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AN ITALIAN FOLK STUDY : ESSAY FOR

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An Italian Folk Study

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INTRODUCTION

In the following folk study one will be able to get a bird's-eye view of the Italian's life in his native land and then in the New Country. By reading a number of accounts told by Italian immigrants, one can obtain educational and interesting information of the past. These accounts include factual accounts, folktales, songs and poems.

In the first section a study is done of the Italian in his native land taking into account religion, education, entertainment, courting, and other aspects of importance. The study is based on the life of two immigrants from early childhood to young adulthood between the years 1930 to 1950.

The second section deals with the same two immigrants and the impact of the New Country (Canada) on their lives. This occurs between the years 1950 to 1955.

The accounts in the report are almost exclusively told in the first person. But instead of taking them down in the Italian language spoken they have been translated into English.

. Life in Northern Italy

The following account of Italian life is told by an Italian woman thinking back of how she use to live in Italy and how different the life was then and there then it is here and now.

I was born in the town of Treviso in 1928. The town is located about 100 miles from Venice and had at the time a population of about 5,000. All of the people were Catholics and most practiced their religion by going to mass every Sunday either at the 5:00, 8:00, or 10:00 a.m. mass. Work was always done on Sunday too, but then farm work could hardly be put off at any time.

When I was in my teens, I went to church in a dark suit, and veil. All the women I knew did not wear make-up and if they did especially not church. One time a rich woman of the town wore lipstick to communion and the priest refused to offer her communion. This was scandalous. I came from a poor family, so that a pair of shoes had to last two years. It was three miles to go back home from church so that after my sister and I had gone a mile we would take off our shoes and nylons to preserve them as long as possible.

The church, San Apolinare, was small and had both pews and chairs to sit in. The pews were generally for the muddled-aged and elderly of the parish and were free of charge. The chairs were for the younger crowd, but you had to pay one palanca (about five cents) to sit in them. Having no money I would

have to sit with the old folks and usually next to the nuns so that everyone teased me about becoming a nun.

The priest was usually well provided for by the parishioners, who would give him food and money for his services as both priest and teacher. Education was almost completely taught by the priests and nuns in the area. These were the only persons who could get a higher education for it was ^{NOT} inexpensive. People were encouraged to become members of the clergy by the free education. Other branches of education such as lawyer, or doctor could only be obtained by the wealthy. Most of the farm peasants could not afford to send their children to school and needed them as labors on their farms or "campi".

The majority of the people went to school up to grade four learning the basics--reading, writing, religion and arithmetic. School was only half a day the other half being spent working on the farm. When a child was about eight years old he was expected to take care of the farm animals and then as he got older to plant, hoe, prune, and harvest. There was always something to do.

Entertainment consisted of music, singing, story-telling, drinking wine and popping sun-dried corn. These activities usually took place in the barn since it was the warmest place in winter and the coolest in summer. This was the time when courting took place. Females did not venture out of their houses

after supper, nor did they go to town at any time unescorted. If a man wanted to court a girl he would do it at her house or barn in the presence of other members of her family. He was expected to leave by ten o'clock. If the family was not satisfied with the young man he was discouraged from visiting the girl even though she might have liked him.

Each girl was expected to have a hope chest prepared for her wedding. This hope chest consisted of linens, blankets, embroidered towels and other necessities. I got married when I was twenty-five years-old and my mother thought that was too young. Most girls married when they were about this age and had four to eight children. In Italy rich young men, such as those ^{WHO WERE SONS} of doctors, lawyers never looked at poor girls. Rich people did not associate with peasants. There was four levels of people those that were beggar poor, those that were just poor, those that were members of the clergy and those that were rich.

Our house was a three-story affair built of bricks and had ten bedrooms. In it lived my family and my two uncles (my father's brothers) and their families, so that altogether there were twenty-seven people. My father, the oldest of the three brothers and my two uncles owned the farm jointly, but it was my father's decisions that pulled the most weight among the three.

Five Accounts

¹My neighbors the Feltrahi used to eat cat now and then and always threatened they would trick me into eating some. I always said they never would. You see it was not against the law to eat cat. People never ate it on a regular basis. It was a delicacy like snakes, frog-legs or snails.

Cats in Italy were usually wild creatures hanging out in packs. My father once told us children that he was exploring a hillside one day and found a cave, which upon entering quickly ran out or else be scratched by a dozen or so vicious cats.

Well, just before I left the old country I had to say good-bye to all my neighbors and friends in the vicinity. On entering the Feltrahi's home, they quickly offered me a meal of meat, corn (polenta), and spinach. You might say my last meal. I was rather hungry so I said I wouldn't mind sitting down and having just a bite. I sat down and started to eat, remarking that the meat was especially good. What kind is it? I asked. They laughed and laughed, almost in hysterics. until someone said CAT. Well, I managed a quick thank-you and good-bye and hurried off to find a place in case my stomach decided to give up on me.

