected me by showing how one was supposed to twirl the spaghetti against a spoon and create a nice compact neat ball for consumption. I felt so embarrassed to realize that I was not doing Italian things the appropriate Italian way. It was only years later that I discovered that the traditional Italian way to eat spaghetti was to twirl the spaghetti as I had done. The spoon method was an "English" invention to make spaghetti eating look more dignified. By the way, spaghetti and meatballs is not a traditional Italian dish. Italians eat spaghetti without the meatballs and meatballs are eaten as a separate dish.

I had also come to be familiar with another aspect of being Italian as I was growing up and that was when I was called a "wop". At first I didn't realize it was a slur against Italians so I wasn't offended. But only once my brothers told me that it was meant to hurt that I did become offended. But it was also a little confusing because some of my best friends would call me "wop" or "wopper" so I began to distinguish my offense from those I knew and those I didn't. It was a weird

thought to think a slur could be both endearing and offensive based on who it came. I also came to realize two things: the offense I took at name calling or other gestures was not as offensive as names and gestures directed at some other people and the name calling and abuse that my parents suffered when they first arrived in Canada was far greater than anything I would endure.

The first lesson I learned at the abuse endured by others came innocently enough because I didn't know any better. I had begun to play travel fast pitch softball (or fastball). One year a young black kid joined our team and this was a new experience for me. My school had no black kids and I had no black friends. This teammate, Ray, was a good player and friendly enough. One day, before the start of a game, one of our teammates convinced us all to rub Ray's hair for good luck before a big game which we went on to win. When I got home my brother asked how my game went and I told him we won, maybe because of our good luck charm. When he asked what I meant, I told him that we had rubbed Ray's hair for good luck. That's when my brother sat me down and told me about racism. He asked how I felt when someone called me a "wop" and I told him that it didn't feel so good. When he asked why we rubbed Ray's hair, it hadn't dawned on me that we were rubbing his hair because he was black, not some good luck charm for winning. He pointed out that Ray would face racism every day just for how he looked and no other reason. I felt bad and I took this to heart but I don't remember whether I tried to convince my teammates to stop what they were doing. Regardless, it was a real important lesson for me to learn. Even though I hadn't meant to be

hurtful, I came to understand that racism was a learned behaviour and that I had an obligation to stop racist acts.

The second lesson was about what my parents went through. When they first arrived in Canada, they were often called “greasy wops”, “learn the language” or “go back home, we don’t want you here”. I was fortunate because by the time I had come around, these taunts had ended but that did not mean they still weren’t subject to inappropriate and in many cases, purposeful, horrid behaviour. One day, we had a visitor come to our house to meet my parents. I can’t why but he was an acquaintance of someone my parents knew and he was invited for a visit. After a brief introduction, the first thing he said to my dad was: “How could you Italians have voted Mussolini into power”. I was old enough to understand this to be an insult directed to my dad, especially as this was an invited guest. My father didn’t respond, either because he didn’t hear the question right or , more likely, he didn’t want to engage in such disrespectful behaviour. I didn’t engage either but when I learned, later, of what my family endured during the war and the stand they took against Mussolini and fascism, I would have given him an earful.

For many years, I had felt uncomfortable because my parents were different from my friends parents. They spoke with accents and they were the only immigrants in my circle of friends and schoolmates. But I came to embrace their honesty, their welcoming spirit and their ability to treat strangers as friends. I think they instilled in all three brothers these important qualities that took me a while to appreciate.

Summer of '72

My Summer in Italy

Because my father worked so much, he had little time for sports. But like lots of Italian immigrants he enjoyed watching hockey. I can only assume that, unlike football or baseball, hockey was an easy game to follow and the one North American sport that most resembled soccer, kind of like soccer on ice – goals at either end of a playing surface with the object of putting the puck or the soccer ball past the goalie and into the net. Unlike most of our Italian relatives however, my dad did not cheer for the Toronto Maple Leafs; he was a Montreal Canadiens fan.

But where my father was not a sports fan, his three sons were huge sports fanatics. Not only did we follow hockey, football and baseball, but we actually played, whether it was in the school yard or on organized teams. Ironically, the one sport we did not play was soccer. And it's likely that our love of sport is what led to a full integration into a community that did not have many Italians. And like my friends names like Dave Keon and Mickey Mantle became heroes to us.

Because my best friend Steve started playing fastball (not to be confused with baseball or slow pitch), I began playing as well. And soon, Steve, his younger brother Jamie and I were selected to play all-star travel fastball. And in 1972, Steve and I, who were a year older than Jamie, moved up an age

bracket and joined the Sunocos, a team that would prove to be one of the best in the province. We had it all: pitching, hitting, fielding. It was going to be a great summer...until.

