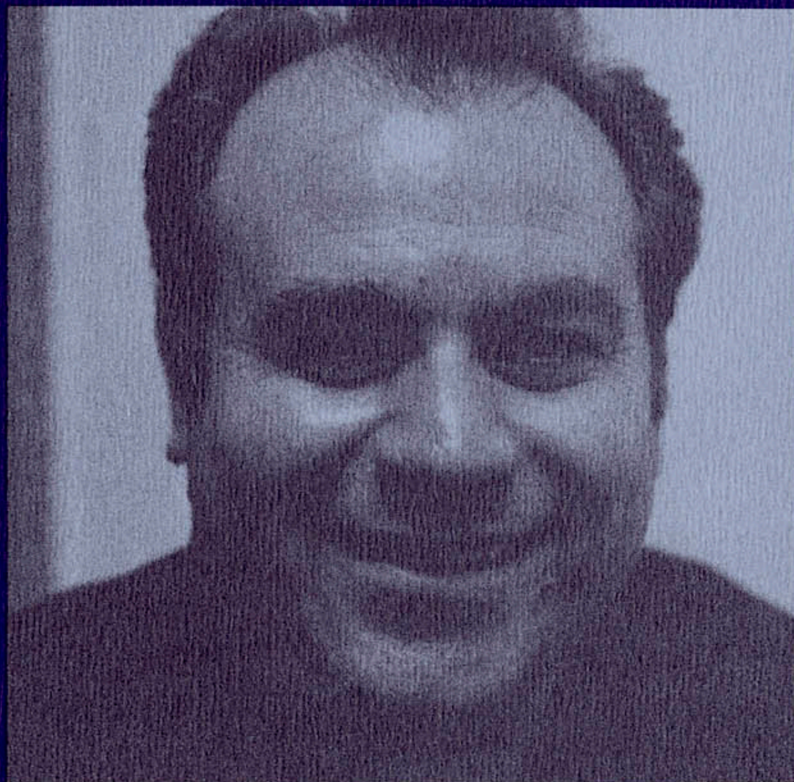
THE ITALIANS



IN CANADA

Bruno Ramirez

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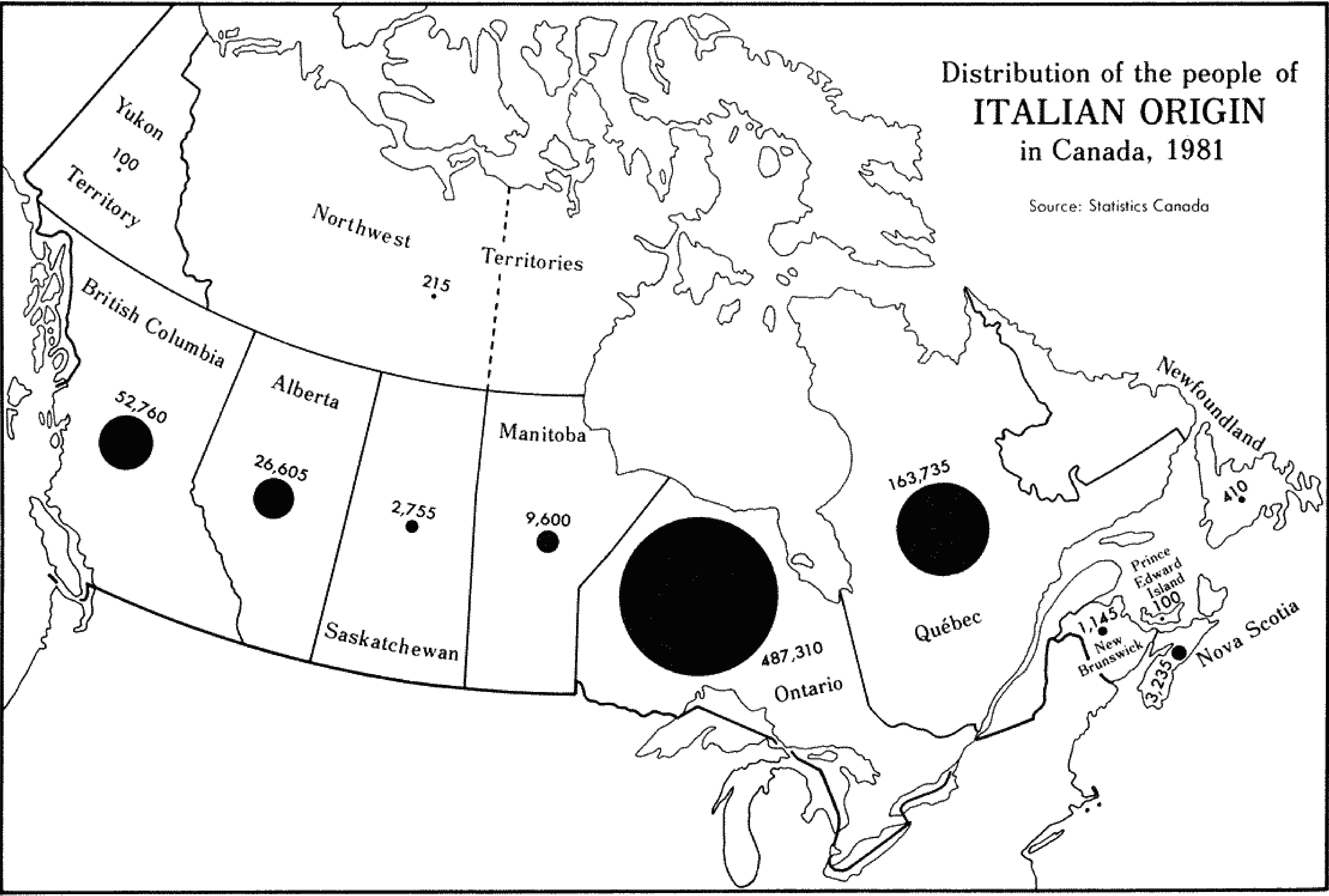
Distribution of the people of
ITALIAN ORIGIN
in Canada, 1981
Source: Statistics Canada
Yukon
100
Territory
Northwest
Territories
215
British Columbia
52,760
Alberta
26,605
2,755
Saskatchewan
Manitoba
9,600
487,310
Ontario
163,735
Québec
Newfoundland
410
Prince
Edward
Island
100
1,145
New
Brunswick
3,235
Nova Scotia

THE ITALIANS IN CANADA

Bruno Ramirez

I — ITALY, A COUNTRY OF EMIGRATION

Since the creation of the Italian State, in 1861, emigration has profoundly marked the social and economic life of the peninsula. Once the climate of political and social turmoil associated with the creation of the new Italian State subsided, emigration took on the character of a powerful movement englobing virtually the entire territory of the country. Between 1861 and the end of the 19th century, seven million Italians took the path of emigration. With the onset of the 20th century, the movement reached an unprecedented magnitude, becoming the country's number one social and economic problem. In 1901 — the record year in the history of Italian emigration — out of a total population of 33 millions, as many as 533,245 Italians crossed the border to work and live in a foreign land.

