

My Elderly Sisters of Italy

By Rosanna De Rango

As a social worker, working with Italian elderly every day, I often feel amazed at the resilience of the human being. Many of these elderly people, largely women, have endured lives of poverty, violence, and losses of all kinds. These women, as in most cultures of the world, have endured the greatest part of the burden, in the family, as well as in the larger society. Yet many of these elderly women still retain a love for life and hope in tomorrow.

A large percentage of the Italian elderly women in Canada immigrated here twenty to forty years ago. They have lived mostly with their children in the community, with a small percentage in residential institutions for seniors. Many of the elderly I see live at Villa Colombo Homes for the Aged, are from other elderly residences, or live in the community. As a geriatric social worker of Italian heritage, I hear their stories every day. Yet so little is really known about these women. There are no books or journals documenting their legacy.

What follows are excerpts from the lives of a few women, particular individuals who represent many elderly Italian women's lives, past and present.

Angelina is eighty-eight years old. Widowed eighteen years ago, she is now dying of cancer. As Angelina reflects upon her life, she purposely laughs in order not to let herself cry. Her face is a myriad of hard creases, with intricate webs of fine lines around her eyes. Her watery blue eyes have shed many tears. Over the years, her skin became rugged from working under the scorching sun in the small southern town where she was born. She worked hard during those blistering days, cutting the wheat, farming the land. Her back is now ruined from the hard work and she is in constant pain. Angelina had to lift heavy pieces of wood



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and anything else that was needed. A hernia has protruded from her belly since she was a young woman.

At a young age she had four children. One child died at two from pneumonia. Angelina's marriage was not much of a marriage. It had been arranged by her relatives. Her husband worked in Canada while she raised the children on her own, in her native town. Every so often he would return to Italy for a visit. One time, Angelina explains in her heavy dialect, she didn't hear from her husband for over fifteen years — not even a letter saying that he was still alive. During the second World War her husband was in the military and was even a prisoner, she heard many years later. Finally, when Angelina and her children came to Canada to live with her husband in 1950, they were like strangers: their children were the only proof that they had ever been together. There were many problems in the family. When her husband died she lived alternatively with her children, but again she experienced many problems.

Five years ago Angelina decided on her own to live independently of her children. She did not fit into their busy lives. She felt that she had no "say" living in her children's homes. In the old days, she says, the elderly parent used to be part, if not the head, of the decision-making in the families of their children. Now everything has changed. She felt out of place. She decided to move into an elderly residence so she could have some peace of mind and control over her life. Her children, now in their sixties, felt a lot of guilt over her decision. Yet Angelina felt that everyone, including herself, would be much happier in the long run. She could have the security of knowing that her health needs would be taken care of, and she would have the companionship of others her own age. But for Angelina, life never made things easy for her. She is now constantly in pain from the tumor. Every day the energy drains from her flesh, from her spirit. This gives her little interest in people and activities around her. Her sense of humour is laced with sarcasm. She thinks her life has been ironic. The time is running out on her. "If only life

could have been different," Angelina says with a sigh.

Eva is a very handsome woman, even now at eighty-three. Her skin is youthful and finely textured. Her grey-white curls are elegantly made up every day. A long string of artificial pearls are worn fashionably around her neck. Eva believes that even at her age, a woman should take care of her personal appearance.

Eva says that she was one of the more fortunate women of her time. Her life was also one of poverty and hard work on the farm, but at least she had a husband who treated her well. Eva declares that, in her days, most women were like slaves to their husbands. She angrily states, "Men did whatever they wanted to women!" At twenty she married a farmer like herself. She told her husband that she did not want many children. "There were no birth control means in those days," she chuckles to me. They had three children. After spending much of her life working with her husband on the farm in her northern Italian town, in 1957 Eva and her husband immigrated to Canada to be with their children. Here they lived with all of their children at different times. Because their children looked after their needs, Eva and her husband never worked in Canada. In turn, she raised the grandchildren and helped with chores in the house. After her fiftieth anniversary, her husband died suddenly from cancer. He had been such a healthy man; his death was a great shock. This was a very difficult time, but she made herself go on with life. Eva had never been one to "bang her head against a brick wall," she says. She had had many tragedies in her life. Although she came from a large family of six brothers and six sisters, all but one sister died at a young age. One of her brothers died at twenty-one from war injuries. Her only living sister was in Argentina; Eva saw her for the first time after forty years. "We didn't even recognize each other," she says sadly.

Yet, she reflects, her life had been better than the lives of many other women of her generation: at least she had married a good man. In spite of the hardships, there are good memories she can extract from

the past. Eva says that is how she has always been. She has always built on the few good moments in her life and not let the tragedies corrode her character. The major disappointment in her life was not having had the means to obtain an education. She had wanted to be a doctor. In her small home town, from a young age, she helped the sick. She gave injections to the sick in her community. In those times, many medications were given by injection; there were no nurses to do this in the rural areas. Hence, women like Eva would learn how to give injections. The neighbours in her town referred to her as a "doctor" in their dialect. She smiles at her nickname. At least she had been a healer.

