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*Cet article rapporte les expériences de six femmes d'origine italienne qui sont venues au Canada il y a presque vingt ans. Dans tous les cas, c'est le mari ou le père qui a pris la décision d'immigrer. L'arrivée dans un pays dont elles ne parlaient pas la langue fut très difficile. Ces femmes font maintenant partie de groupes de discussion informels du YMCA pour les femmes immigrées. Ces groupes se réunissent après les cours d'anglais langue étrangère. Bien que ces femmes aient eu le courage et l'initiative de fréquenter ces classes, il y a encore des milliers de femmes immigrées qui restent isolées chez elles.*

Lucy, Emma, Tina, Maria, Angela, and Vittoria are six of the women of Italian origin who meet weekly at the Immigrant Women's Program run by the YWCA of Metropolitan Toronto, held in the Bloor/Bathurst area of the city. This past summer we spent some time together reflecting on their lives as immigrant women in Canada. We talked about

their expectations and dreams before coming to this country, the realities which they experienced once they arrived, and their assessments of whether the journeys they made close to twenty-five years ago have been worthwhile.

In this essay I would like to share, with their permission, some of their reflections, and in the process identify some of the major factors in the lives of immigrant women as they attempt to integrate themselves into the new society.

In our talking we discovered that the decision to come to Canada was not made by any of the women. It was their husbands, and in Maria's case her father, who decided that the family would immigrate. Like millions of other immigrant people, these decisions were made in the interest of securing a "better life" for their children. As Tina said, "My husband did not ask me if I wanted to come to Canada. Just before we had our fourth child, he said, 'we already have three children, two boys and one girl; if this baby is a boy, we go straight to Canada.' When the third boy was born he went straight to the consulate. I kept praying for something to happen. I did not want to leave my family. We were eleven brothers and sisters."

Once the decision to immigrate was made, the husbands left Italy and journeyed to Canada. Two years later the wives came over with the children. Emma recalled her arrival at Halifax harbour: "I never forget the arrival at Halifax. No husband, my children young, the first one seven years, the second one five years, and the third child three years. I had many luggage in my hands and I had never seen snow like that in my life. I said to myself, what is this snow place!"

# WHAT IS THIS SNOW PLACE!

... conversations  
with Italian-  
Canadian grandmothers

Vittoria, who came here at age eighteen to marry a fiancé ten years her senior, thought she was coming to the "end of the earth." Maria, who came with her family when she was seventeen, remembered that "in Italy we used to say in Canada 'the money is on the floor.' When I came here there was no money at all, and I had to start to work right away. I worked in a garment factory where I did not have to speak English."

Like Maria, the other women did not speak English when they arrived in Toronto. We talked about those early years in Canada, when they struggled to survive as mothers, wives, and workers in the new society. Emma recalled, "At first it was so strange. There was no family here; everybody who was here worked. I was alone at home. In Italy I had worked on a farm where there was always lots of people around." It was difficult for Angela to find accommodation: "We could not find a home, as no one wanted to rent a home to people with three children. After we found a place through some Italian people. My husband and eldest son went to work." Before Lucy learned English she could not answer the phone. "It was very hard and confusing. I often felt stupid and ashamed. I remember how happy I began to feel when I could ask the right questions."

For two of the women, Tina and Maria, the social isolation was intensified when their husbands died, leaving them with the responsibility of raising their young children. As she thinks back to those years when she and her five children lived on a "miserable" allowance and were clothed by the St. Vincent de Paul, Tina sometimes dreams of a ten-minute meeting with the premier of Ontario. "I would like to tell him that we have the same number of children. I remember seeing how proud he is of them. Mine are the same age. I would like to ask him if he thinks it is fair that his children had so much and I had to raise five orphan children on so little."

Community-based English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes and the YWCA's Coffee Groups for Immigrant Women were started in the Bloor/Bathurst area of Toronto

in the early 1970s. It was to these programs, when their children were grown up and they had some free time for themselves, that the women came. The YWCA program was designed to complement the structured ESL classes. The women had the opportunity to practise the new lan-

of all my troubles, it was worth it — the children did what we were dreaming twenty-three years ago."

There is a deep sense of pride, along with a great deal of modesty, as the women speak about themselves and their accomplishments and those of their children. Their

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guage in a non-threatening situation that, perhaps more importantly, allowed for the development of a strong support network among the women. Angela came to the programs when her children married because she was alone at home. "I met the other women. . . . I like to come because I need sometimes to get out of the house and I make friends here." (When Angela's husband died last year, she moved out of the Bloor/Bathurst area to be closer to her sons. She now travels an hour by transit to come to weekly group meetings.) Maria says that after her husband died and left her with four children, she knew that "if I did not go out I would go crazy. I went to the Villa Colombo, I went to the YWCA group, I went to church."

Before he died, Tina's husband had insisted that the family speak Italian at home. "For this reason," she said, "I never learned to speak English. Now my children are all married to non-Italians, and I had to start English classes so that I could speak to my grandchildren."

When the women speak of the accomplishments of their children in Canada and about their grandchildren born in this country, a listener realizes that the decisions their husbands made twenty-five years ago have been worthwhile for them. The grandchildren born here have given these women roots in Canadian soil. As Tina reflected, "In spite

success in learning English ten or twelve years after their arrival in Canada is a result of their personal initiative and courage in venturing out to the available programs. It is also crucial that the English-as-a-second-language classes and the YWCA programs were available when they needed them. All this evidence flies in the face of federal-government policies that declare that immigrant needs in terms of settlement and adaptation, and the corresponding funds to assist this process, end three years after the date of arrival in this country.

But for every one Tina or Emma who comes out to daytime English classes or support-group programs, there are thousands of immigrant women who remain isolated in their homes. Furthermore, programs offered during the day are not accessible to women who work outside the home. The situation of low-income immigrant women, struggling to raise children, hold down a job, and keep their families together is extremely desperate. There are at present very few effective support programs to assist them.

#### **Further Reading:**

Ana Bodner and Marilee Reimer, *The Organization of Social Services and Its Implications for the Mental Health of Immigrant Women*, November, 1979. Report produced for the Secretary of State.