Only the international upheavals brought about by the two world wars, as well as the fascist take-over of the Italian State (1922-1943), had the effect of curtailing significantly the exodus. But these developments turned out to be mere parentheses in a century-long phenomenon; for in the aftermath of World War Two the plague of emigration reappeared as forceful as ever, and in the course of the following 30 years, another seven million Italians left their homeland.

Although during periods of intense political conflicts — such as the 1850s, the 1890s, and the 1920s — important contingents of militants were forced to expatriate themselves to escape political persecution, the emigration phenomenon in Italy has had its roots primarily in the country's economic conditions. In the majority of cases, behind the act of emigrating there has been a desire to escape poverty and material privations, and to seek a better future in some foreign land. From at least the 18th century, itinerant artisans from a number of Italian towns travelled to the most important capitals of both the West and the East to sell their rare skills. And in a number of northern districts, seasonal border migration into France, Switzerland or Austria had been a way of life for many generations. However, the mass exodus that followed the unification of Italy grew to a large extent from the economic and political consequences associated with the transition toward industrial capitalism, and from the unprecedented transformation of the world labour market.

From the outset, the industrialization of Italy was marked by a considerable degree of territorial concentration. Its most immediate effect was to accentuate the disparities which already existed between regions which were commercially advanced and regions which lagged behind in terms of economic resources and infrastructures. Thus, in the more advanced northern sections of the peninsula — such as Piedmont and Lombardy — the existence of a modern entrepreneu-

rial class, coupled with the region's proximity to the major European commercial circuits, created the conditions most propitious for an industrial take-off. These factors, of course, should not be disassociated from the economic and fiscal policies undertaken by the new Italian State, which had the effect of favouring industrializing activities to the detriment of agriculture. In a capitalist economy which had not experienced an agricultural revolution, the plight of farmers and peasants was made even worse by the unusually heavy taxation imposed on agricultural activities. Consequently, in those cases in which the local agrarian economy proved unable to integrate itself into a rapidly expanding industrial economy, marginalization and underdevelopment became the inevitable outcomes.

It is no coincidence that the first regions to experience massive emigration were those which were closest to the major poles of industrialization. In rural areas surrounding such industrial centers as Turin, Milan, Genoa, Leghorn, Vicenza, Biella, the social and economic fabric which had survived for generations was rapidly engulfed by the destabilizing effects of the new forces of production. The emigrants who fled these areas were not only peasants and small farmers who found themselves pushed aside by an expanding commercial agriculture; among them were also large numbers of artisans whose traditional trades were rendered obsolete by the new techniques associated with factory production. There were also small merchants who, powerless, had been watching the disappearance of the local markets on which they had long based their economic activities. The northern regions were of course the ones more directly affected by this process of economic destabilization, and this explains why during the 30 years that followed the unification of Italy, it was this section of the country that supplied by far the largest contingents of emigrants. Thus, up to 1891, 67 per cent of the emigrant population originated from the North, as against 11 per cent from the Central regions and 22 per cent from the South.

These figures, however, conceal a tendency which had been developing for one or two decades, but which would reveal itself fully only after the turn of the 20th century: the rise of a strong migration movement spreading throughout the southern regions, as the effects of industrial capitalism penetrated the Italian South. The latter found itself ill equipped to adjust to the demands of the new economic order. At first, the rural masses of these regions tried to protect themselves by exploiting to the utmost its centuries-old subsistence economy. But the anarchic commercialization of timber resources that marked the post-unification era showed its tragic consequences for the soil condition of vast agricultural areas; in many hilly and mountainous regions, the delicate balance between pasturage and farming was destroyed forever. Increasingly, hard-pressed farm-owners sought security in quick profits by sacrificing land improvements and by imposing oppressive working and living conditions on their waged agricultural workforce. Soon soil exhaustion, the chronic lack of capital, and a growing indebtedness prevailed, throwing these regions into a state of economic stagnation from which only a few could recover.Consequently, by the turn of the

century the epicentre of the exodus had shifted into these regions, and the "Southern Question" had became the major national issue around which the political forces of the country clashed.

When in 1907 the Italian Parliament undertook one of the most thorough inquiries into the agricultural conditions of the Italian South, the factors linking emigration to agricultural underdevelopment and economic stagnation were evident to all observers. The "southern question" had become inseparable from emigration. One only needs to read the numerous contemporary reports and testimonies; people emigrated to escape usury, or to be able to pay their debts, or to ensure the dowry for a daughter or a sister; others left with the hope of accumulating the savings necessary to buy a small plot of land; a large number of youths chose to seek a wage abroad rather than waste two years of their life in the army as conscripts. As village upon village in the South emptied themselves of their youngest labour force, amid endless political debates about the crisis, it soon became evident that the emigrants had found their own solution to the "Southern Question". It was a solution, of course, which sanctioned the state of structural dependence of the South vis-à-vis the North; but one, nonetheless, which allowed hundreds of thousands of peasants to insert themselves within some of the most advanced sectors of the North Atlantic economy, and to tie their destiny not to the motherland that had betrayed and humiliated them, but to distant societies where wage exploitation contained within it the seeds of a new life.

The country that emerged from the ruins of World War Two was one which inherited an economic structure marked by the deep division between North and South. Not only had fascism done little to change that reality, but by stopping the emigration flow and by encouraging a high birth rate, it had accelerated the formation of an enormous reservoir of labour power. The latter would become the main resource that the political leadership of the newly created republic would offer to its international partners in the vast process of economic reconstruction of post-war Europe. A new generation of emigrants took the path that their uncles or grand-fathers had taken some decades earlier. Others set their compass toward countries which had been little touched by the first emigration wave. Probably nobody at the time thought that in one of those countries — Canada — Italians would constitute one of the largest immigrant communities.

II — ITALIAN EMIGRATION TO CANADA

Historically, the emigration movement from Italy has radiated toward three major geographical areas: Western Europe, South America and North America. The choice of Western Europe is easily understandable, owing to the region's geographical proximity. Among the overseas destinations, Latin America, and particularly Brasil and Argentina, first attracted the largest contingents of Italian immigrants. The United States, which had long relied on immigration

from the British Isles and northern Europe, did not open its door to large numbers of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe until the 1880s. As the United States entered an unprecedented cycle of industrial expansion making the need for unskilled and semiskilled labour most acute, it rapidly became the principal overseas destination for Italian emigrants. Between 1880 and 1920, as many as four million Italians entered the United States. It is within this broader process of industrialization affecting much of North America that Canada became a destination for Italian immigrants. Although the migration stream toward Canada would soon develop its own dynamics, its volume remained quite limited compared to that attracted by the United States. Its importance, however, would grow significantly during the post-World War Two wave of emigration.

