

Who Speaks for the Children of Immigrants?

By John Calabro

I was a high school teacher for thirty years and I am now a publisher and a writer, and as such, the thoughts that I share here are deeply personal, anecdotal, mostly observational and not backed by academic research.

My reflections focus 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. In addition, the Italo-Canadian community has minimized that price and not done enough to differentiate the experiences of these children who were forced to go along by virtue of being children or teen-agers, from those of their parents who immigrated, to a certain degree, by *choice*. The experiences were different and led to different traumas and it is those differences that are seldom acknowledged.

My experiences were no different than those of other children of immigrants, and it continues to be the experience of the new immigrants to Canada. As such I feel that my narrative, although personal, is still relevant. For me, what kept changing along with the cultural climates as I dutifully followed my immigrant parents around the world was my first name.

I was born in Delia, Sicily in 1954. In Sicily, a first-born male is named after his paternal grandfather. Because of strange circumstances my father had the same name as my paternal grandfather, Luigi, and I was named Giovanni to be differentiated from my father. I should have known there would be trouble when my mother decided to call me Gianni, the name of a popular singer in those days. Because of that naming tradition, when people from our Sicilian community, who knew my grandfather saw me, they followed the custom and called me Luigi, sometimes Luigino, small Luigi or even the diminutive Gino, it happened so often that I stopped corrected them.

In France, most people called me Jean. When we moved again to Canada in 1966, the teacher taking the morning attendance on my first day of class called me 'Gene', a mispronunciation of Jean. I corrected her by pronouncing it Jean and proudly said I was Français. She smiled and apologized. Later in the schoolyard my schoolmates promptly beat me up because they thought that I was French Canadian and therefore must have been a supporter of the Montreal Canadians hockey team, which at the time everyone in Toronto hated. I quickly became John. All this, before the age of 12.

These small changes and adaptations of my first name do not sound like much but they were symptomatic of the cultural changes that created an internal, conscious and subconscious, emotional tug of war that gave birth to the feeling of not belonging and to an alienation that still lingers over 40 years later. Every new culture I was dragged into tried to make me one of their own, and by modifying my name tried to make me abandon the culture I was coming from. Every 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”. The Hyphen that my friend Frank Giorno describes so well in a wonderful poem. How many of the children of our new immigrants are experiencing those feelings, the countries where they are coming from may be different but the experiences are not.

My 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. There, I had a difficult time connecting with the Italo-Canadian community, since I spoke no English, little Italian; only French and some broken Sicilian.

At first I tried to accept the Italian-Canadian culture of my cousins, who had already been in Canada for a while, but I felt different, more like an outsider, even with them. Something was missing. I knew the Italian culture, in terms of the language, food, traditions and expectations. I understood this culture but was never comfortable in it. As I became more immersed in the culture of the host country, I became more of an outcast from my cousins who were more interested in hanging around the pool halls on St. Clair, one particular Italo-Canadian pastime. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but I never felt at ease there, we didn’t do that in France. There was no French culture for me to embrace in our Italian neighbourhood. It was either Italian or English and I veered out of necessity towards English.

This had disastrous consequences on 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 everything my hardworking parents stood for, as they kept reminding me. And yet I was following the pattern I knew best, my French experience. 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. My parents worked, shopped and lived in French.

In Canada, after forty years my parents still have difficulty speaking and understanding English. Their Italian ghettoizing created in them a form of arrested development that soon took over their whole life. 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! My uncles and aunts in France became more French and less Italian as time went by, while my uncle and aunts here in Canada became more Italian and less English-Canadian as time went by. What about the child of immigration, what about me? Here I was a Sicilian-born kid, steeped in French culture dropped into an Italo-Canadian ghetto in Canada, desiring to be part of the dominant English culture, a desire that my parents and their community perceived as a betrayal.