²On a windy, dark night about the hour of ten as I was walking home, I heard a thump, thump sound on the road. Somewhat tense I continued walking down the road and toward that

thumping sound, which kept getting closer and closer. Finally, I saw something white sort of hopping in the air and down again. The view of this apparition just froze me. As it came within ten feet of me, I could see that it was not a spectre but a man-- a one-legged man on crutches. It was Rino Caldo, who had had his leg cut off because of gangrene. This disability, however, did not keep him from going about his business. The man liked to wear white clothing so people could see him in the dark and avoid bumping into him.

It can be terrifying at times to walk home in the dark, because the roads are dark, long and very narrow and completely surrounded by forest. All sorts of scary things creep into your mind as you walk on.

³One night as I walked down the road, I suddenly remembered that a man had recently drowned in the creek (il foso) by this very same road. The fact was that the creek was very narrow, but deep so that if anyone fell in head first he would die, unless someone was there to help him at that moment. Well, that is what happened to this man he hit a rock with his bicycle and flipped into the foso.

Well, as I was nearing this point, I was startled by something very huge and ghostly white. It looked like a dog. In ~~far~~, I broke off a branch from a tree and turned to confront it, but it had disappeared. I continued on home thinking I might have seen an illusion.

I was used to the dark, but nevertheless any eerie occurrence

was enough to make one's hair stand on end.

⁴Two men I once knew were walking down a road flanked by trees. On this particular night, Masiano, a twenty-two year-old shoemaker was coming from the opposite direction . Because he was afraid he started singing. The two men heard his singing so they hid behind some high bushes on either side of the road. When Masiano came adjacent to them they cracked branches and made low grumbling sounds. Poor Masiano started to scream and reached home in a state of shock. His five brothers, after finding out what was the cause of his fear , got a small oil lantern and went to see what they could find if anything. They found the broken branches and various hand-made claw-like prints. The Devil had scared him, they told Masiano, who after that went to church more often and avoided going out at night.

⁵I spent eight years of my life from the ages twelve to twenty working for various farm owners as a farm hand. Sometimes these farms I had to work on ^{were only} walking distance from where I lived, but sometimes they were from twenty to fifty kilometers away, so that I had to live at the farmer's house. When there was a whole house of children and no food, the only solution was to send the children off to work. Ninety percent of the money I made went home to the family. Living conditions on the owner's farm were always much better than those at home.

I remember just before World War II, when I was about nineteen, I was working in the field cutting hay at this farmer's house, when I saw my father and older brother going into the farmer's house. I knew they were up to something, but I could not figure out what. I latter found out they were trying to buy a horse. Well, hell just took over me. Can you image a forty-three year-old man buying a horse when he had no money in the first place to buy food. How is he going to feed seven hungry children?

I went home after work and went to bed immediately with the intention of getting up early the next morning and trying to stop my father before he carried out his foolish idea. I got up the next morning and found that he had gone and taken my pet sow as partial payment. I stormed out on the road after him and caught up to him just outside the farmer's house. Well I said, "Give me back my pig. So your going to buy a horse and is that what we are going to eat? You see, my idea was to sell the sow's piglets and get the money to pay off some of our debts and also buy food, but still keep the sow to butcher. The argument went on and on with the flinging of arms and the pacing back and forth, but at the end I won.

Oh my father wasn't the only stubborn one in the family so was I and everyone else in the family. The truth is they are hot-tempered and stubborn to this very day.

Poems and Songs

The Italians have a number of poems which usually serve the purpose of entertainment when sung. The following poem was a favorite of children. It is obviously a Jack and Jill version or at least in many ways similar to it.

Ti Ton e Ti Tee c' andava a nosée.
Ti Ton le mangiava
e Ti Tee le senova.

Translation: Ti Ton and Ti Tee went to gather nuts
Ti Tee gathered them
And Ti Ton ate them all.

It should be noted that the way the poem is written is in the Trevisano language. There are many types of Italian dialects. These depend on the region and province in which Italians live. Some of the other types are: Forlano, Romano, Abbruzze, Calabreze and ~~N~~apoletan.

This next poem is similar to the "There once was a lady of Niger" poem. It points out the idea that once a woman became a widow she was not expected to remain one for long. Since there was a lot of work to be done men were necessary to do it.

Una volta ghi giera un uommo e so femmena
Sentai su una pendola
La pendola se ga rabalta
L'uommo se ga copa
e La femmena se ga marita.

Translation: There once was a man and his wife
sitting on a rock
The rock tipped over
The man got killed
And the woman married.