During the 19th century, the presence of Italians in Canada was practically limited to Montreal. As the century progressed, smaller pockets of Italians began to appear in Toronto and in the Okanagan Valley. These early immigrants were mostly isolated individuals, often single males, involved in trade, or itinerant artisans attracted by the opportunities that growing commercial centres could offer. In most cases, it was from their ranks that a community leadership emerged, providing some initial infrastructures for the subsequent influx of Italian laborers. Only toward the end of the century did Italians began to enter Canada in large numbers. This first wave of immigration was mostly temporary and seasonal in character and was associated with the large projects of railroad and canal construction and with the natural resources industries. As early as 1888 about 600 Italian laborers were reported working in the construction of the Hereford Line, in Southeastern Quebec. Other important contingents could be found in the Ontario hinterland and in the West. Often these early immigrants were recruited directly from the major American metropolitan areas. At the end of the season, those who did not return to the United States or to their villages in Italy, tended to converge toward Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver, where the prospects of finding work and lodging for the winter months were more real. Soon, however, the emergence in Montreal and Toronto of large and resourceful employment agents acting in concert with steamship companies, made it possible to recruit workers directly from Italy, thus laying the base for a permanent migration stream between Italy and Canada.

The official statistics show clearly the progressive attraction that Canada exerted for Italian immigrants (see Table One). From 1890 to 1898, according to Italian statistics, an average of 360 Italian immigrants per year entered Canada. Starting from 1899, the annual average surpassed the 1000 mark, climbing rapidly to 5,930 in 1905. The crest of the movement occurred in 1913, when as many as 27,704 Italians entered Canada. By 1921, largely on account of natural increase, the population of Italian origin living in Canada stood at 66,769. Although the early 1920s witnessed a reactivation of the migration stream from Italy, it was only from the late 1940s on that Italian emigration to Canada would expand into a major movement (see Table Two). From 1948 to 1972, Italy would

TABLE 1

ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA (1901 -1978)

Years	Number	% of Total Canadian Immigration
1901 - 1910	58,104	3.5
1911 - 1920	62,663	3.7
1921 - 1930	26,183	2.1
1931 - 1940	3,898	2.4
1941 - 1950	20,682	4.2
1951 - 1960	250,812	15.9
1961 - 1970	190,760	13.5
1971 - 1978	37,087	3.1

be the second only to Great Britain as the source of Canadian immigration.

Several factors have favoured the development of this immigration movement. In the first place, the particular evolution of the Canadian labour market engendered a growing demand for unskilled labour which was willing to accept the uncertainty of seasonal work and the physical hardship associated with railroad and canal construction. According to data published by a 1904 Royal Commission, on that year, out of a total workforce of 8,576 men in the employ of the Canadian Pacific Railway, 3,144 were Italians. One may suspect that a significant proportion of these Italian workers had been introduced to Canada by Montreal- or Toronto-based Italian labour agents (known as *padroni*). Canada's less restrictive immigration laws gave *padroni* and employers a much freer hand in resorting to forms of recruitment, such as contract labour, which in the United States had been outlawed in the 1880s. Moreover, the widespread pattern of return migration marking the early stage of the movement produced its own network of information, and thus contributed to making Canada better known to other Italian villagers contemplating emigration. To these initial dynamics, it is important to add the accelerating effect produced by the forming of migration chains linking Italian villages with specific locations in Canada. Recent studies, for instance, have shown that by the end of the first decade of the 20th century a significant number of migration chains, based on kinship as well

TABLE 2

PEOPLE OF ITALIAN ORIGIN IN CANADA
(1871-1981)

Years	Men	Women	Total	% of canadian population
1871	?	?	1,035	0.03
1881	?	?	1,849	0.04
1891	?	?	2,795*	0.06
1901	?	?	10,834	0.20
1911	34,651	10,760	45,411	0.63
1921	39,722	27,047	66,769	0.75
1931	55,141	43,032	98,173	0.94
1941	61,669	50,956	112,625	0.97
1951	84,914	67,331	152,245	1.08
1961	240,905	209,446	450,351	2.46
1971	383,955	346,865	730,820	3.38
1981	389,995	357,975	747,970	3.10

* Individuals born in Italy.

as on relationships among co-villagers, linked Montreal to several dozen villages in the upper southern regions of Molise and Campania. These networks acted as support mechanisms for new individuals and families arriving to Montreal, and helped lay the base for a more balanced community life. Similar tendencies have been noticed in the history of Italian settlement in Toronto and in other Canadian cities. All the southern regions of Italy, with the exception of Sardinia, became major sources of immigration to Canada. Latium and the Marches in central Italy also sent large contingents of immigrants, whereas northern Italians

choosing Canada came primarily from the Friuli region and from the Venetian backcountry.

Similar socioeconomic forces were at work in the revival of the immigration movement from Italy after World War Two. The unprecedented expansion in the Canadian labour market in the post-war era gave Italy the opportunity to act as a leading supplier of unskilled and semi-skilled labour. This development was greatly favoured by the policy of sponsorship enacted by the Canadian government: prospective immigrants could be admitted to Canada as long as residing relatives agreed to act as sponsors and assume the financial responsibility for the newcomers during the period of their settlement. Of all immigrant groups, Italians were the ones who took the most advantage of the sponsorship system. More than 90 per cent of all Italians who entered Canada between 1946 and 1967 were sponsored by their Canadian relatives. Thus, one of the effects of this policy was to reactivate the migration networks which had previously linked the two countries but which had been interrupted by the advent of fascism and the war. At the same time, new networks came into being, performing the same role as pull mechanisms and contributing to the particular regional composition that one finds in the various Italian-Canadian communities. It should not be surprising, then, that when a new immigration policy was enacted in 1967 restricting the sponsorship system and basing the selection of new entrants on labour-market considerations, the influx of Italians fell drastically, and by 1972 they made up only 3.8 per cent of the total immigrant entries into Canada.

