

June is **Italian Heritage Month** in the province of Ontario

**The history and role that Italians have had in Ontario**  
**CBC Radio 1, Fresh Air with Mary Ito**

**Interview with Prof. John Zucchi, Department Chair of History and Classical Studies at McGill University in Montreal. Co-author of *Italians in Ontario* and author of *Italians in Toronto*.**

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**Q.** How far back can we trace Italian immigration to this country (Canada)?

**A.** Well, we can trace what we call normal Italian immigration back to the mid-19th century. By normal I mean people who came not as early adventurers or explorers but those who came as workers and trades people from the south of Genoa back in the 1850s to 1860s. And the 1870s we see the broader Italian immigration of construction labourers (outdoor construction projects) and resource workers.

**Q.** And then when did the largest waves of immigration happen?

**A.** Well there are two main waves, there's one just before World War One—within that decade before the First World War in particular from 1910 to 1914— and then the main migration during the post-war period in particular from 1951 to 1966.

**Q.** And why did those happen?

**A.** In the pre-World War One days we have Canada looking potentially for western settlement, and farmers in the Canadian west and the prairies. However, there is at the same time a need for workers in the resource sector, in railroad construction and maintenance, in forestry, mining, etcetera, also in factories increasingly as the country becomes industrialized. And so while the Canadian government in the pre-World War One period was looking for settlers in the west it turned a blind eye and allowed the resource companies and railway companies to hire Italians and other southern Europeans. In the 1920s there is the completion of settlement of the west, at the same time the government was looking for resource workers. Again, the railways in the late 1920s had pretty well determined Canadian immigration policy from 1925 to 1929 so many Italians came in that period as well. In the post-war period it became very clear, actually during the war it became clear to the Liberal government at the time that Canada's economic expansion depended on greater migration and Italians became a significant component of that migration, so much so in fact that by 1959 Italian migration exceeded British immigration into Canada.

**Q.** My understanding is that the government though didn't really want Italians in the country for quite a long time and that attitude didn't change until after the war.

**A.** Well yes Canada, you could say that the Canadian government and these people of the Department of Immigration had a, what you might call, an ethnic hierarchy—a hierarchy of which ethnic groups or races were desired in the country. And as you might guess, the immigrants from Britain and some from northern Europe were the most desirable immigrants. Those from southern and eastern Europe were towards the bottom of the ladder, as were groups from Asia, Japan and China. Italians you could say were tolerated because they did set government policy, as I mentioned before, that they would expect them to become farmers in the west. But at the same time, you had companies like Canadian Pacific and major resource companies that simply needed and had an insatiable need for labour, and Italians were a significant component of that labour force and therefore the government had to tolerate and accept them.

**Q.** For the Italians who came after the war, what kind of economic and social conditions were they coming from?

**A.** Well many of the Italians, virtually all the Italians coming after the war—in particular in the '50s to the mid-60s—they were coming from a post-war Italy that had suffered economically, particularly in the late

'40s into the 1950s. Most of these immigrants, there were some immigrants who came from the industrial workforce in Italy, but the vast majority of them came from farms. They were either small land holders or landless labourers or share croppers. Some of the immigrants were indeed from very poor farming families, others had no prospects for the future. If they were to take a 21, 22, 23 year old young male with four or five brothers on a farm, only one or two of those brothers are going to inherit the farm and the rest have to look for other possibilities. Those possibilities might have been in Milan, or in tourism, working in industry, or going every year to Switzerland or France as temporary migrants, or willing to take a chance and take off for Canada and try one's luck there. Many immigrants did that in fact. Many came as young men to work in the resource industry for a year with a work permit and then became migrants. Other women, fewer women, came independently but came here as maids. In any case, the male to female ratio was pretty well equal by the mid-to-late-1950s.

