

Author: Marisa Agostini

Earning Respect through Hard Work; Education; Facing Hardship; Life Steeped in Family; Preserving Cultural Heritage

I was born in Montalto Uffugo, in the province of Cosenza and the region of Calabria, a town that today boasts 22,000 inhabitants and a rich history dating back to 166 B.C. Its original name Auffugum, in Latin meaning “escape”, derives from a forced flight of its villagers to a nearby mountain after 86 were slaughtered for their strict religious beliefs. Montalto has always had a flair for intellectual activities. In 1890 composer Ruggero Leoncavallo dedicated a theatrical opera performance of *I Pagliacci* for the town’s people. Leoncavallo’s opera was set in Montalto. This performance and his Theatrical Libretti continue to be honoured with a yearly celebration of an international opera competition to this day.



Figure 1: A view of Montalto, with our white three storey house across from the Madonna del Carmine Church, circa 1955.

Source: Courtesy of Ida Monaco and H. Themann.

Religion defined our town. We inhaled it as we inhale air. It kept us grounded. Old churches, monasteries, convents and an institute for priestly training marked it as a significant religious centre. All the townspeople inculcated the Catholic faith in the children. A gift of a few liras from Don Antonio’s housekeeper enticed us to go to Mass on Sundays. We flew to church early so that we could have first bid of sitting beside her. We celebrated name days not birthdays- traditionally that of a saint. Our mother led the Rosary every Friday; a tradition that she kept religiously when we got to Toronto in 1958.

As religion defined our town, so it defined our family. I had nuns for aunts on both sides. We went to school at Zia Ida’s convent. She was the mother Superior of the Santa Rita Da Cascia Convent in our town. Later she was named Mother General in Cosenza. She ran a number of convents throughout the

province as a religious leader. Faith was the strongest legacy we brought to Canada. No passport required! Our children continue to pass on our Catholic traditions to their children.



Figure 2: My mother, Rosina Panno, with Sister Emma, her youngest sister, and my father, Francesco Trotta, circa 1950.

Source: Courtesy of the Trotta family.

“You’ll be going to the land where dollars grow on trees,” my Zia Ida (the nun) would say. Everyone believed that Canada was a land of skyscrapers and money trees! As part of the second wave of the Italian diaspora, driven by challenging economic conditions after the Second World War, we too were uprooted from our homeland. Dreaming of a better life, we left without regrets. We were all eager to put our past life behind us. Our journey was a challenge. The ocean waters were turbulent. Eight days of nausea kept us little ones in our cabin as the *MS Vulcania* crossed the Atlantic.

From Pier 21 in Halifax we boarded a train. As we crossed the Eastern Canadian provinces, from the windows we stared at the snow that reached the rooftops of the small homes. This vast whiteness was new to us. Winters in our town were so cold that they sometimes caused *geloni* (wicked frostbites) that swelled our fingers and toes. But this whiteness of the snow was pure eye enticing candy! “Where are we going?” I wondered- “Had our parents made the right decision coming here?” We expected skyscrapers not small houses. “A few years earlier my mother’s sisters and brothers had chosen to escape to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Never underestimate the resourcefulness of an Italian mother. After each train stop, my mother, Rosina, mixed clean snow with carbonated orange pop to make “*la scirubetta*”, a delightful slushy-like mixture. We enjoyed this new treat in Toronto after every snowfall—something unthinkable in today’s polluted city!

Once we arrived in Toronto, my aunt Rosina, who had preceded us to Canada, welcomed us with packages of chocolate covered marshmallow cookies and other delights. On our first trip to the supermarket in December, finding out-of-season lettuce, cucumbers, watermelons, and strawberries, made quite an impression on us. How was this possible? Back home we ate only seasonal foods. It took us a while to get used to the taste and smell of red grapes and soft white bread!

As immigrants, we made many sacrifices. After renting for two years and moving several times, my parents pooled their money together with my brother-in-law, Gildo Pagano, to buy a small semi-detached two storey house at 142 Essex Street near Bloor and Ossington. Central heating was a godsend. No more tucking charcoal-heated bricks between the sheets before going to bed to stave off the bitter cold, as we had to do back home.

Fourteen of us lived in that house. My sister Elide and her husband Gildo occupied the second floor along with a family of five renters. Elide was ten years my senior. Elide and Gildo had immigrated to Toronto ten months before us. I lived downstairs with my sisters Ida and Lidia, my brother Guido, our parents and a single male renter who slept on a cot in the kitchen. Our home had a furnace, running water and plenty of food. For the first time in our lives we owned a fridge, a television and a

radio!



Figure 3: In Niagara Falls, our favorite picnic area, are siblings (left to right) Marisa, Guido, Lidia and Ida, circa 1962.

Source: Courtesy of the Trotta family.

Having neighbours of Italian descent enabled my parents to communicate with them. They all learned to speak *Italese* with each other. This was a mixture of English, Italian and regional dialects. Between *Italese*, hand gestures and facial expressions they made themselves understood by English speaking Canadians. Saturday nights we often got together with my aunts, my uncles, their families and friends. Pizza, *aranciata*, *gassosa* (lemon soda) and *Brio* were standard fare. Sometimes we danced a tango, a

mazzurca or a waltz. Sometimes the men played cards while the rest of us watched the Lawrence Welk Show.

Saturday afternoons my sisters and I danced to the beat of Dick Clark's American Bandstand. Eagerly we followed the Beatles' debut on the Ed Sullivan Show with thousands of teenagers crying and pulling their hair in an emotional frenzy. That was quite the experience. My sisters and I were probably the only teenagers who maintained our composure and sang along without drama. Given our parents' strict behavioural code we wouldn't dare behave like that. Beatlemania-style "acting out" was definitely a no-no.