III — THE ITALIANS IN CANADA

a. *The Urban Choice.*

Despite the high degree of geographical mobility which marked the experience of the early contingents of Italian labourers in Canada, by the first decade of the 20th century Italian communities or "colonies" — as they were often called — had become part of the urban landscape of some of the major Canadian cities. In 1911, for instance, more than two thirds of the population of Italian origin was concentrated in Montreal and Toronto. This tendency reinforced itself during the second wave of immigration. Thus in 1976 as much as 90 per cent of the Italian population resided in urban centers of 100,000 and more; 69 per cent of them were concentrated in cities with a population of one million and more. If one translates these figures at the provincial level, it means that Ontario and Quebec together have become the residential choice for more than two thirds of the Italian immigrant population. But while in Ontario a significant proportion of that population settled in urban centers outside Toronto — such as Ottawa, Hamilton, Guelph, Windsor, or Thunder Bay — in Quebec the Italian population has traditionally remained concentrated within the Montreal metropolitan area. Outside central Canada, the pattern has been similar to that observed in Ontario (see Table Three). Major cities such as Vancouver, Edmonton, and Winnipeg have attracted by far the largest contingents of

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF PEOPLE OF ITALIAN ORIGIN IN CANADA (1901-1981)

Year	Maritimes	Quebec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia	N.W.T.
	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %	N %
1901	357 (3.3)	2,805 (25.9)	5,233 (48.3)	329 (3.0)	1,976 (18.2)	134 (1.2)
1911	1,378 (3.0)	9,608 (20.9)	21,440 (46.6)	3,473 (7.6)	9,997 (21.8)	67 (0.1)
1921	2,013 (3.0)	16,141 (24.2)	33,355 (50.0)	6,650 (10.0)	8,587 (12.8)	23 (0.0)
1931	2,330 (2.4)	24,845 (25.3)	50,536 (51.5)	8,185 (8.3)	12,254 (12.5)	23 (0.0)
1941	2,794 (2.5)	28,051 (24.9)	60,085 (53.3)	8,368 (7.4)	13,292 (11.8)	35 (0.0)
1951	3,288 (2.2)	34,165 (22.4)	87,622 (57.6)	9,906 (6.5)	17,207 (11.3)	57 (0.0)
1961	5,278 (1.2)	108,552 (24.1)	273,864 (60.8)	23,914 (5.3)	38,399 (8.5)	344 (0.0)
1971	5,750 (0.8)	169,655 (23.2)	463,095 (63.4)	38,115 (5.2)	53,795 (7.4)	410 (0.0)
1981	4,790 (0.6)	163,735 (21.9)	487,310 (65.2)	38,960 (5.2)	52,760 (7.1)	? (?)

Italians without preventing the emergence of Italian settlements in smaller cities such as Nanaimo and Kitimat, in British Columbia, Calgary and Lethbridge, in Alberta, or Transcona and St. Boniface in Manitoba. In the Atlantic region, of particular historical significance are the Italian communities that have grown in the mining and steel-producing towns of Cape Breton. Most of these smaller urban settlements are yet to be included in the research agenda of immigration historians.

This conspicuous preference for urban life may appear difficult to reconcile with the predominantly peasant origin of this immigrant population. In reality, despite the agricultural background common to many Italian immigrants, the typical agricultural commune which sent its emigrants to Canada resembled more an urban island inserted within the mostly mountainous countryside. In most cases, these "agro-towns" had populations whose size ranged from 2,000 to as high as 10,000. Even the smallest agro-town had a long tradition of urban-based socioeconomic and cultural activities, as it was the residential seat of all the population including those involved in agricultural activities. In the areas that supplied the largest contingents of emigrants to Canada, farmers living in isolation on their farms constituted the exception rather than the rule.

The choice of residing in the large and middle-size Canadian cities may also be explained in terms of the particular dynamics of the Canadian labour market as well as the occupational background of Italian immigrants. After the initial work experience in the Canadian hinterland, Italian laborers tended to be attracted to large urban centers such as Montreal and Toronto, and to a lesser extent Vancouver. The rapid growth of these metropolitan areas in the early 20th century created a strong demand for day laborers, particularly in the construction and maintenance of city roads, sewer systems, and the other types of urban infrastructures. Moreover, industrial plants, such as the mammoth railway shops in Montreal and Toronto, employed increasing numbers of Italian laborers. At the same time, the city offered those Italian immigrants who had entrepreneurial ambitions the chance to start a small business or to practice artisanal trades which they may have learned in their villages. Some Italian immigrants endured years of hardship and uncertainty as day labourers in the hope of accumulating a small initial capital sufficient to start a business. For some of them this vision became a reality as barber shops, shoe-repair shops, grocery stores, fruit and vegetable stores, bakeries, and similar types of small businesses began to dot the landscape of Italian neighborhoods.

Often catering primarily to Italian customers, some of these businesses proved springboards for successful entrepreneurial careers. Thus, as the research of John Zucchi has shown, immigrants from the Sicilian agro-town of Termini Imerese, who had brought with them a knowledge of the fruit trade, were able, once in Toronto, to penetrate this sector of the urban economy and attain a position of quasi-monopoly. Other immigrants found less ambitious ways to utilize their previous agricultural skills and adapt them to an urban environ-

ment. In Montreal, for instance, a sizeable number of Italian immigrants were able to contract work as gardeners for the wealthy Westmount families. And the settlement of the Mile-End neighborhood (later to become Montreal's main "Little Italy") in the northern outskirts of the metropolis seems to have been stimulated largely by the availability of unoccupied fields which made it possible to grow gardens as an additional support for the family economy.

As Italian residential enclaves began to expand and acquire a life of their own, their force of attraction for newcomers proved to be significant. The newcomers could now attend mass in an Italian parish; they could do their shopping in their own language; they could celebrate with friends and relatives their patron saint; and increasingly they could find partners and start a family. To a lesser extent, similar dynamics have been observed in the history of other urban centres which had Italian settlements; railroad towns such as Fort William or Port Arthur, mining and steel towns such as Sudbury, Glace Bay, Hamilton, and Sydney, or still forest industry capitals such as Vancouver. During the large immigration wave of the post-World War II era, the sponsorship policy was a powerful factor determining the urban destination of the majority of Italian newcomers. Moreover, in the industrial and metropolitan areas of Ontario and Quebec, Italians were primarily attracted to the construction industry, light manufacturing, and in the services (especially trade). These occupational trends were reinforced by the fact that, compared to those who had immigrated in the early 20th century, a larger proportion of the newcomers possessed a more diversified work experience often acquired in previous migrations to northern Italy or to other European countries. One important result was their growing participation in labour unionism, both in construction and in some of the major manufacturing sectors. Another aspect of the post-war immigration era which also explains the preference for urban life is the relatively high proportion of Italian women who have entered the labour market. Although in most cases it was the clothing industry that absorbed this female workforce, it has been a development reflecting a particular strategy of settlement and a particular conception of the family economy.

b. *Italian Familialism in the Canadian Context.*

Several studies on the history of Italian immigration to Canada have stressed the central role of the family (both nuclear and extended) as agent of adaptation to the new socioeconomic realities of the host society. Italian immigrants brought with them a notion of the family that rested on strict norms of authority, mutual responsibilities and honour. The family was viewed essentially as a cooperative enterprise whose material and emotional well-being was dependent on the specific roles that the various members were expected to perform. The father's traditional role as provider and as guardian of the family's morality tended to reinforce the domestic confines within which the roles of wives and daughters had to be performed. But domesticity implied a number of responsibili-

ties which were crucial to the maintenance of the peasant household economy. The production of home-made articles for both familial use and for local exchange, the processing of food to be preserved, the raising of domestic animals, the tending of the family's vegetable plot, were all tasks that were integrated into the normal reproductive functions of a wife or mother. Wage labour outside the home tended then to be discouraged unless — as happened in harvest seasons — it was a form of gang work in which the woman laboured along with kin or trusted co-villagers.