Eight years ago Eva decided to live at Villa Colombo. The family care for her, but she felt that she didn't want to be a burden on anyone. She also felt lonely by herself at home since her children worked and they had their own lives to worry about. When she first moved into the Home, Eva felt depressed about her life. Her children had not wanted her to leave. They also had a lot of ambiguous feelings. They wondered if they could have done more for their mother. The whole change itself was a difficult adjustment to make. But she found that after a while she began to feel different. She began to make friends. She had suffered from a back problem for quite some time, but after physiotherapy she started to feel much better. Little by little, she became more active. Now Eva feels good about her life. Her children visit often. She has time to relax or participate as she wants. She says she feels better now than she ever did. She doesn't feel her age. Since Eva has such magnificent skin at her age, I asked her how she keeps it so. She replied that because she always smiled, her skin resisted wrinkles. Perhaps she could be right.

Anna is eighty-five years old. She married twice, but in each case had very little married life. She was born in a town south of Rome and had worked on the land, like many women of her generation. She also worked at whatever odd jobs she could get. Anna says of herself that she

"worked like a man." There were no machines to do the work, so she worked with her hands.

Anna walks straight and looks much younger than her actual age. She is still healthy and robust. There are few wrinkles on her face but deep, hard lines cut across it, particularly around her eyes and mouth. Her grey, wavy hair is set in a small bun behind her head. At nineteen she married for the first time. Because her husband was a communist sympathizer, the fascists persecuted her husband and her family. Anna's husband spent more years in jail than in their own home. The only reason they did not incarcerate her was because she had to take care of the children, she says. Finally, in 1933, they murdered her husband. He was severely beaten, and unconscious, was thrown into a river. At the time of this horrible event, she had three small children and was about to give birth to her fourth. There were so many massacres committed by the fascists, Anna bitterly states. Later on, one of her children died of diarrhea at the age of two. This used to be common, she says, holding back the tears. Women had to do a lot of hard work, so there wasn't much time to spend looking after the children. Also, there was no medicine to cure even simple ailments. So many children died.

Anna did all types of work to bring food to her children. There were days, especially during the war, when they survived on a piece of hard bread a day. In good times there was more bread, potatoes and beans; meat was something that was rarely available. Anna's eyes glisten and she can no longer hold back the tears, as she tells me "a mother will do anything for her children." When she worked as a domestic, sometimes she was given some food but she brought this home to her children. Later, as her children grew, her sons left for other countries in Europe to find work. Many young men would try to cross borders illegally and were often caught and jailed. At least her sons escaped this penalty. Even though Anna was widowed at thirty and she had many proposals of marriage, she didn't want to remarry while her children were young. She was afraid that another man would not care for her children and perhaps abuse them — as was common in those times. "When I think of the past," she says, "my skin gets goosebumps, just to think of the hunger, the misery, the tragedies. But the worst was the hunger," Anna painfully remembers.

When Anna was fifty, she met and subsequently married a man who had

been living in Canada. Anna, her children and her new husband came to Canada. Finally, Anna says that she had some peace of mind. This husband was good to her and her children. But after only seven years, her second husband died from diabetes complications after a lengthy illness, during which time she took care of him. After his death, Anna lived with her children and stepchildren from her second husband. She didn't have to worry much during these times.

Anna decided to live at Villa Colombo when it first opened ten years ago. It was her own decision. She has always been used to making decisions, in crisis situations and in everyday matters. She knows what has to be done. If she had wanted to live with her children, she could have, she says. But she does not want to be a dependent on anyone. Even though she is elderly, she feels that she can still do many things. She also enjoys the company of people of her own generation. Anna is very active and takes great interest in the problems of people around her. She is a leader. She is the voice of many elderly who know her. I asked Anna what is important in her life. She says "Getting up, having a nice cup of coffee, simple things..." What worries Anna is illness, especially the mental confusion from which some elderly people suffer. She hopes she never becomes a victim of dementia.

Anna says that she is happy now. Her children are close to her. She enjoys her old age because her children care about her. Anna always resisted getting depressed in her life. She is a real survivor, one who believes that many others of her generation are not happy because they do not want to see the good changes in the world. They hold onto their unhappy memories. Anna has always had hope in the future. She believes that change is possible. Anna believes that for women, there has been progress between the generations.

The most striking aspects of all these women are their incredible resilience, their courage, and their will to survive. These women went to tremendous lengths to take care of their children, often completely on their own. They are the living witnesses of a history in some ways remote and different from the generation of women today. Yet, are their histories so different from the present day of Italian women and women in general? As a geriatric Italian social worker, I also see the children of these elderly women, as well as the grandchildren. Many traditional patterns remain.

Enigmatico

His limpid skin is green gold as he
reclines
in a shade that crowns him with the
leaves of vines.
As smooth as the golden skinned grapes
his firm
thighs are about to burst their denim
husks,
the golden thighs of a man of bronze.

Eyes of pale amber, with the bite of
brandy.
Lips that kiss her lady's shoe, her knee,
the liquid outward curve of her hip,
lips that call her madonna,
his dream of a bright aproned jewel for
his
kitchen,
he polishes it there in the long grass of
August
until he rips her leisurely as a silk,

and she cries out caught
with one bare foot in a village in the
Abruzzi,
the other busy with cramped English
speaking toes in
Toronto,
she strides the Atlantic legs spread
like a Colossus.

Photograph of a girl dressed as a gypsy,
child waist pinched by a red girdle,
for *Carnevale*,

in another world, wearing the black
academic gown,
a rabbit skin about her shoulders,
she hangs on the wall of a suburban
bungalow.

Mary di Michele

...from *Bread and Chocolate*
(Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980).