

Italian Canadiana

Nonna's Spiritual Journey Back Home

Raymond Culos

Volume 35, 2021

Patterns of Nostos in Italian Canadian Narratives

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087603ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v35i0.37220>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Culos, R. (2021). Nonna's Spiritual Journey Back Home. *Italian Canadiana*, 35, 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v35i0.37220>

Résumé de l'article

This is a story of a young bride, typical of many Italian women of her generation, who struggled with the proposition of having to leave all she knew and loved behind to join her husband and a new life in 'America'. Threading this common story of emigration, journeying, and settling, however, are the memories of a devoted grandson who, charmed by grandma's fascinating narratives of "home", embarks in his adult life on his own journey, back to the fount of his origins. Nonna Artemisia had left Italy on the promise to her father that she would endeavour to return someday to be with him again. The author, captivated by his grandmother's lifelong feeling of separation, symbolically returns her spirit to its original familial home.

Nonna's Spiritual Journey Back Home

Raymond Culos

Author and Chronicler of Vancouver's Italian Community

Abstract: This is a story of a young bride, typical of many Italian women of her generation, who struggled with the proposition of having to leave all she knew and loved behind to join her husband and a new life in 'America'. Threading this common story of emigration, journeying, and settling, however, are the memories of a devoted grandson who, charmed by grandma's fascinating narratives of "home", embarks in his adult life on his own journey, back to the fount of his origins. *Nonna* Artemisia had left Italy on the promise to her father that she would endeavour to return someday to be with him again. The author, captivated by his grandmother's lifelong feeling of separation, symbolically returns her spirit to its original familial home.

Keywords: new beginning, *nostos*, *anima*, *nonna*, Vancouver, emigration, journey, settling.

My maternal grandmother was born Artemisia Ricci on Sunday, July 25, 1886 in the idyllic town of Civitanova del Sannio which boasted a population of between two and three thousand inhabitants. The fifty-five-square kilometre *piccola città*, located twenty-five kilometres northwest of Campobasso, is nestled on a verdant hilltop high above the Trigno River in the rugged Apennine Mountains, the virtual backbone of the Italian peninsula.

Artemisia was reared in an atmosphere of love and affection and was doted upon by her father Rufino, a local artisan skilled at making wine barrels. As a cooper, Rufino Ricci had to best a myriad of challenges in order to feed and clothe his family most of which was oblivious to Artemisia in her early years. As part of a regular daily regimen, Rufino and his wife Maria Domenica nee Lucarino, along with their five children, worked assiduously at a number of strenuous and time-consuming activities related to animal husbandry and vegetable farming. The family's section of cultivated land, referred to as the *campagna*, was situated a relatively short distance from their home. On it was grown a variety of garden produce (*verdura*) including wheat, hay, tomatoes, lettuce, beans, corn, peppers, garlic and onions liberally fed with fresh groundwater drawn from strategically positioned wells.¹

There existed also an extensive vineyard the grapes of which largely

¹ Workers who spent long hours working in the fields—often from dawn to dusk—used these wells as coolers. Ropes tied to clay receptacles containing food, wine (*la fiaschetta*) and water (*la ciotola*) were kept cool and fresh until required.

were used to make copious amounts of home-made wine through a process called *la vendemmia*.² Interspersed among the seeded areas of the farm was a healthy supply of grazing grass-feed for the farm animals—and a number of fruit trees including cherry, plum, pear, apple and olive. The yields from this conglomerate were administered mainly by the women of the family who also were responsible for drawing water from the town's cistern for home consumption. They prepared the meals, baked, preserved, made rudimentary clothes and tended to the farm animals: sheep, donkeys, goats, pigs, rabbits, and chickens. Moreover, the women of the family regularly washed their clothes literally beside their neighbours, while exchanging the news of the day, alongside a communal pool into which water flowed, likely emanating from an aquifer.

Nothing, literally nothing was wasted in the family's attempt to make both ends meet. For example, the animal dung along with certain garden refuse plus peelings and scraps from the kitchen were housed in a quasi-compost, fenced to prevent intrusion by the livestock. Toward the end of the growing season or in early spring, seeds from the farm-grown plants, in particular tomatoes, beans and peppers were inserted in the compost mix. With liberal watering and close attention, this plethora of seeds became the source of hundreds of seedlings most of which were used in planting the next year's crop.