In the urban universe of the Canadian city, Italian immigrants sought to preserve their familial values, and when necessary adjust them to the new economic imperatives. Several of the household tasks mentioned above could be transplanted into the new setting, and proved vital to the material survival of the family. In addition, given the large surplus of single men characterising the early stages of settlement, Italian women could take in boarders, thus integrating a cash-yielding task into their regular domestic functions. During the early stage of settlement and throughout the interwar period, the servicing of boarders was undoubtedly the most common form of paid labour performed by Italian women. In general, Italian families tended to rely on the additional wages of their children rather than sending mothers or wives out to work. In fact, the earliest examples of Italian women working outside the home involved second-generation girls who were mostly employed in the clothing industry of Montreal and Toronto.

The large-scale encounter of Italian immigrant women with the Canadian labour market is a development that occurred mostly during the post-World War Two era. The unprecedented expansion and diversification of the urban economy gave Italian newcomers a wider range of possibilities to pursue economic strategies that would allow them to preserve their traditional familial values. To be sure, the mostly peasant background of Italian women, coupled with language difficulties, limited considerably the range of occupations at their disposal. Thus, in general Italian women opted for jobs, such as in clothing, in food processing and other types of light manufacturing as well as services, where they could work and travel in the company of other Italian women, often relatives and co-villagers. Moreover, in such workplaces Italian women were often supervised by foremen who were of Italian origin, thus easing the pressure to learn English or French. In their adjustment to the Canadian urban labour market, Italian mothers could often rely on informal support mechanisms provided by kin, relatives and neighbors, which ensured supervision of children during the mothers' absence. During the critical periods of child-bearing and rearing, some Italian mothers could contract needle work to be done at home.

Needless to say, the additional income derived from women's labour proved crucial in the pursuit of an economic strategy. During the 1950s and 1960s, in fact, most Italian men worked in the construction industry or in sectors of the labour market characterized by seasonal and irregular employment. But the

monetary contribution of women as well as children was also part of a cooperative familial effort to attain a degree of security and independence. Probably no other goal figured higher in the priorities of this strategy than the ownership of a house. This ancestral desire for a measure of economic and psychic security to be concretized in the possession of a house became part of Italian migration folklore: during the post-World War Two era, one of the most popular songs in Italy spoke of "a little house in Canada which had a pool with fish inside, was surrounded by lots of lily flowers, and was admired by passers-by". Despite the esthetics emphasis placed on this popular image of the good life, the ownership of a house allowed Italian immigrants to fulfill important economic and cultural objectives. The house, in fact, gave them considerable autonomy to pursue a variety of domestic activities associated with the household economy, as well as a degree of independence and status in the organizing of social functions among relatives and co-villagers.

The deployment of these mechanisms of adjustment to the new economic imperatives has tended to strengthen the socializing effects of the family. Italian children have been nurtured in the traditional familial values of obedience, parental respect, morality, and hard work, and are expected to contribute to the family's cooperative effort. The family, then, has become a seat of intense kin interaction which, however conflictual it might have been, has encouraged continuation of relations, even beyond marriage, and has enhanced the retention of their heritage language. In the typical post-war Italian immigrant family, the main tendency has been for children to speak Italian (most often a regional dialect) at home, and English or French with their teachers or schoolmates.

Particular parental supervision has been applied in the socialization of female children. Here again Italian parents have tended to carry over into the modern Canadian metropolis a strong concept of domesticity which has set clear boundaries to the social freedom of their daughters, and to their career expectations. At the same time, unlike the peasant universe they had left, in Canada the schooling of children extended over a much longer period of time, thus putting a severe strain on the supervisory role of parents. The assault on social and cultural values which marked the educational environment of many Canadian cities in the late 60s and early 70s proved to be a severe test for the strategy of acculturation of many Italian families, particularly as it coincided with the massive entry of Italian Canadian youth into the high-school and college system. Although research on this question has been very limited, it is fair to suggest that in general the Italian family has proved capable of absorbing the shocks of intergenerational conflict, giving way to *modi vivendi* which have permitted some basic familial values to persist into the 1980s. Thus, the strong tendency among Italian Canadian male students to orient themselves toward commercial and technical occupations, and the equally strong tendency among their female counterparts to enter the labour market soon after school and to interrupt their working careers with marriage, have been more often than not the

result of parental guidance and parental projections of success. Moreover, familial interaction has marked the transition to adulthood as former Italian children have proved willing to trade-off a measure of autonomy in their adult and married life with a strong sense of responsibility and obligation toward their aging parents.

The effectiveness of this type of socialization process has been greatly enhanced by the insertion of the family within kinship networks, providing a wider context for ethnicity-based social and cultural relations. The importance of these relations for Italian Canadians has often found a clear expression in their residential choices and in their marked preference for a neighborhood-based face-to-face life. A study done in Montreal in the mid-sixties found that two out of three of the sampled Canadian-born Italians had their nearest close relative living in the same building or within a five-minute walking distance. The study also found that — excluding cost considerations — more than half the Italian Canadians sampled had chosen to buy a house in a given area because they already knew the neighborhood and because relatives and other Italians lived nearby.

The massive urban relocation experienced by most Canadian cities and the rapid demographic changes affecting Italo-Canada in the past 20 years have done little to alter the centrality of the family. Well into the eighties, Italian familialism continues to provide the most immediate parameters for the ongoing acculturation of an ethnic group whose presence has become an integral part of Canadian life.

c. *Acculturation and Associational Life.*

The centrality of family and kin-based relations among Italian immigrants has not prevented the development of larger community institutions aimed at recreating a cultural universe in which they could maintain alive their traditions and sense of identity. From the earliest stages of Italian settlement in Canada, one may observe the presence of ethnic associations: in Montreal during the 1870s; in Toronto during the 1880s; in Trail, B.C., starting in 1905, and in Fort Williams, Vancouver, Sydney and other Canadian cities, a few years later. As the immigration flow grew in volume and as settlement became an irreversible process, associational life became richer and increasingly differentiated, providing an important barometer of the complexity of acculturation of Italians in Canada.

