

Bittersweet in Banff

My father doesn't like chocolate.

Despite the fact that he married my mother, who is Swiss, and raised two chocolate-loving children, I don't recall my dad eating chocolate desserts, and certainly never an actual chocolate bar. As a candy-loving child, with the cavities to prove it, this suited me just fine. There was one less person to compete for the sweet stash of Toblerone, Cailler and Lindt that we would bring home from our summer holidays in Switzerland.

It isn't the taste or texture of chocolate that my dad finds distasteful. Nor is his disdain the consequence of paying for my extensive and expensive childhood dentist bills.

No, my father doesn't like chocolate because of the war.

Growing up, I didn't know much about my father's past. Like most young people who tend to think in self-centered ways that their parents could never have possibly ever been children themselves - inconceivable! - I too believed that my parents existence began when I emerged into their lives.

For me, this conceit lasted into my late teens. While I knew that my dad had been born in 1938 in northern Italy and had come to Canada sometime in the 1950s the gaps in my knowledge of his early life were much larger than in the case of my mother's upbringing in Switzerland. She had reams of photo albums with dates and place names chronicling her family life, ski exploits and student year abroad in the segregated American south.

By contrast, my father had one solitary photograph. It was his Canadian immigration photo, a black and white image in which he was sharply dressed in his only suit, his blond hair Brylcreemed into the sleek style of the day. He was 19 years old.

The dawn of understanding about my father's childhood came on gradually, in flickering vignettes during my teens, in and out of focus like an old silent film. On my family's first visit to Padova, Italy, in 1982, we toured his hometown, which had changed greatly since my father's youth. After visiting the sites, including the impressive *Il Santo*, the Basilica of Saint Anthony of Padova, with its magnificent ceiling of azure blue and gold and the saintly remains of its namesake, we wandered in a residential neighbourhood, pausing in front of a series of brown, nondescript buildings.

What we'd come to see was no longer there. The orphanage, or *collegio*, where my father had lived after the age of 11 had been demolished many years prior to our arrival. In spite of its absence, my dad spoke to my younger brother and me with some fondness about growing up in the orphanage. He recalled how much he'd enjoyed going to school and studying math, his favorite subject, and playing soccer with the other kids. His manner didn't contain traces of bitterness; it was a simple and straight-forward acknowledgement of his adolescence.

It was a confusing visit. My father *had* parents; they were my grandparents, Nonna and Nonno. Nonna who cooked multi-course Italian meals with homemade pasta and five kinds of vegetables freshly picked from her backyard garden. And Nonno who loved to entertain my brother and me by pouring Labatt 50 ale into a glass to the point the foam would overflow onto their Formica table. Why had my father, who had parents, grown up in an orphanage?

The incomplete explanation that we were given was that times were different then. That answer fell far short of illuminating the past; like a stick stirred into a murky pond, the waters became opaque. Perhaps we were too young to understand. I filed that knowledge away as something I didn't really want to know.

When I graduated from high school in the late spring of 1987, my father proposed a dad-and-daughter trip to Banff, Alberta. I thought a trip was the perfect way to celebrate this

achievement before I headed off to university. As I was the first of my family to be going to college, it was a source of some small family pride. I was excited about school and about our trip to Canada's first National Park, a place I'd never been. While we had taken many trips as a family of four over the years, this was our first holiday together, just the two of us.

Banff is beautiful at any time of year, and this late summer was no exception. The lively mountain town was buzzing with families and tourists from around the world squeezing every last ounce out of their holidays. We wandered along Banff Avenue and checked off our own activity list with a ride up the Banff Gondola and walks along the Bow River.

Alpine summers are brief and fleeting, and in late August, Banff's was preparing its exit. We wanted to make the most of our extended long weekend visit and headed west in our rental car towards Johnston Canyon, a forty-minute drive from town.

It was a beautiful day for a hike, and the seasonal change was noticeable in the air and in the surrounding forest. We brushed aside young deciduous tree branches whose leaves were already turning red and gold with the onset of cooler mountain temperatures. My dad was a brisk walker and set a steady pace. As we followed the trail through the canyon, we could hear and feel the rush of the waterfall, as well as the rumbling of a long, cross-country CP Rail train rolling through the wide glacial valley of Banff National Park.

Memories are often triggered by sensory experiences. Sounds, smells and tastes can transport one back to time and spaces previously lived, loved or endured. I don't know whether my father's memory was triggered by the vibrations and distant roar of the train, or if he'd intended to use this trip to share insights into his early life. After all, I was 19 years old, on the cusp of adulthood, at least technically speaking. He must have thought I was ready and mature enough to appreciate and understand what he needed to tell me.

Whether by design, fate or prompted by outside forces, he began speaking as we walked together side by side on the trail. Like the creek water, my father's words flowed from him in a steady stream. Quietly and steadily he spoke about his childhood experiences in a manner that struck me as more surprising than sorrowful. As if he couldn't believe that he'd decided that this would be the time and place he'd chosen to share his past with his daughter. I was just as surprised and listened closely to his words rising over the rush of the canyon.

My dad was born and grew up in northern Italy during World War II. He lived on his uncle Augusto's farm in Montemerlo, a small village outside of Padova, one of the oldest cities, with one of the most storied universities, in Italy. During his early childhood, he lived with six female cousins who treated him like a brother.

He was happy in his uncle's home. Living on a farm had its advantages during wartime, and when he wasn't in school studying his favourite subjects of math and history, my dad enjoyed helping his uncle on the land. As much a young child could anyway. In spite of the shortages that often accompany war, my father and his family were lucky to enjoy the food grown on the farm, including pears and persimmons, as well as the occasional chicken and rabbit.