It is likely that the older children took turns in accompanying their father as he foraged for firewood some distance away from home. Artemisia would later reveal that, when it was her turn, the process required that she ride a mule, while her father walked in the lead. As they progressed, they would wend their way beyond the outskirts of town to the areas in which her father would gather twigs and tree limbs. On the return trip, once again mounted on the donkey, she would steady the bundles of firewood strapped to the mule, as required. During the course of this activity, Artemisia would knit a pair of socks; one sock in each direction. It was thought erroneously by her Canadian-born grandchildren that our *nonna* lacked a proper education because she hadn't attended school. However, it eventually became apparent to us that she had been skilled in many disciplines related to animal husbandry and farming. As a youngster, she learned at her mother's knee to knit, crochet and do needle point work. In her teens, she became proficient in carding and spinning sheep's wool to make yarn from which she helped make bedding and a number of clothing items for herself and siblings.

With her mother at the helm, Artemisia and her sisters helped in the process of preserving cherries and plums-in-wine, grinding wheat to make flour which later would be taken to the mill for refining, making

² When the harvest was ready for picking, family and friends—all of whom would share in the end product—gathered to pick thousands of clusters of ripened grapes for stomping. The juice and crushed grapes filled many large barrels to begin the fermenting stage. The occasion indeed was a festive one marked with laughter and good-fellowship, a huge meal, a glass or two of wine plus the singing of a repertoire of old favourite songs.

hand-made pasta and processing olives for cooking oil. In addition, they assisted in making fresh cheese from goats' milk as well as stacking hay for animal feed. At some point, she also became proficient at killing chickens for food and tending to farm animals as they gave birth. In this context, she periodically would accompany her dad to a neighbour's farm with the family's lambs in tow so that the farmer's ram could service the ewes thus ensuring another generation of sheep for wool and meat. An incredible accomplishment considering everything produced in-house was achieved without the benefit of amenities such as electricity or indoor plumbing of any description. Coal oil lamps plus cistern and/or well water were the staples of the day. In order to advance his cooperage interests, Rufino required funds to purchase staves and related materials. To accomplish this, he would gather up choice amounts of fruit and vegetables and cart the freshly cleaned and trimmed produce to neighbouring towns where he would sell them at an improvised roadside farmer's food market. The money earned, of course, would go toward purchasing the much-needed oak planks. In this endeavour, his sons Luigi and Michele proved to be excellent understudies. Sadly, at age 12 or 13, Luigi contracted "consumption" and after several months of deteriorating health succumbed to the disease (tuberculosis). His death had a profound and devastating effect on the family, none more profoundly affected than Rufino who loved his protégé son dearly. Artemisia fretted for her father and drew closer to him in an attempt to lessen the impact of the tragic loss. Years later, she would name her first-born son Luigi (Louis) which certainly would have pleased her grieving father.

In the mid-1890s disaster of another kind befell the unsuspecting Ricci family which at the time included Rufino's elderly widower father who lived with them. The entire Civitanova region had been hit by cruel and unusual weather resulting in the virtual decimation of all fragile food crops. This was not an unprecedented occurrence but was one that demanded immediate attention, if the family was to survive. Rufino and his brother sprang into action, agreeing to leave for America as soon as practical in an attempt to gain labour jobs in New York City's construction sector. They shared their plan with their wives—but not their father who was terminally ill—and made tentative arrangements to borrow fare money from relatives and friends. It is speculated that once a plan was in place, they made a quick trip to Campobasso City where they arranged for government-issued work and exit permits before booking passage with a steamship line. A few weeks later and with 'carboard' suitcases packed by their wives, at the ready, the Ricci brothers said their goodbyes to the family. As they attempted to exit the house, they were met by their weeping and troubled father who had come down from his room upstairs via the outside staircase (no inside access existed to the bedrooms above). "You're leaving for America, aren't you," he exclaimed teary-eyed. Hearing these awkward and somewhat perplexing words, the brothers retraced their steps and set their luggage down in the kitchen area. Arguments were put forward and words were exchanged with the old man prophesying, "If you leave now, you'll never see me again as I

am sure to die before your return.”

