

TO GIVE ONE THE OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE THEIR KNOWLEDGE, IS TO RENDER THEM MORE CAPABLE TO TAKE ON THE WORLD

Milena Brunetta

My name is Milena Brunetta, and I am twenty-one years old. I was born, and live in the city of Montreal, Canada. I am currently a university student, specializing in Elementary education. While studying, I also work as an English teacher, and a private tutor. I teach English to Chinese students aged five to twelve. These students go to a French school, and attend English classes on Saturdays. I also tutor English, French and math to students aged six to twelve who are struggling with these subjects in school. I have a passion for learning, and increasing my knowledge; furthermore, I strive off of sharing my knowledge with others, especially children. In addition to going to school, and working, I am part of two Italian associations in Montreal, the Basilucania association of Montreal, and COGIC, which is an Italian youth association.

The experiences we have as individuals are different for every one of us.

Furthermore, the way we process similar experiences can differ drastically depending on our outlook on life. These experiences help us to grow as individuals, and give us the opportunity to increase our knowledge. In addition, learning about ones culture allows them to experience something other than the factual knowledge we are used to learning; ones culture connects on a deeper, more emotional level; it is personal and relatable.

Given the opportunity to experience the Italian culture among others from various countries has been an extraordinary experience. We have had many stories to share relating to our Italian culture. It is astounding how different our lives are due to the countries we are respectively living in; however, what connects us in such a profound way is our upbringing as Italians.

Why take such a leap of faith to an unknown place? –

It is difficult to say why my grandparents did not stay in Italy, even though the times were tough. However, I can speculate and say that I think above all, they were thinking of their family and the possibilities this new country could provide; hoping that it would offer more opportunity for not only themselves, but their children. I will say one thing,

I cannot be more appreciative of the strength my grandparents had. I will be forever grateful that they left everything and everyone they knew, and came to Montreal to settle down, for I cannot see myself anywhere but here. I would not be who I am right now without the sacrifices of my grandparents, nor would my parents be, the wonderful people they are. Being able to say that we are Italians living in Canada, is not diminishing, rather it is enriching. My grandparents were able to offer us the best of what it is to be Italian, in a country that is rich of possibilities and promise.

My parents are both of Italian descent. However, they were both born in Montreal, Canada, after their parents, my grandparents, immigrated to Canada from Italy over fifty years ago.

My grandparents from my mother's side are from the region of Basilicata. Both my nonna Maddalena and nonno Vincenzo were born in Acerenza, Italy. After having served in the Second World War, and deteriorating conditions threatened the quality of life, my nonno and nonna wanted to provide for their family, my nonno applied to enter Canada, and was accepted. The voyage took my nonno half way across the sea, and eight days later he set foot in a land not his own, however, ready to conquer and become part of it.

Having left my nonna and uncle behind was difficult, but the sacrifice was set on intentions that embodied a hope of greater fortune. My nonno made his way to Montreal, and for two years worked on a farm looking after livestock. After two years away from his family, my nonno returned to Italy. However, he only stayed two months before making his way back to Montreal, once again on his own. While in Montreal he applied for my nonna and uncle to be able to come to Montreal to join him. After a long four month wait, they were accepted, and were ready to make their way to Canada.

On August 16, 1957, my nonna and uncle, then ten years old, arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax, Canada. From Halifax they made their way to Montreal by train. The beginning of a life surrounded by opportunity, and held together by Italian traditions began its course. At the time that my nonna and uncle went to Montreal, my nonno was renting an apartment only big enough for him, so they moved to a third floor apartment close to downtown. They rented their apartment for \$35 a month, and that did not include heating.

After four years of settling in, they told the first of my nonna's brothers to come live in Montreal. Once he arrived, my nonno was responsible for him for the next five years.

