The *Italian Heritage Project*

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In 1953, Livia Tonin (**Figure 1**) left the small Italian town of Casacorba, in the Veneto region of Northern Italy, embarking on an 11-day sea voyage from Genoa to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and into an unknown future. She bid goodbye to her childhood home, a two-bedroom flat which housed 18 immediate and extended family members, along with their cow. After a long passage across the Atlantic Ocean, Livia arrived in Halifax and journeyed by train to Guelph, Ontario, where she was finally met by her fiancé, Gino. Together they built a new life, one punctuated by trials, tribulations, and adventures.

Livia's account is one of several stories recently exhibited by the *Italian Heritage Project*, an experiential learning initiative at the University of Guelph whose aim is to collect and curate personal narratives, oral histories, and physical artifacts contributed by Italian immigrants to Canada, particularly those within the Guelph-Wellington area. Developed in collaboration with the Italian Canadian Archives Project (ICAP) and aided by a grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *Italian Heritage Project* consists of an experiential learning course connected to an online repository hosted by the University of Guelph's McLaughlin Library.

The project's genesis was in the fall semester of the 2015-2016 academic year, when an experiential learning and community engagement component was added to the core language curriculum at the School of Languages and Literatures, a department of the College of Arts. This addition coincided with a more general need to preserve Italian-Canadian cultural heritage. To this end, Dr. Sandra Parmegiani, Head of European Studies and Italian Studies at the department, began a community-engaged experiential learning course for students who had declared a minor in Italian Studies and who wished to preserve the stories of the local Italian-Canadian community. The author, one of Dr. Parmegiani's students, enrolled in a Digital Humanities Summer Workshop at the University of Guelph's McLaughlin Library and worked with the library's staff to build the website. Using a locally-hosted version of Omeka, an online platform for digital collections and exhibits, the *Italian Heritage Project* website displays material gathered and assembled in the experiential learning course. Students' participation and community members' collaboration form the pillars of the project.

Although the *Italian Heritage Project* is still in development, those involved intend to continue building the website as a collaborative, ICAP-affiliated repository in which the heritage work conducted in individual Italian-Canadian communities can be shared. Beyond the project's digital boundaries, students and community members are currently planning a physical archive which will eventually be housed in the Guelph-Wellington community.

For many of the contributors and students, collecting or sharing these stories has been a deeply moving experience. Contributors' stories and artifacts afford an intimate glimpse into the lived experiences of Italian immigrants to Canada. Tradesmen and women brought their tools, their letters, and their jewelry, mostly things of sentimental value. These objects now offer us a delightful insight into the lives of these individuals who redefined themselves and embraced new and complex composite identities.

Livia Tonin did not bring many belongings when she set out from Casacorba: a few clothes, some essentials, and a small alarm clock which today she keeps in a display cabinet in her living room. Recalling her journey, Livia recounted losing her engagement ring while she washed her hands mid-voyage. The cause of much trepidation *en route*, the mishap later generated much laughter—and Gino, her then-fiancé and later husband, never replaced it! After settling down in her adoptive home of Canada, Livia never looked back; she did not mourn the loss of her childhood home. Canada became her home and she adopted it with joy and determination. Other participants shared some of the obstacles which they encountered in Canada and which made them question their resolve. One related the experience of giving birth in a hospital in which none of the doctors or nurses could communicate in her native Italian. Another contributor did not intend to leave Italy forever; despite having lived in Guelph for more than five decades, he is always planning his return.

Since its inception, several student researchers working on the *Italian Heritage Project* have been moved to research their own family histories. As one student, Alaina Osborne, noted in her work on her family archive, "The photographs represent layers of historical, social and personal meaning that affect how I choose to articulate the narratives of my grandparents' lives [...] Because I am related to the subjects of my research, my maternal grandparents, I am innately emotionally tied to their individual stories. (Italian Heritage

Project 2016). Through the exploration of family documents, heirlooms, and artifacts, and by tracing the stories of relatives who have passed, students have pieced together fascinating details, even unraveling decades-old mysteries about the lives of their ancestors.

These stories, at once deeply personal and yet able to transcend cultural barriers, speak to fundamental human experience and help to constitute a shared Canadian history. By collecting, curating, and sharing these stories, the *Italian Heritage Project* engages in a selective and productive dialogue with history and with cultural heritage as it explores the intimate relationship between Canada and its migrant populations. Contributors' stories are eloquent testimonies of migration, a theme which is particularly resonant today. Yet

these stories risk disappearance as populations age and memories fade. The *Italian Heritage Project* hopes to afford the oral histories, memories, and lived experiences of the Italian-Canadian community of Guelph-Wellington (and beyond) a place where they can be collected, curated, and preserved.

References

Italian Heritage Project. 2016. The Italian Heritage Project [Internet]. Guelph (ON): University of Guelph; [cited 2017 August 12]. Available from: <https://italianheritage.lib.uoguelph.ca/>.

Figure 1: Livia Tonin, 1953. Kindly reproduced with permission from Livia Tonin and the *Italian Heritage Project*.