I don't remember when, but my parents told me that we were going to Italy for 4 weeks that summer, right in the middle of fastball season. My mother's family was having a big family reunion where all 10 of her brothers and sisters (and they were still all alive) were gathering together along with my Nonna. It would be the first time since the end of the war that everyone would be together. I don't know what the occasion was but I had no real choice in the matter. Larry was already married with a family and Steve was 20 so he was staying home to work for the summer, so it was my mom, my dad and myself who were going. It was also going to be my dad's first time back in Italy. Not only was this going to be his first time back, it was likely the first extended vacation he had since coming to Canada. I wasn't able to process it until much later but for me, this was a visit to the "home country" where I would meet people I had never met before and see sites I had never seen before and then I would return to Canada. For my parents, this would be different. It was not a visit and it was not a home coming, it was a coming home trip: a return to roots and to family, a place of belonging, a place grounded in personal history, memory and emotion. For my mother it was the occasion to be with family again, save her father who died shortly after I was born. For my father, it was going to be more poignant. His brother Achille, who lived in Windsor, died a few months before we were to leave for our trip. Achille and my father had come to Canada together after the war, only to bring

their families later. Achille had moved to Windsor while my father made his way to Guelph where he had an older brother, Batista, who had immigrated in the mid 1930s. The only person left in Italy of my father's immediate family was Giuseppina, a nursing nun, who my father had not seen in about 25 years. Since she lived in the city of

I was both excited and disappointed and I had considered quitting my fastball team so I showed up for a practice with a local house league team to see if they needed players but when I saw our "pitcher" throw his pitch over the back stop which is about 15 feet high, I knew I had to go back to my travel team. All my coach said was: "We'll still be here when you get back"

So, we left half way through July along with my uncle Mario (he was my mother's youngest brother) who lived in Toronto and my cousin Danny who was my age.

I don't remember much about the flight but three things stood out. First, I noticed the number of passengers who twirled a paper bag in front of their faces. I didn't know it at the time, but they were twirling their barf bags. Second was the intense pain I felt in my ears as the plane began to descend and the air pressure changed. And finally, the round of applause that this largely Italian set of passengers gave the pilot upon successfully landing the plane. I guess most of them had never flown on a plane, especially those with the barf bags on their laps. It was only then that I saw rosary beads entwined in their fingers as well.

I don't remember who picked us up at the airport or how long the drive was to Loria, but it couldn't have been more than 45 minutes. It was apparent that I was now in a different country from what I was used to and two things stood out for me on that drive. First, is that after we left the main highway out of Venice, the country roads became very narrow. They were two lane roads, with one road going in each direction. Alongside, what felt were miniscule shoulders, there were trees that lined these country roads. The whole drive felt tight and somewhat claustrophobic. The second thing was that as we neared our destination, we could see Monte Grappa to the north. Officially, Monte Grappa is on the southern most end of the Dolomite Mountains but it really is a stand alone mountain, and unlike the jagged formations of the Dolomites, Monte Grappa has a more rounded peak. As I had come to learn later, Monte Grappa was the site of some fierce fighting between Italian soldiers (known as the Alpini) and Austrian soldiers during World War I. It is also infamously known for the murder of 31 partisans and the hands of occupying Nazis and SS during the autumn of 1944.

As we began to pass each village which seemed to morph into each other, we finally turned onto the exit for Loria and after passing through the town centre, we turned into a laneway. The first house on that laneway was my Nonna's house. It was built close to road with just enough room between the house and the road for a small sidewalk. As we pulled into the gravel courtyard at the back of the house my Zio Nano (uncle Ferdinando), Zia Corinna (aunt Corinna) and my nonna came out of the house to greet us with hugs and

tears. They commented on how big I had become which I found strange because I don't remember them saying the same thing about my cousin Danny who was about 3 inches taller and 20 pounds heavier than I was. I guess they had never met him but they remembered me from my first visit when I was 4. The rest of the day was a blur but eventually they showed us where Danny and I would be sleeping during our stay: on the second floor near the granary.