Immigration takes a heavy toll on every member of a family. I understand that, 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. It was not easy. I can attest to that. My parents were, for the most part, economic refugees. As such they had a concentrated purpose – economic gain. All 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, while their sacrifices were being rewarded materially.

They were rewarded by an increasing standard of living, and rewarded psychologically in the belief that they were creating a better life for their children.

Parents also had other advantages. They 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. Together, they could circle the wagons and fend off the demands made of them by the host English-Canadian culture. This physical, linguistic and cultural ghetto protected them.

But what about the children? What happened to them when they left the ghetto? They were suddenly dropped-off at a local school, dropped into a foreign English culture and dropped into a bastion of English immersion. They were often placed several years below their academic levels in lieu of ESL (English as a second language) classes. They were made to feel academically and culturally retarded. And there, they were left to cope with the truncation of the old and bear the brunt of this new culture.

After a day of English 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, and the more they were made to feel bad. As children, they didn't have a defense mechanism to protect themselves. Their parents did not understand 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.

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 were the vehicle of *transformation*. They knew, consciously or subconsciously that they were part of this great change, that they were the transition between their parents' ancestral culture and that of their future children's new Canadian roots. A transition that was not coming easy and that no one in the Italian community seemed to understand.

How did this transition manifest itself? It took different forms for different people. For me, it made it difficult to identify with many aspects of culture. Starting with history! What was my history; was it the history of the Romans, the Gauls, 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 of them are cultural comfort foods. My musical or literary heritage is neither Italian, French, nor is it Canadian. People assume that I know about Canadian popular TV shows of the fifties and sixties, but I wasn't there and 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 is 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.

The commonality exhibited by those children and the children of immigrants today in this journey, and on that bridge, is that none of them ever felt or feel completely at home, with either culture. What made the crossing of this metaphorical bridge more difficult than it should have been for us 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.

To explain the parallel, at funerals we eulogize the person who has passed away, we feel bad that they died and in our eulogy we highlight their good points while, out of respect, minimizing or keeping quiet about the bad points. We remain 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 has internalized that state of mourning and continues to eulogize the Italian culture in their art. You must understand that I am not critiquing their works of art. A lot of these artists are my friends, and a lot of them are brilliant artists in their own right. I am critiquing how they approached their subject and the lack of balance in that approach.

This eulogizing can be both subtle (the use of a word, the turn of a phrase) and at times more obvious (like a story or poem full of nostalgia) but for a long time it has permeated the writing of Italo-Canadians. It was found everywhere. It is the idea of reverence for all that is Italian (or Sicilian or Calabrese or Ciociaro). It is the underlying theme that Italians, in general, are the best and 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 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 have them and that they are there. 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 alcoholism, the backbiting of a small town mindset in a big city, and the effects of mental illnesses that were hidden from view. There have been a few attempts at showing that reality, but for the most part, the artistic community along with the community at large prefers to perpetuate the myths. This is often achieved by over-glorifying the *Italo* in Italo-Canadian or over-dramatizing the journey and the sacrifices of the parent.

I am not criticizing Italian culture either. 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 already 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? And yet it was inevitable that we would assimilate. In fact, how could we not? The inevitable outcome of immigration is one of assimilation and morphing, all we need to do is to just look at our children or our grandchildren, or look at the American experience with their earlier immigration



experience, 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 my friends and I suffered in the 50's and the 60's. I see it in the schools and I see it in the streets. We often blame these teens for the outcome of their frustrations, we see the end result, we see the anger, the violence, the need to belong to a gang, but we forget to see why they are doing that, and we forget to listen to them, and to their stories.

As to the question, who speaks for the children? No one does! In effect, no one can. 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 voice, one that is less sentimental, less nostalgic, less eulogist, and more honest. It is the voice of those children, like myself and my friends who are now grown-up and feel strong and secure enough to speak about it, and it is also the voice of our own children who have crossed the bridge or are about to step off that immigrant bridge in Canada called the *hyphen*.