

# Esterina in the Eyes of Anna

By Amanda Di Pancrazio

*When nostalgia strikes a mother...*

It was December of 1959 and the holidays were quickly approaching. At the time, we lived on 9th Avenue in St-Michel. My parents lived on the main floor with my sister, Maria, who was eighteen at the time. My husband and I lived upstairs; I was five months pregnant.

We went downstairs, curious to see how my parents were doing, and my mother was in the process of preparing sausages for the upcoming holidays. The room was filled with the stench of freshly slaughtered pig; the typical smell for an Italian household around December. There she stood, above her link of sausages, with a look of grief spread across her face. My husband couldn't resist but get his camera.

My family and I came to Canada in 1956; we came from a small town named Pietrabbondante in the province of Isernia. My mother always took pride in anything she did, especially when it came to expressing her cul-



**Esterina in Montreal, 1959**

tural culinary skills. We always produced sausages around December while in Italy; I guess you can say we brought our traditions and customs with us.

As I looked at my mother, forcing a smile for the camera, I realized the nostalgia deep within her smile. It almost seemed as if she imagined her-

self back in Italy, surrounded by her siblings; all of them taking part in the sausage-making process together. She seemed swept away, drowned in her own thoughts, about being home again.

Our father had first made the decision for us to come to Canada when work was difficult to find in Italy. By staying in our hometown, our struggling ways of life would not improve. My parents had made the decision of coming to Montreal since my Uncle Mario, my mother's younger brother, had immigrated here just two years before we had made the equivalent decision. Canada seemed the best option considering they were tolerant towards immigrants and there were many opportunities.

Looking at her expression, I was overcome by a melancholy feeling as well. I myself had left behind a good deal of my childhood, friends, family and the place I called my home. While on the boat to Canada, I cried; I was strongly affected by the feeling of rem-

iniscing and seasickness. We arrived in Halifax and took an extremely long train ride to Montreal. It felt as if we were entering a life of misery; all we could see was forest. When we finally got to Montreal, it was a relief to see that our lifestyle would be changing for the better. Although I enjoyed my new urban life, I couldn't help but remember the quiet rural lifestyle I had left behind.

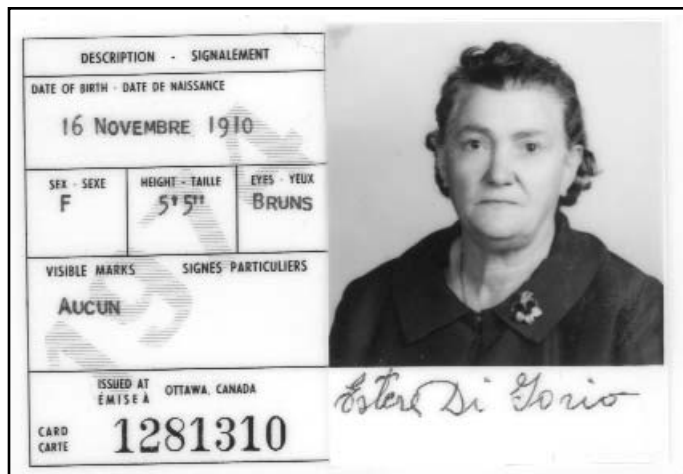
My husband grinned as he put his camera down on the table and stated that someday, her grandchildren would find the picture and realize how traditions never fade away in this family. My mother smiled. That's when I noticed the deep indentations of the wrinkles on her face; my mother was only forty-nine years old, yet, she seemed sixty. In my opinion, her elderly looks were caused by a strenuous life.

During the Second World War, our family struggled to live. It was difficult to find food and it really added a lot of strain on my parents. My father strived to maintain two jobs to make ends meet; he was the town's barber and

the tailor as well. Although the war was an immense struggle, the exertion continued after the war ended. Our town was small and underprivileged, which was the main reason why we made the

manufacturer in women's clothing where she worked as a seamstress for five months. She then withdrew from the workforce to become a homemaker while my father continued his job as a tailor in our new country.

By thinking back on my mother's sacrifices and efforts, I could see why she bared such elderly features. She continued to make sausages as I unrelentingly observed her. My husband told me he would be in the living room with my father if I needed anything and so I took a seat at the table at which my mother was working. She stayed in focus with her food preparation as I looked at her rough and creased hands pushing more pork meat into the funnel of the sausage stuffer. I then looked back at her expression; her eyes filled with concern. Why must a woman who endured so much still be troubled, I thought to myself. I watched as she squeezed the last bit of meat into the link and rolled it into a pile.