The men looked at one another exchanging glances of regret after which they paused a moment, then turned to their wives saying, “Let’s unpack the luggage.” Although few details of this particular vignette have survived, remaining somewhat sketchy in places following a century and more of its retelling, it is known that Artemisia’s grandfather, true to his prediction, died at home a few months later. Soon after the old man’s funeral, his sons departed Italy for America and the prospect of earning sufficient money to affect a new beginning back home.

It is true to say, I believe, that Artemisia yearned for her father and was wanting for his fatherly love and counsel. And as the absence of the brothers Ricci turned from weeks to months, she matured beyond her years taking on more responsibility for the upkeep of the house and well-being of her younger siblings. Spring found the preteen joining with other family members and accommodating neighbours in preparing the farmland for eventual planting by her father whose return was now imminent.

The working-trip to America proved fortuitous and the money saved from the excursion paid for all expenses with sufficient funds left over to purchase farm and cooperage supplies for the start of the intended “new beginning”.

On his nineteenth birthday, Monday, May 27, 1907, Donato Minichiello exchanged vows with Crestina DiPalma in the church chapel of the Chiesa Madre di Civitanova del Sannio. Soon after, Crestina volunteered to formally introduce her friend Artemisia to Donato’s older brother Saverio. Her brother-in-law and Artemisia immediately were attracted to one another and were married a year or so later in the same church. Saverio, an enterprising young man, soon shared his anxiety about the responsibility of planning for his and Artemisia’s future. “Unfortunately, I simply do not see any prospect of gaining a good paying job in Civitanova,” he said. “However, I believe we can build a prosperous life for ourselves and any children we might be blessed to have, in America. With your support, I will return to Joliet, Illinois, where I worked a few years ago, to seek permanent employment and to determine what opportunities exist for us to settle there,” Saverio stated with conviction. It is clear that she wasn’t overjoyed with the prospect of leaving her family and the only life she knew for America, a completely unknown entity to her. However, she kept her feelings to herself. With the steamship passage on the SS Romanic secured, Saverio departed Naples on January 9, 1909, for the United States. Months later, a letter from Saverio for Artemisia arrived at the local *negozio*. It was given to the young bride at the first opportunity. The letter’s main message wasn’t unexpected nor was it necessarily what Artemisia wanted to hear. Her reaction was to keep the letter and its contents secret.

As the story goes, the clerk was impressed by the fact that the letter had travelled all the way across the sea to Italy from America. Enough so, that three or four days later while serving Rufino in his *negozio*, he enquired about the letter, hoping of course to become privy to its details. No such luck as Rufino was not going to let on that he had been unaware

of the existence of the missive from America until that very moment.

Later that day, however, Rufino spoke in soft tones to his loving daughter saying, "You've received a letter from Saverio, haven't you?" As tears welled in her beautiful blinking blue eyes, Artemisia replied unequivocally, "Yes, and he asks that I join him in Joliet as soon as I can. Oh, father, I don't want to go. I love you too much to bear the pain of leaving you behind. I fear that if I should go to Saverio now, I will never see you and mother ever again. I just can't leave everything that I love behind," she sobbed.

Rufino embraced his daughter and whispered, "You won't be leaving us behind as long as you keep us in your heart, my child," he lovingly intoned. "Artemisia, your life is with your husband who I'm sure will ensure that you find happiness with him in the New World. And as far as being able to see you again, I would simply ask that should you and Saverio become financially successful in the years ahead, that you would return to stay with us awhile. Now, think about what I have said, talk to your mother and siblings and quietly come to your decision. I would expect, however, that you would be prepared to fulfill your commitment to Saverio who has demonstrated his love for you by proposing a path of hope and happiness that you will surely find rewarding. Bless you, Artemisia."