My grandparents from my father's side are from Sicily. Both my nonna Carmela and nonno Giuseppe, were born in Santa Lucia del Mela. My nonno, who I unfortunately never had the chance to meet, as he passed away at a very young age, came to Canada in 1952, after being invited from his sister. He arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax, and then went to meet his sister in Montreal. While in Montreal he lived with his sister and her family. They were 8 people living in one common space. My nonno worked for CN, a train company while living in Montreal. He stayed in Canada for a few years, and then went back to Italy, where he met my nonna, and got married. Together they left Italy in 1956 headed for Canada. The voyage to Montreal was not as smooth as it should have been, as my nonna's belongings were stolen. Once in Montreal, my nonno went back to work for CN. After a little while, my nonna called her sister to join her in Canada.

Today, we can all agree that traveling is relatively easy. If we were to move away from our family for a couple of years, there is a sense of security knowing that whenever we long to go back, we can be on the first flight available. However, I can only imagine the courage it took to leave one's family, as my nonno's and nonna's did, not knowing when they would be able to return, or whether or not they would see one another again. There is an undeniable strength in the individuals who, with blind faith traveled thousands of miles away from everything they knew.

I believe that in coming to Canada, they enriched their lives by combining their Italian culture, with the endless possibilities their new country had to offer.

There are many individuals who are unsure of their identity when it comes to their culture. When speaking with Italian immigrants, or children of Italian immigrants, they sometimes feel as though they don't have a concrete identity, rather they are neither one nor the other; they feel lost, or as we may say, caught in the middle. I, however, have never felt torn between the two; being Italian, and being Canadian. I am not one, nor the other; I am a combination of the two. I have always considered myself an Italo-Canadian. I feel both Canadian and Italian. I feel Canadian because I was born in Canada, and I consider it a great country to live in. I am proud to say that I am Canadian.

However, I am also proud to say that I am Italian, because who I am as an individual is fundamentally based on my Italian heritage.

Although, I grew up in Canada, my family's values, beliefs, and traditions are what grounded me as a person. I must also say that these values, beliefs, and traditions are based on my Italian heritage. To say that I feel more belonging to one, and not the other would be wrong. I feel as though I am at an advantage of being born in Canada, but being brought up through the eyes of an Italian family.

What was it like growing up in Canada as an Italian child? –

Family was very important growing up, and continues to be today. My parents were adamant about me speaking Italian, and knowing my Italian heritage. Therefore, my first language was Italian. I started school, and only knew how to speak Italian. It did not take me long to learn English, as children pick up languages quickly, however, being able to say that my first language was Italian makes me proud. It makes me feel more in touch with my Italian culture. Throughout my elementary years, I, as well as, my brother, attended Italian school on Saturday mornings. This allowed us to socialise with other Italian children. Another big part of my life as a child was spending time at my nonna's.

Food was, and still is, very important in my family. My nonno used to make the typical Italian specialties, which included, sausage, prosciutto, tomato sauce, as well as, wine.

After my nonno's passing, my father continued, and until this day, continues to make wine. My nonna also made/makes traditional desserts, such as, crustada and pastize.

Along with good food, came good conversation. Conversation which led to stories about Italy, and how life was at the time my grandparents left. This also led to descriptions of how they lived, in small houses, working on farms every day, carrying baskets, from the farm to their house, and washing their clothes in the local basin with the rest of the women of the town. These stories were wonderful to hear as a child, and even as I grew older, as it made me imagine this place my grandparents came from.

However, it is when I visited Italy for the first time that I was really able to understand where my grandparents came from. These stories went from being something that were passed on by word of mouth, and imagined abstractly in my mind, to becoming something concrete, and real. Being able to go inside the house my nonna was brought up in, to see where she used to eat, sleep, work, and stay with her family was incredible.

I strongly believe that being connected to ones culture does not only include knowing the history, the language, the traditions, and the culinary aspect; I believe to truly understand ones culture, one needs to physically become part of their culture. The picture perfect landscapes and panoramic views that Italy is blessed with are breathtaking, and once seen really give you a sense of belonging.

I believe, I am the product of a fusion of cultures, taking the best from each to create something unique, on a level that I can relate to both being Italian and being Canadian.

I am Italo-Canadese, and proud to say so.