When he was old enough, my father performed the daily ritual of walking through the countryside to school with his cousins. One day, their usual journey was interrupted by the rumbling approach of a low-flying plane which began spraying the ground with machine gun fire. The group threw themselves off of the road, rolling into a ditch and staying as still all possible. The plane was so low, it almost hit the stone chimney of a nearby farmhouse but managed to right itself and bank away from them.

Air raids were not uncommon in the region, especially after Italy's capitulation in 1943. Padova and much of northern Italy became part of the Italian Social Republic (also known as the Republic of Salò), the puppet state of the German occupiers and remaining Italian Fascists. The

city hosted the Ministry of Public Instruction of the new state, as well as a military command post, railway station and an airport. As such, it was a strategic area for the Allies to target.

From December 1943 to the end of the war, Padova was heavily bombed by Allied aircraft. The worst hit areas were the railway station and the northern district of Arcella. During one of these bombings, the Church of the Eremitani, with frescoes by Andrea Mantegna, was destroyed; this is considered by some art historians to be Italy's biggest wartime cultural loss. The Cathedral and the University also suffered damage. Some 2,000 inhabitants of Padova were killed in the raids.

Fortunately for my father, he and his cousins were not harmed by the plane that day, or in the raids conducted by the Allies for control of northern Italy, or in the final insurrection by the partisans to rid Padova of the Fascists and German troops still occupying the area.

When liberation came in April 1945, there was much joy and happiness. Alongside their neighbours and countrymen, my father and his uncle's family fêted the Allied troops who'd entered the city and ended the occupation of the region.

As was common when young Allied soldiers arrived in a newly liberated town or city, GIs handed out candy and treats to local children. In Montemerlo, American GIs went from house to house, giving war-ration Hershey chocolate bars to all the kids. The GI who visited my father's farmhouse handed out chocolate bars to all of his cousins. But when he saw my father with his light blond hair and blue eyes, his reaction was swift and damning.

'Tu tedesco, niente cioccolata per te.'

'You are German, no chocolate for you.'

Northern Italy has been at the confluence of civilizations for thousands of years. Between raiding Gauls and Germanic tribes to the shifting allegiances of city states and empires into the 20th century, the Veneto region has seen its share of tribes, clans and people of all kinds, including individuals with all manner of hair and eye colour, from the prototypical black to light blonde and even red hair.

The misconception and accusation issued by the American soldier must have wounded my father deeply. After so many years of war and then occupation, nobody wanted to be associated with Germans, least of all a seven-year-old child. What was a day of celebration became one of confusion and exclusion. Certain memories are imprinted on us at an early age. That bar of chocolate became the symbol of my father's humiliation.

Among the falling leaves and flowing glacial water, a family mystery had been revealed. As we continued along the trail, I lagged behind, turning over my father's recollections in my mind, processing the words that, out of nowhere, he had put out into the universe, though they were intended for my ears only. On this beautiful, warm late summer day in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, his stories had offered a glimpse into his past, and revealed chapters of his life that formed the man he became, long before I arrived on the scene.

It was difficult for me to think about my father being so rejected as a child. To imagine his pain and suffering at the hands of others. I gained an appreciation about his formative years which made me grateful for how he had never let the negativity of his early life experiences cloud the way he'd raised my brother and me. Our childhood was filled with stability, love, parental involvement and family adventures. We lacked for nothing. I felt profound gratitude and love for how my father had overcome hardship, and that he'd chosen to reveal his past to me. This trip marked the beginning of our adult relationship.

In 1949, my father moved from his uncle's farm to the orphanage in Padova because his mother couldn't take care of him. After the death of his biological father in the Spanish Civil War, my

dad's mother had met and married another man. I suspect my grandfather, with whom my dad had a tumultuous relationship, likely didn't want a young child around the house.

My father emigrated to Canada in 1957 at the age of 19. He didn't want to come. His stepfather had arrived from Italy the year previously to work and sent for his wife and stepson to join him in Montreal. My dad had just graduated from technical school and was working in his first job in a tool and die factory in Padova. It was a good job and he enjoyed it, but he had no choice.

On March 30, 1957, he and his mother departed on the *Vulcania*, travelling from Venice to Naples and then finally to Lisbon before crossing the Atlantic. He was one of the tens of thousands of Italians leaving his homeland behind in a large wave of immigration from the country that lasted into the 1960s. The Venetian custom authorities were not happy to see him go. Italy didn't appreciate their able-bodied young people departing when the country was still in the midst of post-war reconstruction. The officials tore up my father's Italian identity papers, denying him his citizenship until it was restored by the Italian government decades later.

My father and grandmother arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on April 9, 1957, and were processed at the Canadian immigration facility, Pier 21. Now the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, this National Historic Site and landmark is where one million immigrants passed through on their way into the country between 1928 and 1971.

After being welcomed into the country, their journey mirrored one taken by millions of others arriving on Canada's shores since the 19th century. They boarded a 'cattle train' outfitted with hard, rough wooden benches. My father was confused about why he was there, and why he was fed corn on the train, which was very unusual because in Italy corn was usually fed to the pigs, not consumed by humans.

It was one of many adjustments to come in his new life that would eventually lead to a long and successful career in the aviation industry. He reunited with his stepfather in Montreal, where

two weeks after his arrival, a late spring storm blanketed the city in 20 cm of snow. It was his first taste of the more than 60 winters he's experienced during his life in Canada so far.

And like chocolate, he doesn't really care for winter that much either.

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