Various types of associations came into being depending on the specific local context, on the particular needs of their members, and on precise sociopolitical conjunctures. Undoubtedly the most typical form of association, particularly during the first stage of settlement, was the mutual aid society. Some Italians had known mutual aid societies in their home-towns; others learned about them for the first time once in the new world. In both cases, these societies constituted a

form of association which clearly expressed the needs of an immigrant population that lacked the means of access to Canadian civil society, and which saw itself highly vulnerable to the unpredictability of the labour market and to the harshness of the working conditions to which Italian labourers often had to submit. This associational choice, for instance, was encouraged by the difficulty Italian workers had in gaining access to labour unions, and in many cases by the hostility the latter expressed toward Italian immigrants. Although mutual aid societies could be found in virtually all sectors of the immigrant and native Canadian population, Italian immigrants tended to resort to them also as a way to strengthen their village or regional allegiances. This was so not only because they found it was easier to place their trust on an officer from their own villages or regions, whom they knew personally; but also because these associations served as vehicles bringing them together for social events and leisure activities.

The perpetuation of *campanilismo* (pride in one's village or regional origin) on Canadian soil was a phenomenon growing out of both the particular cultural-political reality Italians left behind, and the important role played by migration networks. The strong sense of local and regional identity which for centuries had characterized life in the Italian peninsula had been little affected by the creation of an Italian national state, particularly in the southern regions which sent the largest contingents of immigrants to Canada. It should not be a surprise, then, if during the early stages of settlement in Canada, local and regional identities tended to prevail over a national identity. Moreover, the rapid regrouping of people coming from the same locations — a result of the working of chain migration — favoured the recreation of a highly personalized universe which provided the most immediate parameters for the immigrants' associational life. Research on the settling-in process in Toronto and Montreal has shown a strong tendency among immigrants from the same village or provincial area to form residential clusters. Another important indication of the persistence of this personalized universe emerges from the marriage patterns practiced by Italian immigrants. Between 1906 and 1915, two out of three Italian marriages performed in the two Italian parishes of Montreal involved spouses coming from the same region, and in more than half of the cases the two spouses came from the same provincial area.

But although *campanilismo* would remain a constant in the history of Italian-Canadian communities (it is still very much alive today), new forces were at work enlarging the parameters of associational life and laying the basis for the emergence of a national identity. For many Italians who participated in the first wave of emigration, the acquisition of a national sentiment was a process that occurred not in Italy but in Canada. Several factors favoured this development. Among the most important was the creation of national parishes in the major areas of Italian settlement. In virtually all the cases that have been studied, national parishes became the focal point of immigrant communal life, not only in worshipping and other ritual functions, but in a wide range of social and

leisure activities centering around the parish. Italian immigrants came together and interacted as members of a wider national community rather than as members of particular townsgroups. For many Italian immigrants, the bells of the national parish began to ring louder than the sound of clashing regional dialects.

Of equal importance, if not more, was the experience of discrimination Italian immigrants encountered in Canada. Probably no other discriminatory practice acted more as a unifying element than the negative stereotyping which became increasingly common in the Canadian media and in public opinion at large. During the 15 years preceding World War One, the portrayal of southern Italians as an inferior group enjoying gregarious life, substandard living conditions, and prone to acts of violence, had become a matter of public consumption. While the constant association of Italians with crime helped to lower the standing of Italian ethnoculture within Canadian public opinion, it also produced among Italians a common concern of their lot as a people which would soon translate into community-wide associational activities.

International events, totally beyond the control of the immigrants, accelerated this process. The outbreak of World War One was one of these events. Although there were cases of Italians residing in Canada who evaded the conscription orders, many others answered the call, and their departures to Italy often turned into public manifestations of patriotism within the community. In Montreal one of these manifestations occurred even before Italy's entry into the war, and it nearly turned into a major riot. When Henry Bourassa, director of the influential daily paper *Le Devoir*, wrote an angry editorial accusing Italy of cowardice for not entering the war, Italian community leaders organized a mass rally which was attended by thousands of their fellow countrymen. Their public denunciation of Bourassa's unwarranted charges sparked such an emotional response in the audience that a group of Italian immigrants marched to the *Le Devoir* building breaking some of its windows and performing other acts of vandalism.

As Italy threw her lot into the most ominous confrontation the Western world had ever known, the trepidation with which Italians in Canada followed the military events could not but awake in them a sentiment of patriotism that strengthened their communal bonds. The repercussions that these events had on Italian associational life soon became evident. In a number of Canadian cities, Italian war veteran groups were created; in Toronto three major mutual aid societies merged in 1919 to create the *Società Italo-Canadese*; and the Order of the Sons of Italy (a US-born federation of Italian associations) made major inroads into Canada, becoming at times the community's leading associational vehicle. The ferment that the war had unleashed in the ethnic consciousness of Italians, coupled with the emergence of a more articulate ethnic elite made up of successful businessmen and professionals, produced the ideal terrain for the effort to redefine *italianità* and to elevate the community's image in the eyes of

the host society. At the same time, demographic processes were at work which had the effect of cracking the walls of insularity that had characterised many Italian regional groups. The interruption of the immigration stream resulting from the war, in addition to the growing demographic weight of Canada-born Italians, favoured the integration of the various regional groups into the community. During the 1920s, in fact, the proportion of regionally-endogamous marriages decreased steadily, and in the second half of the decade four out of five marriages performed in the Italian parishes of Montreal involved spouses belonging to two different regional groups.

The consolidation of a national sentiment occurring within most Italian communities received a major boost with the triumph of fascism in Italy. In 1922 Mussolini seized power, imposing on that country a repressive regime whose immediate results were law, order, and stability — attributes that were soon interpreted by many western observers both in Europe and North America as the trade-marks of progress. For an immigrant population in which more than half the adult population had left Italy before the advent of Fascism, and whose image of the motherland they left had been one of oppression and political exclusion, the transformations that the regime set out to effect could not but be viewed as signs of progress. For many of those Italians, then, Fascism was perceived less as a political ideology and form of government, and more as synonymous with a renewed *italianità*. Fascism, as it was imported into many immigrant communities of the humble and uneducated, served several purposes at the same time. It brought a sense of respect toward social hierarchy that played very well into the hands of the communities' *prominenti*. It brought an elaborate system of public ceremonial that many Italian immigrants could easily appropriate for themselves in their longing for ethnic respectability. And by the 1920s most Italian leaders had understood that ethnic respectability was a *sine qua non* if the community was to negotiate successfully its insertion within Canadian civil society.