We took the next few days to settle in and pretty soon Danny and I had a routine to keep us occupied. There was no one else our age as my uncles three boys were about 8-10 years older than us and while our parents were visiting and reminiscing with relatives, Danny and I rode some bikes around town and played catch with the baseball gloves and ball I brought. We were soon given the task of gathering eggs from the chicken coop in the back of the house. My nonna's house had the coop, a barn with about 3 cows and a hayloft, a large vegetable garden behind the barn and further down, away from the barn, was a watermelon patch that my nonna tended to. Every day, Danny and I would enter the coop, give a gentle shove to the chickens to gather eggs from their nest and bring them into the house. Not only did we have fresh eggs every day but every so often a chicken would be slaughtered for supper and we would also have fresh milk that would be boiled first before being allowed to cool. It was like living on a farm for us and everything was going well until Danny told me about his dream. One morning he told me that he had a dream where the chicken attacked him as he entered to coop to gather the eggs. With that in our heads, we entered the coop a little anxiously that morning and the

chickens must have sensed our trepidation. As we slowly and unsteadily moved to push the chickens to the side to gather the eggs, they started squawking and flailing their wings. We felt like we were under attack and fled from the coop inside the house. Needless to say, we never ventured inside the coop again during the trip. My cousins and aunt and uncle must have thought we were sensitive city kids who couldn't handle the simplest of chores. They were right.

Now my nonna was a spry woman in her 80s who walked to church on her own every day wearing that traditional widow's outfit. She had reached the age where she could say what she wanted and not worry about offending anyone. She never shied away from offering an opinion and no one was willing to challenge her. When she was in her early 90s she was asked her age and she responded that she was 70. When they pointed out that her oldest son was 75, she responded: "It's not my fault he was born before I was".

As the summer days got hotter, we started asking about the watermelons and whether they were ripe to eat yet. These were the type of watermelons that were bright green and shaped like cannon balls. She kept telling us that it was too early in the season and they weren't ready yet. Finally someone decided to check out the patch on their own and discovered that not only were the watermelons ripe but there were watermelon rinds strewn under the vines. She had been coming out on her own and eating a full watermelon by herself. She said she was worried that all the watermelons would be eaten and there would be none left

for her. There were literally dozens of watermelons that were ripening off the vines.

To my parents' credit, this trip was not just about visiting relatives or revisiting old homesteads; they realized this was also an opportunity to explore as much of Italy as we could on a short time line. Naturally, the first site we visited was Venice and I was enthralled by the magic of that city. The gondolas, feeding pigeons at St. Mark's square, climbing to the top of the church bell tower to see the statues of the "Moors" striking the church bell, and seeing the Rialto Bridge over the Grand Canal were all highlights for me. But the most impressionable thing I saw was the Bridge of Sighs. It is the bridge that connects the Palace of the Doge (ruler of Venice) and the dungeon across the canal. Legend has it that the last thing a condemned person had of the outside world was through the window of the enclosed bridge. There was something melancholic about that vision that has stayed with me since then. After visiting Venice we spent a couple of days at the beach. I brought my baseball gloves and Danny and I played catch on the sand until amazingly someone appeared with a baseball bat. Soon, I was teaching Italian kids how to play baseball on the beach with makeshift bases made out of piles of sand. We also went to the war monument at

Redipuglia. The monument is the resting place of over 100,000 Italians killed during World War I and it is located just a few kilometers from the Isonzo River where some of the fighting was so intense that the river turned red from the blood spilled during fighting. The massive memorial is designed as a series of stone steps with the names of the killed engraved on the front of each step. In many ways the memorial is an imposing structure that really highlights the tragedy and futility of war. My cousin Danny pointed out, almost with a sense of pride, the number of Visentins whose names were etched while we could find no reference to any Martinellos. When he brought this to my uncle Mario's attention, he said, without a sense of irony or humour that it was nothing to be proud of, that maybe the sense of pride should rest with the Martinellos who were too smart to be killed. Somehow, that stayed with me throughout the visit.

My parents also took me south but we went without my uncle Mario and Danny. We stopped in Pisa and climbed the tower which was still open to tourists but the the thing I was most excited about was visiting Rome. My parents had friends in Kitchener who were from Rome and their brother, who still lived there, offered to show us the city. The visit was both a huge thrill and a major disappointment. We got to see the Colosseum, the Trevi Fountain and we even went into the catacombs, but what I really wanted to see the most was the Sistine Chapel and the statue of the Pieta in St. Peter's. Our Roman guide did not know how to get to the Sistine Chapel so we missed out on that, and just a couple months before our trip, a so-called deranged man took a hammer to the Pieta breaking off one of the arms and damaging the faces of

Jesus and Mary. So when we got into the basilica, the statue was hidden behind a wall of marble as restoration was taking place. I left Rome with a real sense of dejection despite seeing some wonderful sites. It would be another 20 years before I finally got to see what I had wanted so badly to see the first time around.