Artemisia reached her decision to join Saverio sans negative influence by her family. She immediately wrote to him of her plans to leave for America as soon as practical, news which surely must have filled his heart with loving expectation. In her letter, she also informed him that her brother Michele and his (Saverio's) sister Felicetta were planning very soon to marry and that Donato also had decided to leave for America. This was fortuitous news as it meant that she and her brother-in-law could make the trip together.

Festooned by family and friends including Crestina and one-year old Teresa Rosina, well-wishers all, Artemisia and Donato departed Naples aboard the SS Romanic on October 5, 1909 for Boston and Joliet. Also seeing them off were newly-weds Felicetta and Michael Ricci who declared that they too envisioned a new start in "America" but that their destination would be Vancouver, BC.

Donato and Artemisia soon discovered that much of the shipboard food wasn't to their liking. Moreover, once they had sailed through the relatively calm Mediterranean Sea and sailed beyond Gibraltar into the more turbulent Atlantic Ocean, they often became seasick during the five thousand, six hundred-kilometre (3,500-mile) crossing. Upon arrival in Boston, they were famished for familiar tasting food and ready to eat virtually anything but the like of ship's fare. Leaving Artemisia to await the arrival of their luggage, Donato scampered like a hare up the street in search of an Italian café or a retail store featuring cuts of familiar looking meat. He was attracted to the first shop en route which happened to be a bakery. From the street, he could see a display of several scrumptious looking cream covered pies which immediately caught his attention. He entered the *panificio* and pointed to a specific wondrous delight. With his

American currency in the palm of his outstretched hand, he purchased the pie and ran back to the docks where Artemisia was waiting with their belongings. Each with a sizeable piece of pie, they began to munch away. Within a few moments, Donato spat out his first mouthful! Unknowingly, he had purchased a lemon meringue pie to which he was totally unfamiliar. On that particular day, as it turned out, Donato had his first and last slice of lemon meringue pie!

Following a stop-over day in Boston, the travellers purchased train passage to Joliet, the last phase of their three-week journey. Donato and Artemisia booked tickets on the next morning's train. As she and her husband embraced at the city's railroad station terminal, Artemisia's fears were allayed somewhat. Saverio had done so well in preparing for her arrival by securing a clean and liveable rental house located in a neighbourhood where other Italians lived. Once in the rental accommodation, he was particularly pleased to tell her—and his brother—about the progress he had made in working as a labourer in a housing construction site.

It was an auspicious beginning, one which lent much credence to Saverio's promise of providing for a prosperous life for himself and Artemisia. Often it is difficult for the inexperienced to comprehend the emotional drama experienced by those who leave behind everything familiar to live in a foreign country in which customs and language are unfamiliar and where no established friendships exist.

Donato soon obtained employment, paying as he did a fair share of the household expenses. He was a godsend to the young couple as he served as a vital link to the life left behind in Italy and the adventure at hand. In the spring of 1910, a letter was received from Michele, now living in Vancouver. He began his remarks with a brief but enticing description of the beauty of the city on the Canadian Pacific coast and ended with a suggestion that Artemisia, Saverio and Donato join him in Vancouver "where the weather was much milder" and job opportunities existed. Considering that Artemisia was pregnant, she and Saverio encouraged Donato to feel no encumbrance in making his own call regarding the prospect of moving to Canada. It wasn't long before Donato departed Joliet by train to Vancouver via Winnipeg, Manitoba.

During the interval, Artemisia and Saverio agreed that as soon as practical following the birth of their child, they would join their siblings in Vancouver. With assistance of an Italian mid-wife, my mother Felicetta Minichiello entered this world on Tuesday, September 27, 1910 in the family's home on Frances Street, Joliet, Illinois. On her fortieth-day birthday, however, baby Felicetta and her parents arrived at Vancouver's Great Northern Train Station where they were greeted with much fanfare and joyous emotion by Donato and Michele.