Like hundreds of other immigrants, our family walked several blocks to Honest Ed's for the daily 99 cent specials. A turkey was guaranteed at our table for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We were content and had much to be thankful for. With sacrifices, we gradually made financial progress. Saint Anthony's Church, our parish on Bloor Street, had a live band of young Italian musicians towards which many of us teenagers gravitated. Italian movies beckoned from the Paradise Theatre across the street, but this was still an un-affordable luxury for us.

CHIN radio was my mother's best friend. She gleefully accompanied the singers of that era. Her favourite song by Domenico Modugno was *Volare*, which she sang along with sheer passion. Johnny Lombardi became the growing Italian community's most trusted entrepreneur and impresario. He imported foods from Italy for his College Street grocery store, brought numerous Italian singers from Italy to Toronto, introduced the CHIN picnic where these Italian singers performed and, developed a Sunday CHIN television program. His initiatives and support gave the Italian community a sense of identity and belonging.

One of the biggest sacrifices I made to help my family's finances was to quit school at the age of 14. Back then, it wasn't mandatory for students to stay in school until the age of 16. Between cooking, household chores, sewing for the family and neighbours, watching the neighbours' children and keeping tabs on our tenants, mom was always the last to go to bed. Money was needed to pay the mortgage. As the eldest of four unmarried children, I was the only one who could help. And so, my school train came to an abrupt halt!

My desire to help the family did not prevent me from pursuing a few small personal goals. I wanted new clothes and shoes. My first purchase with my hard-earned money was a white satin dress with white fur trim around the wrists. I felt like a princess.



Figure 4: Marisa and Giovanni on our wedding day, May 2, 1964. Source: Courtesy of the Agostini family.

At the time, it was not unusual for girls to marry young. I tied the knot at the age of 16. For the first year, Giovanni Agostini and I shared a basement apartment with my sister-in-law Lorenzina and her family. The following year we rented a flat to have more privacy. Slowly but surely, we purchased our own semi-detached home on Vaughan Rd, north of Saint Clair Ave.

By the time I re-boarded the education train, I was married with two young children. Having skipped high school, I attended Saturday morning classes to acquire the skills that would allow me to properly format a paper and improve my grammar. I enrolled at York University as a mature student. I was lucky to have a supportive husband who respected my desire to better myself. I transferred to the U of T and graduated with an honours degree in History and a major in Italian Language and Literature in 1987. Emotions well up at the memory of my husband John, my daughters Anita and Sonia, attended Convocation Hall to watch me receive my degree. With a warm embrace my husband John exclaimed: "Marisa, this is the most beautiful gift you've ever given me!" and proudly handed me two dozen white roses. That moment foretold bigger and better things.



Figure 5: Working with my Grade 2 students in 1990. Source: Courtesy of the Agostini family.

There was no greater satisfaction than to finally have my own classroom. I had made it to the finish line! The primary grades were a good fit. Children at this stage were eager to learn. The needy one's just needed extra support. Parents were very grateful that I kept their children after school to receive one-on-one assistance. My roots had led me to teach for the Toronto Catholic Board. Teaching religion was a breeze as it was a big part of my being.

I taught with an immigrant perspective. My classroom library included a collection of story books that reflected the cultural background of my students. Among my favourites were *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini and *The Red Shoes* by Hans Christian Anderson. I did not forget my Italian students. My students got a chuckle as I read *The Sandwich* by Ian Wallace and Angela Wood. The story of Vincenzo, a Grade 2 student, finds his classmates hesitant to sit beside him when he brought a stinky sandwich of *provolone* and *mortadella* to school. The common sandwich of his classmates was peanut butter and jam.



Figure 6: My parents, Francesco and Rosina (seated on the far left), celebrate Rosina's 82nd birthday with the extended Trotta and Agostini family in 2002. Source: Courtesy of the Agostini family.

As a reading specialist in the later part of my career, I continued to emphasize inclusion. With the assistance of their parents, each group of students wrote a morning and after school greeting in their native tongue. This became a regular routine for my students while they worked on developing their reading skills.

Giovanni and I continued to follow most of the traditions acquired from our Italian heritage. We cultivated our own vegetable garden, made our own tomato sauce, sausages, *prosciutto*, and of course, home-made wine. Our cuisine was strictly Italian. We were able to afford Italian movies, Italian music concerts and Italian operas. We watched Italian TV programs. Our three children married spouses of Italian descent and blessed us with seven Italian-Canadian grandchildren. To this day, we continue to be proud of our dual heritage. It took my mother's family a lot longer for them to improve their economic conditions in Argentina. Canada has definitely been a wonderful home for us all.

An Ode to Our Nonna Marisa

By Erica, Emily, Eve, Genevive, Francesco, Giulia and Giovanni

It is in awe that we pay tribute to our awesome Nonna Marisa. A super hard worker all her life, she always strove to reach her potential. From her childhood, she had learned to survive with very little. We can't fathom what it would have been like to go through cold winters without heat, nor indoor running

water, limited clothing and few home made toys! What would we do without all the modern commodities we enjoy today! We are convinced that Nonna's inner and outer strength stem from her survival training.

Nonna's thirst for knowledge led her to enrol in university, as a mature student while married with children. Her biggest accomplishment was completing her honours degree at the age of forty. Our Nonna was a feminist ahead of her time!



Figure 7: Nonna Marisa with grandchildren (seated left to right) Emily Ferrari, Genevive Crispo, Giulia Agostini, and in the back row, Giovanni Agostini, Eve Ferrari, Francesco Crispo and Erica Ferrari, in 2019. Source: Courtesy of the Agostini family.

A
f
t
e
r

w
o
r
k
i
n
g

a
s

a
n