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August 31, 2014

Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada Scholarship Essay

“What’s your background?” This is a question that I, along with many other Canadians, am inevitably and often asked. And in response I am inclined to simply say, “I’m Italian.” But this description is misleading given the uniqueness of each of Italy’s regions, and the cultural differences among the *paesi* within them. This collection of fairly diverse cultures that constitute modern day Italy gave rise to many differing opinions on what it means to be Italian. And so, in understanding my own cultural identity I am confronted with the task of having to describe *my Italy*. What I have discovered is that the region of Basilicata—its sights, people, food, and history— contributes heavily to my understanding of what it means to be Italian.

My first visit to Basilicata about five years ago was a pretty jarring experience. My mother, father, brother, and I had taken a tour of Italy in a rental car, starting in Rome and heading north to see my father’s relatives in Friuli, visiting Florence and Cinqueterre along the way. After a weeklong stay in Friuli we headed straight for my mother’s hometown of Montescaglioso—a trip between two extremes. In just a half-day’s drive I witnessed the lush, green alpine scenery of a little Friulan village give way to the “burnt” landscape of Southern Italy. The harsh mid-July sun had dried much of the soil and vegetation, painting large swathes of Basilicata in hues of yellow and brown. These north-south visual disparities extended to the people, whose darker complexions complemented the colours of the region.

After a short *passeggiata* in my mother’s hometown on the night of our arrival, I grew quite fond of the *montese*. Their customs, mannerisms, and dialect felt familiar since I had been introduced to them years earlier by my grandmother. She was an ever-present figure in my

childhood, practically raising my brother, my cousins, and I, and she featured prominently in my life up to her passing two years prior to the trip. Some of my earliest memories are of this adorable short and stout woman rushing around the house and attending to my every need (which was usually food-related). Observing the people of Montescaglioso reminded me of the love and comforts my grandmother provided me as a child, making me feel right at home in this foreign landscape. And it was due to her influence in my life that I came to understand being Italian as synonymous with being Lucanian.

Given my upbringing, it is no surprise that I took to the local food. But I would argue that even someone entirely unfamiliar with the regional cuisine would fall in love immediately. The core philosophy of Lucanian cooking is common to all Italians; using high-quality local ingredients to craft simple, yet flavourful, recipes. As an agrarian people, Lucanians take great pride in what they are able to grow and produce locally.

It was not long after being introduced to my mother's extended family that they began showering us with gifts of food. During our stay in *Monte* a common sight was my mother's uncle Domenico (who we affectionately called *Zio Mimi*) coming to us with a crate full of *verdure* picked fresh that morning from the farmland he tended just outside the town. My favourite of the pick was the *ciccoria*, which I would often indulge in as a snack with a bit of olive oil and salt, or as a salad to accompany the roasted meats we frequently bought from the local *rosticceria* (or *u furnied*, as the *montese* say). I would eat so much of it in one sitting that my tongue felt numb and swollen from the bitterness.

Then there was Nicola, one of my mother's many cousins. We awoke early one morning to visit him in the *latteria* he owned and operated, and we were lucky enough to catch him in the act of making fresh mozzarella, of which he did not hesitate to offer us a generous sampling. He

insisted we pay him and his family a visit later that night following a dinner engagement with some other relatives that was sure to feature a multi-course meal. My mother was adamant he not put out too much food, as the meals we were having had become a real test of our endurance. He assured us he would only be preparing a “little snack”, and we were foolish enough to believe him. So we walked sluggishly from the dinner party to his apartment, greatly relieved that the day’s marathon of food was over only to be greeted by Nicola and an incredible assortment of cheeses from his shop with some fresh bread and olives to boot. Resistance was futile. And while I savoured some of the exquisite lemon-flavoured ricotta I reflected on the importance of food in my family.

For Lucanians, food is the ultimate way to express one’s love and appreciation. The time and effort our relatives had put into preparing the delicious meals they served were a way of showing their appreciation for our company and the value placed on family and togetherness. I have come to realize that there is no gift greater than good food and good company.

Besides the extremely hospitable people and the wonderful food, Basilicata is home to a rich history that I took great pleasure in discovering while there. I found it remarkable how easily Italians seem to take their surroundings for granted, while I could only dream of what it would be like to live in a place like Basilicata with so much to discover in my own backyard. I imagined living in Matera, home of the famous *Sassi*, a collection of dwellings carved from the canyons on either side of a ravine, separating the pre-historic *Sassi vecchio* from the medieval *Sassi nuovo*. It was difficult not to be enchanted by the look of the place, especially at night. The panoramic view of the town, illuminated by streetlight, from an overlooking balcony was one of the more memorable images of the trip.

Much more profound, though, was my visit to Metaponto where I felt a deep personal connection to an ancient brotherhood and its leader, Pythagoras (or *Pitagoro*), who once lived there. The famous theorem that bears his name was just one of the ideas that allowed Pythagoras to establish a cult following based on a new brand of mysticism that blended contemporary religion with philosophy. Opposition to these ideas eventually drove him and his followers from the islands of Ionia to the safe haven of Metapontum, where Pythagoras remained up to his death. I wondered if the humble Lucanians realized that some of their ancestors had been responsible for one of the biggest philosophical movements in the history of Western Civilization. Although the Pythagoreans held some pretty outlandish beliefs (for example, they thought eating beans was sacrilege), there was one in particular that was revolutionary: that the universe, in all its complexity, can be described and harnessed using mathematics. This was a major departure from the leading philosophical schools in Greece, where it was taught that the utility of mathematics was restricted to the abstract world.

Our ability to describe nature using mathematical relationships has done much to shape the modern world, and my life. When my high school physics teacher taught me how the simple motion of a pendulum could be described so elegantly with mathematics, I became infatuated. Learning mathematics has allowed me to understand deep truths about the universe that would not be possible otherwise, and I have developed a fascination with the natural world as a result. Today as I work toward my degree in electrical engineering, developing the skills necessary to harness the power of nature in service of mankind, I like to think I am paying homage to those Ionian ancestors who graced the region of Basilicata and enriched my own heritage.

The trip to my mother's birthplace five years ago was a turning point in my life. Learning more about my Lucanian roots gave me perspective, and helped me better define myself by

understanding my values, my history, and my ambitions—both professionally and academically. If I am granted this scholarship, I will use it to offset the cost of my studies in engineering. And along the way to becoming a successful engineer, I would love to get more involved in the Canadian-Lucanian community by bringing more attention to the cultural treasures of the region of Basilicata.

It has been a great pleasure to be able to write about the significance of Basilicata in my life. I would like to thank the Basilicata Cultural Society in giving me the opportunity to write this essay, it is the first time I have ever really been able to truly explore my cultural identity and communicate it to someone else. It has been much more satisfying than simply telling someone, “I’m Italian.”