It came as a bit of a shock to discover that in addition to Donato and Michele, there were five other men from their hometown sharing rental accommodation at the corner of Princess Avenue and Prior Street. Although it meant a great deal of additional work and effort in terms of domestic duties and responsibilities, Artemisia was compensated fairly by the boarders all of whom were simply delighted to be again eating a

regular diet of Italian home-cooked meals. This Artemisia did for a full year during which time she became pregnant with her second child. With the money they saved, she and Saverio placed a down payment on a house at 567 Union Street. In February 1912, Maria (Mary), a sister for Felicetta (Phyllis), was born. The girls soon were joined by siblings Louis in 1913, Ada in 1914 who sadly died in her infancy, and a second son Armando in January 1916. The Minichiello's tag-along son Arturo (Arthur) would arrive to the delight of the entire family on Wednesday, December 5, 1923.

Mid-way during this happy time of new arrivals, Crestina and four-year-old daughter Teresa Rosina departed Naples in October 1912 on board the SS Canonic. Following two weeks at sea and six days travel by train, mother and daughter arrived in Vancouver to be reunited with Donato. Also, in line to offer Crestina and baby special greetings at the train terminal were Saverio and Artemisia and Michele and Felicetta.

With profits from a burgeoning Italian imported food store, located in front of the Union Street house, plus rental income gained from the *paesani* borders, Saverio took a bold step. He contracted with an Italian owner of a grape vineyard situated in Fresno, California, for the purchase of large tracks of choice Zinfandel grapes grown in his commercial vineyards. The grapes produced a full body red wine which reflected the levels of sweetness, acidity and tantalising fruit taste similar to the home-made wine he made when in Italy. Saverio eventually partnered with his brother Donato in importing literally tons of these grapes annually from this particular source which the brothers Minichiello would in-turn sell and deliver to a large clientele of Italians living in Greater Vancouver. In the process, Saverio also produced and sold large amounts of bottled wine to friends and acquaintances. The accumulated profits from these endeavours later were directed to the purchase of a fifty-percent share in a licenced four-story hotel located in downtown Vancouver.

Vancouver had become the destination city for scores of Italians including Civitanovese, many of whom arrived during the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century. The Minichiello family sponsored a number of the family's extended members, including seventeen-year-old Rosina Caldarone, whose mother Lucia was Artemisia's older sister. Rosina, a bright and vivacious charmer, arrived in 1921 to live with her aunt and uncle. She was regarded as a breath of fresh air who quickly bonded with her cousins. Not only was her flawless Abruzzese dialect infectious, her ability to facilitate the news sent and received from Civitanova was of a high standard. Rosina worked assiduously at many domestic tasks plus baby-sitting chores which endeared her all the more to the entire family.

Apparently from the time Rosina was a young teen, she had become captivated by the photos received in letters from her aunt Artemisia in 'America'. In particular, she would dwell over the images of her cousins Felicetta and Mary who often were dressed smartly for the studio photo-ops. From a very early age, she dreamed of the day when she too might

relocate to Vancouver were success appeared achievable to those willing to extend themselves.

An opportune moment presented itself in early 1926 to plan and fulfill the promise of returning to Civitanova to see family—in particular Artemisia's father whom she longed to see once more. Rosina, now married to Antonio Culos, would move back to the Union Street house to supervise the needs of Felicetta, Mary, Louie and Armando. The girls, now in their early to mid-teens would attend to grocery store sales and clientele accounts. Donato would run the grape importing business while assisting Rosina in supervising the children. Two-year old Arthur would be taken by his parents on the proposed six-month trip that would involve stays with Artemisia's younger sister Felicetta Cardarelli and family in Boston, and Saverio's brother Nicola, his wife Caterina and their infant son Michael in Springfield, MA.

On June 11th, the threesome set sail from New York harbour to Italy in anticipation of a glorious reunion in Civitanova del Sannio. The anxiety level lessened exponentially as the seas proved easier to navigate, the shipboard food decidedly more palatable and the sleeping quarters clearly more comfortable than on the crossing 17-years earlier. Life had been good to the Minichiellos during the past decade and their stories of success were very positive; a nice beginning to a full exchange of news with both sides of their family. And baby Arthur, alert, healthy and full of promise, was destined to be a great hit with his grandparents³ and relatives. Once in Naples and feeling quite tired after the long journey, Saverio and Artemisia decided in favour of staying over that first night and to arrange for train and bus transportation the next morning to Civitanova, a distance of approximately 200 km. It proved to be a sound plan as they awoke to a beautiful day, well rested and bright with anticipation, especially young Arthur.