Fascism also brought into the Italian communities a great deal of division and conflict, often fomented by Italian consular authorities who had orders from Rome to keep under surveillance critics of the regime. As an anti-fascist opposition became organized, producing its own leadership and its own associational network, the institutional landscape of most Italian communities in Canada often became an arena in which two competing elites struggled to gain the allegiance of the Italian population and to mold what they felt was the right image of "italianità". It was a tortuous and conflict-ridden process of ethnic self-definition that contained in it the seeds of tragedy to the extent that it had become inexorably tied to the political vicissitudes of the old motherland and to the unforeseeable timetable of international diplomacy. When, in fact, the second world conflict broke out and subsequently Italy became an enemy country for entering the war on the side of the Axis Powers, Canadian authorities proved unable or unwilling to distinguish between ethnic consciousness and

political allegiance. Security measures dictated by the emergency situation were immediately applied to the Italian community. Adopting a grossly-conceived notion of "enemy alien" (i.e. Italian immigrants who had not become naturalized as well as those who had become naturalized after 1 September 1929), Canadian authorities swiftly proceeded to mass searches and arrests, surveillance, the dismantling of much of the institutional network, the internment of hundreds of community leaders suspected of posing a threat to the national security and the seizure and confiscation of their private property and assets.

Italian ethnicity had been put on trial and had been found guilty of dual loyalty. Fear, humilation, disarray, compounded by the internal divisions that the war had exacerbated, produced deep wounds which greatly handicapped civic activities, and discouraged the resumption of associational life in many Italian communities. It would take the massive arrival of new Italian immigrants to change the institutional landscape and bring some of the community's pre-war leadership back into public life.

The revival of associational life in the fifties and sixties followed patterns that were not dissimilar to those of the earlier era: rapid proliferation of village-based or regional clubs and associations; the central role of national and neighborhood parishes which multiplied in number, especially in the large cities, as new residential poles came into being; and the creation and consolidation of business and professional groups. Increasingly, the emergence of community organizations, staffed by better educated and enterprising Italian Canadians, offered to newcomers and older residents alike a variety of services in areas such as health, education, and information.

Of course, the associational landscape of postwar Italo-Canada has taken on different nuances depending on the particular political and cultural context in which communities have found themselves. In the Montreal metropolitan region, for instance, most Italian associations were drawn into the linguistic conflicts which have marked that province for the past 20 years. The Italian parents' insistence on the right to have their children schooled in English led to emotional confrontations, such as the one occurring in Saint-Leonard in 1967, and has left most Italian associations cold, if not hostile, in the face of the mounting French-Canadian nationalism of the Levesque Era. After the initial animosities, however, most Italians have shown enough pragmatism to make a distinction between a nationalist sentiment and the language rights of the francophone majority. They have thus adjusted to the imperatives of Bill 101 (which makes French the official language of work in Quebec) and are often pointed to as one of the best examples of cultural integration in the emotionally charged linguistic context of the Province. In the Toronto region, instead, associational efforts have tended to be directed toward a greater access to community services, and seem to have resulted in a more diversified political behaviour. Moreover, in most cities the pro-fascist/anti-fascist division which marked Italian associational life during the interwar period has tended to be

replaced by divisions and rivalries between an older, more conservative leadership, and a younger and more politicized one which has challenged the former's claim to act as spokesman for the entire community. Participation in ethnic associations has not prevented Italian immigrants from taking an active role in the Canadian labour movement. In sectors such as construction, auto, steel, and clothing, participation in union activities, particularly since the 1960s, has been massive, with Italian workers often taking a leadership role in strikes and in local union affairs.

The enactment, since the early seventies, of a multicultural policy encouraging ethnocultural retention and allocating sizeable financial resources, has added new impetus to Italian-Canadian associational life. By the mid-seventies, the network of Italian ethnic associations and community organizations had produced an institutional configuration which contributed significantly to the cosmopolitan image of the major Canadian cities. If Italian Canadians, like most other city dwellers, became caught in the process of urban relocation and suburban sprawl, they were also reached by an enterprising ethnic press and by radio and television waves which in their own way helped perpetuate an ethnic version of the global village. Coupled with some of the social and cultural processes mentioned above, it should not be a surprise if, even as late as in the eighties, a significant portion of the Italian-born population still had the option to work, shop, socialize, read and listen entirely in Italian. Thus, many Italian Canadian communities have long attained what the sociologist Raymond Breton has called "institutional completeness". But in practice, this state has tended to mean different things to different people. To some members of the community's elite it meant that Italian Canadians could act as a unified interest group and negotiate more effectively their ethnicity at the three levels of government. To some politicians it meant that the "Italian vote" had become sufficiently strong and compact to justify recognition and political courting. To assimilationist observers, institutional completeness was synonymous with "ethnic ghetto" — a stubborn foreign presence whose only value lay in its folkloric contribution to their own brand of Canadian cosmopolitanism. To some second-generation Italian artists and intellectuals it meant "a third solitude" alongside those of English and French Canada — the awareness of being a minority in a society in which the only path to genuine recognition is assimilation.

d. *Toward a New Identity?*

Having attained its "institutional completeness" and constituting the fourth largest ethnocultural group in the country, Italo-Canada stands today at a historical crossroad. The drying up of the immigration stream from Italy is bound to reduce progressively the mental and social space on which Italian immigrants had built their ambience. The absence of new blood prevents the renewing of the cultural and traditional values which they had brought into the Canadian city.

The demographic reversal which has led to the growing predominance of second and third-generation Italians evokes much more than traditional images of generational conflict. Rather, it raises the question as to whether an old image of *italianità* and an identity based on the migratory experience will be passed on to the new generations, or whether the latter will mold one that not only reflects a wider set of needs but also one capable of imposing on the Canadian metropolis what Robert Harney has called "a genuine cosmopolitan ethos".

The stakes are formidable for both groups of Italian Canadians. For the mostly former peasant Italian immigrants, Italy — the source of much of their identity — has taken on mythical proportions. Immigration and the long struggle for betterment has rendered them strangers to the profound social and cultural transformations that have occurred in that country. The Italy of divorce and legal abortion, of general strikes and of urban guerilla, is unknown to them. For many of them, their vision of Italy is that of the fifties, that of an Italy that does not exist anymore. Many of those who have revisited their birthplaces have returned troubled by the disappearance of the old village life, and increasingly disoriented by the high standard of living in which their relatives now live. They find themselves suspended between a past that is slowly disintegrating and a present that offers them few cultural means to redefine their identity except vicariously, through their Canadian children. The few Italian-Canadian youths who have refused the legacy of their parents and have tried to distance themselves from a universe often perceived as a trap, find their path tortuous and painful. In the documentary film "Caffé Italia, Montreal", Marta, a college-educated daughter of immigrants who claims to have taken the path to "cultural emancipation" says: "When I enter the Little Italy, for me it is like entering into a museum; and yet I cannot resist going there regularly. It's as if I need to breath the air I find there — you know, the Italian grocery stores, the caffés, the Italian newspapers...." And Tony, one of the lead actors in the film, adds: "When I am with my parents, I hate everything that is Italian; but when I am away I'm ready to defend all that is Italian; but what am I? In Toronto, where I work and live, they say I am an 'ethnic' [laughter]: when I go to see my parents in Montreal, my mother tells me I'm not an Italian — the things I do and the life I lead, she says, are not Italian.... So, what am I?"