The last poem which is always sung as a song is of more

significance then the previous two. It is ususally sung by the teenagers of Treviso on March 31st in the campi. It is a fertility rite which is carried out every year. Apparently it has been done for generations. It is not known whether people from other regions of Italy do this also.

The procedure is to bang two hoes, racks or shovels together keeping in step to the beat.

Ding-dong ding
 Aughui è il ultimo de Marso
 Vien la pioggia che cresce l'erba
 Per daire à mangiare à me vachetta
 che no ghi na.
 Domani è il pesce d'Aprile
 Spero che vien tanto pesce
 Per mangiare tutto l'anno.

Translation: Ding-dong ding
 Today is the last of the month
 Rain will come to make the grass grow
 So that my little cow will have to eat
 Because it does not have anything to eat.
 Tomorrow is the fish (first) of April
 I hope that a lot of fish will come
 So that we will have ^{fast} to eat the whole year through.

1. The Italian Immigrant in Canada

As well as struggling for acceptance into the process of integration the Italians have struggled to maintain their identity and to stamp it upon the character of their new homeland. This is quite evident in the city of Trail, which has managed to maintain its various Italian hotels, clubs, festivals and games and to a lesser degree its language. The Columbo Lodge Archives which opened in March of this year in Trail also tells the history of the Italian people in this country.

Reason for migration was basically that of economic circumstance. The great increase in immigration after 1945 was a direct result of World War II. Migration to Trail was due to the considerable amount of work available at the smelter of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company.

On arrival the immigrant is met with the strangeness of all his surrounding, and with an authority whose language he often does not understand and whom he is inclined to distrust even through an interpreter whom he may also distrust. He is from the moment of his arrival a potential victim of swindlers who speak his language and pose as helpful friends.

Acquisition of the language is one of the most important influence on integration. Much depends upon the level of literacy and education the Italian has managed to obtain.

The immigrant learns English in various ways. Some of the

ways are: Through day-to-day social relations with fellow workers, neighbors, friends and service personnel, through instruction which is either provided at night school or on the job, through private organizations, through joint family effort and through private study.

Learning on the job usually insures only specialized knowledge suitable for purely vocational understanding of language and does not provide the immigrant with a basic knowledge of the language necessary in every day life. This has often been the case of the Italian working at the smelter.¹

Two Accounts

¹I arrived in Trail on February 12, 1952. I saw myself surrounded by terrifying mountains and a lot of snow. The closest mountain in Italy was almost thirteen miles away from where I lived and that wasn't even a mountain but a hill. I keep wishing all the time that I could return back to Italy, but I had barely enough money to buy a meal. I went to live with relatives and was unemployed for the first six months. My first job when it finally came was as a construction worker. Soon after I went to night school, which was taught by an Italian. There was about twenty-five other Italians in the class. It wasn't too bad, considering I only had a second grade education. By November of the same year, I had saved enough money to

¹Norris, John, Strangers Entertained: A History of the Ethnic Group of British Columbia. (Vancouver, B.C.: Evergreen Press Limited, 1971).

send for my future wife, who was waiting in Italy.

²I left Genoa, Italy on November 25, 1952 and docked in Halifax on December 10, 1952. It then took five days to reach Nelson. At Nelson, I meet my future husband and his relatives, who took me to Trail. I was surprised to see most of the Canadians richly dressed in furs and wool. What I really hated was having to walk through the slippery snow in shoes. So Woolsworth was the first place we went to on that day ~~to~~ by boots.

In Italy the houses were huge and housed anywhere from fifteen to thirty people, but here they were small like chicken coops. What I really marvelled at was the electricity in them and the easy button controls for turning on a stove, light or the heat.

On December 27, 1952, I married my husband, who had no money, no house and was out of a job. I had to therefore go out and try to find a job to support ourselves. I got a job at the Star Bakery on Rossland Avenue making bread. I would go to work at 2:00 a.m. each morning six days a week and go back home at 3:00 p.m. The wage was forty-three cents an hour. After I would get home, I would help cook supper for my newly aquired aunt and then latter wash the dishes, iron clothes, wash clothes, or floors or whatever else had to be done. Somehow I don't think we ever had any entertainment except for listening to the radio and talking for an hour before we went to bed.

On the first day that I started work the Italian boss told me to come to work the next day at 2:00 a.m., but he told me this in English so I would start to pick up the language immediately. So all the way home I would repeat the words to myself. When I got home I asked my aunt what they meant and she told me. Not knowing the language was one of my major problems.

One snowing morning as I was going to work two policeman in their patrol car stopped me and asked me where I was going. I did not know what they were saying, so I kept repeating the name Star Bakery over and over. They signaled for me to get into their car and I did, thinking all the time they were going to take me to jail. However, they dropped me off at the bakery and left me alone after that.

Conclusion:

I hope you the reader have found this report on Italian life during the years 1930 to 1952 enlightening.