Inadvertently, this travel delay added to Rufino's consternation. Communications being what they were in those days and lacking a clear understanding of Artemisia's itinerary, her father regularly would walk excitedly over to the town's bus stop nearest his home. Adhering to a published schedule, he was there to meet each bus on its arrival in anticipation of greeting his daughter, son-in-law and grandson. Following each no-show, he would return home to lament, "They weren't on the bus again".

The following day, the trio of travellers approached Civitanova on the day's last scheduled bus run. As a courtesy to Saverio's family, however, they first alighted at the stop nearest the Minichiello house. Giacinta, in particular, was overwhelmed with joy to hold in her arms a grandson born in 'America'. The whole experience made her gasp for breath as she attempted to restrain her emotion so as not to upset or

³ Saverio and Donato's father Felice had died in a work-related accident. As a result, the boys' mother Giacinta soon remarried. True to the tradition of the time, she married her late husband's brother Michele Minichiello with whom she had three children; Felicetta, Nicola and Giuseppe.

frighten the youngster. For a two-year-old, the slightly bewildered Arthur behaved exceedingly well in spite of being handed from one person to another in this very loving environment. A reasonable length of time lapsed before Artemisia whispered to Saverio something like, "It's time to go, isn't it?"

It must have been like stepping out of a dream onto a stage of reality for Artemisia as she entered her parents' home and into her mother's embrace. Love permeated the scene as hugs and kisses were exchanged. Artemisia's sisters excitedly anticipated her question, "Where's papa?" by telling Saverio and Artemisia that the family's patriarch had gone out to the bus stop in anticipation of meeting them.

Reminiscent of a scene out of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Artemisia and Saverio, with Arthur in arms, were encouraged to hide behind a cupboard in anticipation of Rufino's return. He didn't disappoint. Walking into the house a minute or two later, to witness a forced look of expectation on the faces of the assembled family and guests, he sadly intoned, "She didn't arrive on today's last bus either." Artemisia, understandably, didn't wish to prolong the intrigue and stepped out from behind the cupboard shouting as she was drawn to her father's arms, "Oh, papa I couldn't bear the agony another moment." "Home, home at last. God bless you, Artemisia," the rejuvenated Rufino excitedly exclaimed. And as he uttered those words, the seventy-one-year-old *pater familias* turned to firmly grasp the hand of his son-in-law saying, "And God bless you too, Saverio, for being true to your word and making it possible for me to see my daughter once more. Thank you, thank you, my son."

Precious little information has filtered down to this family chronicler regarding Artemisia and Saverio's extended visit with parents, family and friends. It is known, however, that Saverio contracted for reno work to the front-exterior of his mother Giacinta's house. Unfortunately, they found her in declining health but safely in the care of her son Giuseppe's⁴ wife Vincenza who had a one-year-old son Michael. Also of particular note was the occasion of Artemisia's fortieth birthday on July 25th which surely wouldn't have been passed by without some sort of celebration, given the family's collective state of happiness. Saverio and Artemisia also were generous when it came to gifting money to her parents, something they did periodically as they became financially capable in doing so.

One can imagine Artemisia's daily routine enjoyed with her father; walks, visits with friends and relatives, paying respects to those dear to her heart at the local cemetery and the inevitable retracing of youthful haunts and friends. Overall, it was a glorious reunion with the telling and retelling of stories related to the status of the many relatives and

⁴ With the exception of two or three visits home, Saverio's youngest brother Giuseppe spent an estimated fifteen years in Vancouver before arranging—upon the death of his mother in 1937—to have Vincenza and their two sons join him in Vancouver.

friends who had joined the exodus from Italy to Canada and the United States during the past twenty to twenty-five years. A number of these ex-Civitanovese entrusted letters of greeting, many of which contained cash and/or family photographs, to Artemisia and Saverio for delivery to family members resident in Civitanova.