Esterina's certificate of citizenship

transition from Europe to North America. My mother was stressed over the fact that she had left a lot of family behind; however, she persisted with her new lifestyle and searched for work.

She was finally hired by a

She picked up the tools used in making the sausages and tossed them in the sink. She then washed her hands and left the water running over the tools. She put the salt away and stood still for a moment, her hands resting on her hips.

She let out a sigh of relief and looked at the floor. I got up and headed towards the sink, determined to scrub the residue off the tools. My mother quickly signalled for me to leave the work to her. Nevertheless, I ignored it and cleaned off the

***“She seemed swept away, drowned in her own thoughts, about being home again.”***

tools. Behind me, I could hear her removing the plastic covering which she worked on, off the table. I turned off the faucet and turned around to help her fold the large piece of plastic. My mother laid a pan with a dozen sausages in the

oven, shut the oven door and turned around, looking straight into my eyes.

She asked if I wanted to stay for dinner and said we'd be having sausages. I smiled and accepted her offer. She turned on the oven. I heard the front door shut and my sister entered, greeting both me and my mother and setting her purse on the counter. She asked; "What's for dinner?" My mother and I looked at each other, smiled and replied together; **"Sausages."**

## FOOTPRINTS

A strong follower of family traditions, Esterina Di Iorio, my great-grandmother, would always take part in the sausage making process annually. She was the last generation to practice the custom.

Who is to blame for the loss of the tradition? Thirty years ago, a woman with a strong career wasn't as common as it is today. Presently, women are equally as busy and stressed with work as men are, and so, for someone with a strong career, time is precious. It is no longer only the women who cook. Even considering this situation, most people don't have time to prepare elaborate meals so it's just easier to buy prepackaged foods. Still, just about every Italian grandmother will go out of their way to make sausages on a special occasion.

### **How to make traditional Italian sausages**

#### **Ingredients:**

- sausage casing (pig intestines or artificial)
- minced meat (pig's shoulder is best)
- salt and pepper
- ground chilli (for piquant flavour)
- green vegetables (rapini, parsley)

#### **Procedure:**

1. Wash sausage casing.
2. After casing is dried, add salt as desired.
3. Mix minced meat with chillies and greens. Add salt and pepper to liking.
4. Stretch casing over special funnel or machine.
5. Stuff meat in casing till achieved length; twist casing and repeat procedure till end of link.
6. Leave link to dry for a few days. Store in fat for further use.

## REFLECTION

I rubbed my eyes as I stumbled to find words to explain my experience in writing a story about my great-grandmother. I had been thinking of how I felt towards the project all night and the only thing that came to mind was a lot of work. It is then that I opened my eyes to see these daily aspects of my life that I have never paid much personal attention to traditions. It is certain traditions that I have been raised with that have molded me into what I am today.

In my family, traditions have been passed down from generation to generation. Our traditions consist of skills, habits, practices, and beliefs. In my story, *Esterina in the Eyes of Anna*, I have covered one traditional aspect of the culinary arts, the process of sausage-making. When writing my story, I felt it would be appropriate to speak of this tradition since it is one which is lost. As described, my great-grandmother, Esterina, used to carry out the entire sausage-making process as she had learned it in Italy. My grandmother, Anna, did not catch onto this skill; she simply buys the meat at the butcher's.

It is then that I wondered; what will I teach the next generation? Asking myself this, I began to make a list of traditions my great-grandparents brought back from Italy. There were certainly many culinary skills that past generations held: the making of pasta, tomato sauce, wines, tiramisu, cookies, breads and pies. These traditions have yet to fade since my grandmother keeps the traditions alive. I haven't gained any culinary skills yet, so what have I inherited? Certainly not the religious aspect. My great-grandmother was a strong believer in God and devoted much of her life to Roman Catholicism. My grandmother as well is a religious woman and has taught me many Italian prayers, though, through time, I have forgotten them. Even attending mass isn't as common as it once was; neither generation of our family goes on a regular basis. Thinking back, I finally began to notice that we pass down the traditions that we have mastered. I now know that years from now, when the fourth generation comes, I will probably teach someone how to knit colorful little slippers or how to plant a garden of parsley and tomatoes.


While writing about my great-grandmother, Esterina, I took on the perspective of Anna, who is not only my grandmother but one of my best friends as well. Since I was small, she would tell me about life in Italy and her tear-jerking experiences leaving her homeland. It isn't until now that I took so much interest in imagining how it would have felt leaving family, friends and a certain lifestyle behind for a place which you know nothing about. When I think about the groups of Italians who took part in these voyages, I deeply admire and respect the risks they took.

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