If a process of redefinition of post-immigration Italian Canadian identity is underway, some of its most visible signs are to be found in the growing cultural production of the immigrants' children. Whether in poetry, in literature, in cinema, in theatre, or in other artistic genres, their creative works often show the agony of feeling caught between two universes which only they can bridge. Struggling to overcome the walls of marginality and "otherness" into which cultural officialdom has assigned them, their words, their images, their symbols are addressed less and less to their parents and increasingly to the Canadian metropolis. The questions they ask, and the issues they raise are as vital for them as they are for Canada. These questions may conceal the last jolt of an ethnicity which is quietly yielding to assimilative forces. But if heeded, they may also help

us appreciate the history of a community whose presence has changed us all.

IV — TOWARD A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In the pluricultural landscape which has evolved in Canada during the 20th century, the Italian experience offers interesting elements of comparison with that of other ethnocultural groups. In many ways, the group that more than any other one makes comparison a fruitful exercise is the Jewish community (Ashkenazic), for some key elements of its migratory and settlement experience are strikingly similar to those witnessed by the Italians. Not only did the first large wave of Jewish immigration to Canada coincide with that of the Italians; also in both cases, newcomers — particularly in the large metropolitan centers — found some initial community infrastructures created by older Jewish and Italian residents who in varying degrees acted as intermediaries between the immigrants and the host society. Equally striking is the similarity in the two groups' urban experience. Both groups chose predominantly the large city as their new social environment, and in both cases their process of acculturation became inseparable from the evolving cosmopolitan universe of Canadian urban life. Furthermore, it was the diversified urban economy, much more than heavy industry or agriculture, which became for most Italian and Jewish immigrants the terrain on which they deployed their strategies in the pursuit of economic betterment. Despite important differences in degree between the two groups, for many Italian and Jewish immigrants small petty trade became initially the major avenue of economic mobility, permitting them to escape the constraints of the wage system and to achieve a degree of economic independence.

But although the paths to acculturation of these two groups often paralleled each other, in many important ways they also diverged, and this divergence grew out of significant differences in the social, cultural, and political backgrounds of the two groups. From an occupational point of view, for instance, the large contingents of Jewish immigrants who had practiced artisanal crafts or who had been involved in small trade in the Old World contrast significantly with the predominantly peasant background of Italian immigrants. Moreover, previous migratory experiences in Europe had contributed to making Jews undoubtedly the most plurilingual ethnocultural group. Language and artisanal skills, as well as business know-how, were therefore key resources that immigrant Jews, much more than Italian immigrants, were able to mobilize in their relatively rapid integration into the economic landscape of urban Canada. At the same time, the highly politicized environment Jews left behind, and the fact that many of them, especially those coming from Zsarist Russia, were fleeing outright political persecution, resulted in a much more articulate political consciousness than one could find among Italian immigrants. Thus, while both Italian and Jewish immigrants resorted heavily to forms of associational life based on mutual aid, within the latter group trade-union militance and political engagement became

by far more prominent, often catapulting Jewish individuals into positions of leadership in a number of social movements and civic causes. This latter development also contributed to producing within the Jewish community a much more diversified political and ideological scenario than one could find in the Italian community. Only following the massive post-World War Two immigration from Italy, and in the changing industrial and urban context of the 1960s and 1970s, would Italian immigrants show similar levels of labour activism and participation in political and social causes.

The earlier experience of persecution and prejudice common among most Jews emigrating to Canada is also responsible for patterns of acculturation which diverge significantly from those known by the Italians. While both groups encountered discrimination in their new Canadian life, in the case of Jews this barrier took a much more widespread and emotional character, one which had long antecedents in western culture. Thus, if for many Italian immigrants the sentiment of "italianità" shaping their ethnic identity was something that evolved through the relatively long process of settlement and civic integration, Jewish immigrants brought with them an identity which had already been shaped by international antisemitism, and which became immediately operative in their community life and in their relations with Canadian institutions. In this context, two elements which played a key role in keeping Jewish identity alive were religion and education; and here too one finds important contrasts with the Italian experience. Despite the centrality of the national parishes in the community life of Italian immigrants, and the latter's strong identification with Roman Catholicism, religion served more a social need than a spiritual one. However deep the degree of religious devotion among Italian immigrants, their Catholicism — especially among former southern peasants — remained largely one tainted by superstitious beliefs; their faith tended to be relegated to the realm of ceremonial life, only seldom acting as a set of principles organizing daily life and communal practices. Consequently, religion did not play the central educational role that it did within Jewish immigrant culture, where study and learning had traditionally been prominent values; as is well know, in time these values translated into key resources offering Jewish immigrants' children a much wider spectrum of occupational opportunities, and constituting one of the major factors explaining the extraordinary social mobility experienced by Jews in Canada, as well as their prominent presence within the Canadian cultural and artistic landscape.

If many of these contrasts between the two ethnocultural groups had already become quite visible during the pre-World War Two period, they became even more conspicuous in the post-war era. For, while the processes of acculturation of Jewish-Canadians were little affected by the relatively small contingent of new arrivals, the massive influx of Italian immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s (still largely from a peasant background) recreated a social environment in which economic integration and cultural survival became prominent concerns for the newly formed communities. Of course, Italian newcomers could often benefit from the existing ethnic institutional network and from a more diversified

economic and cultural universe than their predecessors had encountered; still, for the majority of them, becoming part of the "Canadian mosaic" became a challenge that they had to meet starting at the bottom of the occupational ladder, and with few cultural resources (language, education) at their disposal. Their postwar history within the Canadian urban landscape became one approaching less that of a well-entrenched ethnocultural group such as the Jews, and much more that of more recent Southern-European immigrant communities such as the Portuguese and the Greeks. And today they face the same assimilative pressures as those groups as they continue to define their place in Canadian society.

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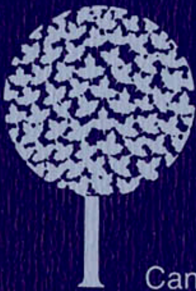

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