

Back In My Day...
By Michael Amato

This holiday season is always very busy for me. While most students get to sleep in and relax while they take a break from school, I have the responsibility of seeing every one of my enormous extended family who extend across two provinces. My mom's side of the family is Maltese and mostly live in Toronto, while my dad and his side of the family are Italian and mostly live in Montreal. For those of you who haven't heard of Malta, it's a small island under Sicily that you could probably walk from one side to the other in a day. 2013 was a big year for the family elders, as my mom's aunts turned 94 and 90 (and they both don't look a day over 75) and my dad's mother turned 93 (and she still has more energy than her five kids, twelve grandchildren, and fourteen great-grandchildren combined).

On the Maltese side, we had a family reunion, which isn't big a deal for us because we have large get-togethers regularly, but this one was also to celebrate my great aunt's 94th birthday. My creatively named great-aunts, Auntie Mary (94 years old), Auntie Mary (90 years old), and Auntie Mary (80 years old), sat near me at the dinner table and they were reminiscing about when they first immigrated. Visiting my dad and his side in Montreal for New Years, I also heard many stories from my Uncles, Aunts, and Grandmother about how life was for them as new immigrants. Their stories of the past are always very interesting to me and teach me how people once survived without video games or the invention of the GPS. They inspired me to get in touch with some of the older generation of my families and learn more about the lifestyle of immigrants in the 1950's.

My Grandfather came to Canada in the spring of 1951, leaving behind his family for six months to try to establish himself by finding a job and a home. He didn't know anyone in the country but knew how to speak English as Malta was part of the British Commonwealth. After a weeklong boat trip across the Atlantic, he arrived in Halifax. The immigration office tried to get him to work in a rural area in Nova Scotia, but being a "city boy" with no experience of farming in Valetta, he got on a train to Toronto. Once in Toronto, he worked at a tire company for a very short time before finding a job at Christie's, where he worked until he retired. I remember as a child, sometimes we would be in the car and he would say, "Michael, wave to Mr. Christie!" as we drove past the factory.

They rented a flat in a big house. To help pay the rent, my Grandmother sublet the extra bedroom in the flat to a family friend. After a year or so, they had saved enough to buy a house. They continued to rent rooms to friends and eventually even bought another house which became a rental property for supplementary income. All these friends became like family and are still a big part of our lives. After all these years, I can see that my Grandmother's tendency to welcome and help strangers and friends is also in my mother. She has always had an open door, having friends of the family stay in a spare room. Also, for the past three years we've rented our spare bedroom to Maria, a foreign student from Russia who has become like family to us.

As I said before, our family is very close. We always get together for holidays and special occasions, and sometimes if there aren't any reasons to get together, we get together anyways. It was the same back then. More of my mom's Aunts and Uncles started to immigrate over the next

few years. My mom, her siblings, and all of her cousins went to the same elementary school, and family was involved in the majority of their social life. Aside from the school week, every weekend they would fill one of their houses all together and have dinner. My mom also told me there was also something called the “streetlight rule” where their parents would send them to play with their cousins outside and to come home for dinner when the streetlights turned on. I’ve heard many funny stories from all of them to conclude that having their social lives and family lives intertwined was never a bad thing, unless they got in trouble.

They survived frugally and made ends meet to survive comfortably. Mom always jokingly lets my aunt know about how hard it was dressing for school in all of her hand-me-downs and they both complain about their haircuts all the time. I’ve seen pictures though, and I don’t blame them. My Uncle Victor was a hairdresser and literally gave them “bowl cuts” where he’d place a bowl on their head and cut off whatever was showing; very similar to Leonard Nimoy’s haircuts when he played Doctor Spock. My grandfather never drove in his life. He took the streetcar and bus to work every day and the family would walk to the grocery store, church, and school. Fortunately, some of the boarders had cars so they would pile in and spend the day at the beach or they would get dressed in their best suits and dresses to go to the CNE.

My mom recalls the biggest struggle was getting used to the cold as it was very different from the Mediterranean island weather they were used to. That being said, Canadian winter, their odd haircuts, and lack of vehicles never stopped them from having fun and they were all very glad they came to this country and never looked back.

My dad’s side of the family had many similarities to my mom’s side, especially the importance of family. They were from a poor farming village in Italy and came to Canada because jobs were scarce after World War 2. My grandfather left Italy in 1952 to go to Montreal where his cousin sponsored him. His family followed in 1954 after he had found a job working on the railway. After about ten years of his railway job, he then worked as a night guard/janitor for a car dealership, while my grandmother found work in the garment industry. For their first five years in Montreal, they rented a two bedroom apartment that was located in a truck yard. These two bedrooms housed seven family members. There was no shower; they just had a sink and toilet. In order to bathe they would boil water in a washtub and take turns. This wasn’t a hardship for them, as in Italy they didn’t have running water and shared half the house with livestock.

After a couple years they moved into a house. All of his cousins and their families lived within a couple of blocks radius and similar to my mother’s family, they would rotate having family dinners on the weekends. I find it funny that my grandmother, two of my aunts, and uncle still live a couple of blocks away from each other and can imagine that it would have been similar back then as to how it is now with family constantly dropping in and out just to check up on everyone.

My dad recalls the Jean-Talon Market being important. Every weekend they would walk to the market with wagons and leave laden down fruit, vegetables, and livestock. Mostly they would buy chickens and rabbits, but also bought goats on some special occasions. I can only

imagine the looks of confusion on a French-Canadian's face as they saw a crowd of Italian people walking down the street with a live goat tied to a wagon.

They had to be frugal as there wasn't very much income. I think my grandmother was the one who invented the three R's. Even to this day she still uses old cookie tins to store sewing materials and other objects and uses empty milk bags as freezer bags. When they weren't being frugal they were always together. My dad, his siblings, his uncles, and his cousins all had jobs at F.W. Woolworks, which was similar to what Zellers would have been like. They also made wine and tomato sauce like every Italian family would at their houses. At 93 years old, my grandmother still makes her own pasta, sauce, and prosciutto while my uncles and cousins all have their own homemade wine they guilt me into trying whenever I visit.

I love my family very much. I know that I'm blessed to have such a tight knit family. I find it amazing when I'm telling stories to friends and they mention that they haven't seen their cousins in years, while I have such great relationships with mine. Both sides of the family have a great balance of love and craziness. Despite not having the luxuries we have now, they always made the best of it and have lots of stories to tell. What I found interesting was how the tradition of togetherness has always remained important. Whether it's having all the family up to a cottage in the summer or stuffing sixty people into a small room for dinner, it's always exciting and filled with laughter and I wouldn't trade any of them for anything in the world.