What is understood clearly, however, is Artemisia's changing focus from past memories to present day realities. She delighted in speculating on the future, with particular emphasis on what might be gained by her children who, she emphasized, were privileged to live in a country of such hope and opportunity. To her delight, her 15-year-old daughter Felicetta already had earned a High School Entrance Certificate. Not that the two realities were incompatible but rather that the memories of Civitanova and the special love she held in her heart for her father would be forever hers to harbour and savour but her children's future lay in Vancouver.

As difficult as it must have been to proffer final goodbyes, Artemisia and Saverio along with young Arthur, whose smattering of Italian had become a source of great family joy and entertainment, readied for their departure. Optimistically speaking, it appeared as if Artemisia's umbilical cord finally had been severed and that the old-world connections were fading in favour of acceptance of the more realistic Canadian fact. And yet, as she cast a final gaze across the azure waters of the Bay of Naples from the steamship's promenade deck, Artemisia's familial spirit apparently remained resolutely equivocal.

As the train drew closer to the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway, located within a short walking-distance of Vancouver's Little Italy neighbourhood, the striking beauty and full majesty of the North Shore Mountains, high above the imposing Burrard Inlet, presented an awe-inspiring view. The city, proclaimed the "Gateway to the Pacific" with an estimated population of 185,000, rightfully boasted of being the proud possessor of a truly iconic Canadian jewel, Stanley Park, indeed a thrilling spectacle to behold. The scent of sea and sky was intoxicating as the trio of passengers breathlessly alighted from what had been their home-on-roads for the past six days and five nights. To their unabashed delight, they were home, home to where family and friends awaited.

The 'welcome home' family reception at the train terminal was organized by Felicetta, Mary, Louie and Armando with help from Rosie and Tony, Donato and Crestina and Mike and Felicetta. It represented only a smidgeon of what was to come. With three vehicles fully loaded with well-wishers, they drove with dispatch from the terminal to the Union Street house where a phalanx of friends, originally from Civitanova and now resident in Greater Vancouver, gathered to 'hear all the news from home'. The chatter was fun-filled and joyous with an excited young Arthur taking centre stage. Soon the atmosphere in the spacious Minichiello home took on a holiday spirit of its own. It became apparent that Artemisia and Saverio, without seeking such recognition, had become known as the elders within the Civitanova expatriate com-

munity. It wasn't a misplaced accolade by any means as Saverio regularly came to the aid of friends and relatives.

Following his death on January 4, 1954, the daily newspaper, The Vancouver Sun, published two 250-word news items within a couple of days of each other. The first of the News Section articles appeared under the heading: "Prominent Italian's Funeral Rites Friday". It read in part: "Requiem high mass for Saverio (Sam) Minichiello, the unofficial "father" of Vancouver's Italian colony, will be celebrated Friday 10 a.m. in Sacred Heart Church."⁵ The family was told by a Bell Funeral Home representative that Saverio's funeral cortege, led by a contingent of VPD motorcycle riders, comprised the largest number of private cars of any funeral for which they had provided service. Artemisia, the bereaved widow forever changed, would mourn her husband's demise for the rest of her days.

Most Sundays, during the next two years or so, I would dutifully escort my grandmother (*nonna*) to the Ocean View Cemetery to pay respects to my *nonno* at his resting place in the cemetery's mausoleum. I would drive her to the Burnaby burial park in my late grandfather's car and later in my own vehicle. And due to the fact that we lived next door to one another, the effort was effortless, so to speak.

During our private moments together, especially during the ride to and from the cemetery, I regularly became privy to a classic *nonna* Artemisia story that included warm references to her father. She often spoke in parables and allegories, stressing morals relating to proper behaviour and conduct. One such vignette related to a particular card player in her town who was possessed of gambling. The subject had foolishly gambled away most of his savings and possessions. In an obvious gesture to make him think about the dire consequences of his obsession, the benefactor of his losses facetiously proposed: "If you want a chance to win back your money and I.O.U. notes, put up your wife as collateral and we'll cut the cards to see if you win back your losses or lose your wife in the bargain." Hesitating only briefly, the gambler accepted the challenge by saying: "Shuffle the cards."