**Q.** I have a strong connection to Italy because I'm married to an Italian Canadian, and I remember that a number of years ago my husband's parents—who came here in that wave of immigration during the '50s—they were honoured a few years ago along with many other immigrants. They were given a plaque, and basically celebrating the fact they'd come here with nothing and just through, you know, hard work and determination they managed to make lives for themselves and also for their children. This picture, on the certificate that they were given, had a couple and they were holding a *valigia d'oro*—a suitcase of gold. Can you tell me, what did that signify?

**A.** A golden suitcase, very much I think falls into line with the image of a street paved with gold, that is that golden opportunity you could say to reach that land of one's dreams, being Canada in this case. For the story, I think we can all of a sudden be cynical and talk about these myths that immigrants had, or the mythical way in which they read their past. And there is some truth in that, that we have this image of immigrants who come, they're hard working and they make it, and their children make it in their professions, etcetera, and there is some truth to this. At the same time I think we can't dismiss the fact that there is a real human drama in migration itself, and these Italian immigrants who arrived in the 1950s came sacrificing a great deal. Let's place ourselves in their boots, as it were; they had to leave a land that they loved, they were discriminated against in those years, they were seen as second class citizens very often, and it was difficult for them to be accepted, physical for them to end up in the workforce, to find a home, to find a new social life, and yet they did. They had a dream and the very fact that they were able to bring up their families here and to fit in with Canadian society within a few years was a great achievement. To turn that into something tiny or small or insignificant, there is something significant in that.

**Q.** Once the Italian immigrants came to Ontario, where did they end up settling, most of them?

**A.** They settled in various places across the province. Certainly Toronto was a central drawing centre. It had this Italian sector or little Italy from the 1870s. The Niagara region as well was significant for farmers who had the fruit orchards in the St. Catherine's, Grimsby, Niagara area, again, going back to the pre-World War One era. Then the Lakehead was also significant, Fort William and Port Arthur both had tiny little Italies, Sioux Saint Marie, Peterborough also, immigrants were working there before World War One in industry, and also Guelph and other areas, Hamilton...Italians really were dispersed right across the province. There is a significant difference between Quebec and Ontario for example where virtually all Italian migration was to Montreal. In Ontario it was quite spread out, right from before World War One. And what's very interesting is that those...oh, I forgot to mention also the mining region of Sudbury, Kirkland Lake, again, very significant Italian migration there from northeastern Italy for example. And what's interesting is that those areas that became areas of Italian settlement in the pre-World War One era persisted right up to the post-World War Two period.

**Q.** I think many of us are familiar with the early immigrants and getting involved with construction and land development and real estate, but when I think of I guess life today, I can't think of a facet of life here

in this province that Italians have not influenced. You know, whether it's politics, education, music, literature, the arts, architecture, when did the Italians start to make an impact in these areas?

**A.** Italians began to make an impact certainly in the post-World War Two period in a big way, in particular from the 1960s on. I think you can read the history of that impact very much as a sign of Italians integrating in Canada. The immigrants, who came in the post-war period, as mentioned before, got into the workforce and were able to raise capital, get into development, real estate or industry, what have you. Their children then ended up in school and going to university and entering the profession of the arts, etcetera. I think we can see the fact that Italians have been able to be involved with so many sectors of Canadian society really as a sign of their integration into Canadian society. Their mobility I think is similar to other groups that came and arrived in those same years and in some cases even better than some other groups. It was a sign that they were no longer "other", I'd say, but had become part of Canadian society.

**Q.** Now that we're heading into, I guess, the fourth generation from that wave of immigrants that came after the war, how connected do you think the younger generations are with their roots?

**A.** Hmm, it depends. I think that there are many third or fourth generation children now or youth that have no real connection or interest. There may be a return in the fourth generation to immigrant roots of Italians and their very idea of what Italian means to their grandparents, or great grandparents. Whereas, their grandparents or great grandparents might have arrived from the small Italian, what they call agrotowns or cultural towns or villages, and their whole idea of Italy would have been that one small town. These children certainly have been brought up with a different idea of Italy—it's kind of like what you said in the introduction, Italian restaurants, fast cars, beautiful food, etcetera. What historians often call a created or imagined nation or idea of Italy.