At this point, *nonna* stopped speaking and literally gasped as if short of breath. "What happened?" I exclaimed. As her eyes welled up with tears she responded with: "He lost!" After a moment or two, she continued. Apparently, the winning gambler then stood up and castigated his incredibly stupid adversary, shouting that he had participated in the ruse simply to teach him a lesson. He admonished his opponent for his audacity in doing such an evil thing. The reality shock and castigation brought the gambler to his senses. Terribly embarrassed, he rose to state in truly profound terms that he had learned a valuable mind-changing lesson. He thanked the man for his thoughtful and generous gesture, shook his hand and left, never to gamble again.

When Judy and I were married on August 18, 1956, *nonna* delivered a *brindisi*, at the reception. Her words of congratulations and *buona fortuna*

⁵ The article continued: "Many former Italians owe their success and prosperity in Canada to the unstinting help they received from Mr. Minichiello."

na resonated with the 200 plus invitees largely because it was the first time, to my knowledge at least, that she had proposed a toast at a wedding. It thrills me greatly to reference her splendid gesture to these pages.

We lived the first ten months of our marriage with *nonna* and Marion, my ten-year old sister, during which time Judy became proficient in preparing Italian food dishes as she observed *nonna's*—and my mother's—amazing culinary expertise. Every evening, with few exceptions, my parents, brother and auntie from next door would join the four of us for dinner. The family's matriarch died on June 23, 1975, a month shy of her eighty-ninth birthday. There had been a health disconnect during the last few years of her life which in the end turned the sadness of her passing into a lasting celebration of her life.

A year later, Judy and I with our children Robert (17), David (15) and Elinor (8) travelled to Italy for the first time. Our priorities were to visit the Culos relatives in Friuli and the Minichiello extended family members in Molise, which until 1963 had been part of the Abruzzo region. Our entourage included Judy's mother Alice and stepfather Henry. To me, in particular, the major highlight of our trip was the visit to Civitanova del Sannio and time spent with relatives and friends in the source locations of *nonna's* morally-laced stories.

Our first and most memorable encounter was with zia Maria Caldarone Viani, *nonna's* niece, and her wonderful family which included two of her daughters Gina and Delia who was visiting from Downsview, Ontario. This relatively brief social call was followed later the same day with an in-home scrumptious family dinner at which we seven joined the five members of our host and hostess's family.

Next day, we were given a tour of the town which included an inspection of the house, now vacant, in which *nonna* lived until she was twenty-four. To gain entrance to the house, my auntie went next door to fetch the entrance key. The neighbour entrusted with the key, an older gentleman, was told of my relationship to the Ricci and Minichiello families. "I know who you are," he ventured to say. "I remember seeing you with Artemisia and Saverio in 1926," he chimed. It was an incredible connection attempt, although he undoubtedly mistook me for being my Uncle Arthur who is twelve years my senior!

The house had been occupied by zia Maria and her family for several years until they moved into a larger and more comfortable accommodation on Via Battista. Several photographs of family members including Auntie Rosie Caldarone Culos and her children Peter and Flora were hanging askew on the kitchen walls. While completing my walkabout, I trembled a little, just thinking of *nonna* and the all-encompassing love she had harboured for this place and her family, especially her father. At this point, Gina and zia Maria took us to the local cemetery which proved to be a remarkable experience as the names on exposed coffins in the 'family' mausoleum of sorts, plus many of the grave markers, read like an index to *nonna's* verbal anthology.

After all the visiting and wonderful hospitality, it was time to

continue on with our journey of familial discovery. As we motored through the town, we stopped to visit the church in which *nonna* and *nonno* were married and where literally all my maternal relatives for generations had come to speak to God. Kneeling at the altar in the Chiesa Madre di Civitanova del Sannio—adjacent to a windowed burial case, which served as the repository of artifacts related to Civitanova's patron saint, San Felice—I prayed that *nonna* was happy and content in the Lord's keeping.

Suddenly, and inexplicably, I felt a soothing sense of calmness and serenity. I imagined—or just wanted to believe—that this feeling of equilibrium somehow was related to *nonna's* soul finally being at peace. And in this context, perhaps, just perhaps, it meant that I had unknowingly facilitated the return of her familial spirit to this hallowed place.