

Friulani Writers in Canada: Elegy for the Future

by Joseph J. Pivato



One day we got lost in Pordenone. On a long drive from Udine to Bassano we took a wrong turn and found ourselves in a newly built area of Pordenone. The streets, sidewalks, green lawns and house designs were all a reproduction of a new subdivision in Toronto. We were lost, but we were back in Canada. It was a disorienting experience. These former immigrants to Canada had returned to Friuli, but had wanted to reconstruct their Toronto neighbourhood. They wanted both worlds: to live in Friuli, but in a Canadian style, and probably with Canadian dollars.

What does this tell us about our relationship to landscape and to history? In 2003 I received a copy of the proposal for a conference in Udine called, "Oltre la Storia/ Beyond history." It read in part:

Being no longer the victims of history, the sons and daughters of immigrants are, in fact, the real protagonists of a contemporary Canadian scene which they enrich and change with their work.

I kept asking myself can we ever really move beyond history? As immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants we are the victims of history, and always will be. Some of us find creative ways to deal with these family traumas, but some of us never come to terms with the great uprooting. The hundreds of Friulani who returned to Pordenone and rebuilt their "casetta piccolina in Canada" found one answer to the question of history. In a way these are true Friulani artists: they are able to look back and forward at the same time. And this may be one way of moving beyond the victimization of history and into a new future. But we cannot all return to Italy, even if we wanted to. There is not enough room for us here. We remember that this is one

of the reasons so many of us left in the first place. And that is one relationship to our Canadian landscape: enough space for people.

In the 1990s as you travelled around Friuli you occasionally saw a blue place name sign which had the final vowel in the name covered in blue spray paint. So Udine became Udin, and Martignacco became Martigna. There are Friulani who want to preserve their language by changing the place names back to Friulano. To deal with this many towns have also put up yellow place name signs with the Friulano spelling below the blue Italian spelling. We now see Codroip, Rodean, San Vit. It seems that if you can name your landscape you have control over it. Some Québécois would understand this idea and practice.

Friuli is a region in the north eastern part of Italy that has always had its own language and culture. As a border region it has also been occupied by many different people from other European powers. The original Celts there were conquered by the Romans, then the Longobards, then Slavic people, then the Venitians, then the Austrians, and finally the Italians. For two hundred years skilled tradesmen have been leaving Friuli to work all over the world. Today there is some question whether the Friulano language and culture will survive beyond this century. This crisis of future survival is the context for my brief discussion about the Friulani people in Canada.

As Canadian writers of Friulano origin are finding out the preservation of culture and language is more complicated than changing a few place names. Friuli has a history which is forgotten. It is a border region on the north eastern edge of Italy vulnerable to attacks, invasions and foreign occupations. In Italian history we do not read much about Friuli. (Leicht P. 1988, 189) Is it vital to the Italian national state, or is it expendable like its neighbour Istria?

Occasionally we find Friulani who know some of their family stories. It is these fragmented stories which reflect part of the lost history of Friuli. Here is some of my own family history which I can never escape:

My mother comes from Nogaredo di Corno which is about 20 km west of Udine. Her family name is Sabucco. The church records in Nogaredo show that the name Sabucco has appeared there since 1468. Like many other families in Friuli the Sabuccos had been there in the same town or village for 600 years. All this changed in the 1800s, especially after Italian unification, when many young men from Friuli began to leave to work in other parts of Europe and the new world. My grandfather Mondo left Nogaredo for Canada in 1904. I wrote a story about his early life in Canada. The Sabucco family is like many others in Friuli; after 600 years of relative stability there is disruption, and diaspora. My grandfather's oldest brother went to Argentina and disappeared. A younger brother went to the United States.

Whole towns in Friuli were depopulated as families went abroad, *al di là da l'aghe*. Friuli underwent many major changes, as did other regions of Italy. The difference in Friuli is that this depopulation meant there were less people speaking Friulano, less people supporting and promoting a distinct Friulano culture. The arrival of modern mass media after the Second World War, the spread of standard Italian, meant that even fewer people would be speaking Friulano. What is happening to this culture in modern industrialized Italy? In an Italy with a falling birth

rate, and a world where fewer and fewer people speak Italian, what will be the position of Friulano? Spray painting street signs will not solve these problems.

This background of a lost language and culture is what appears in the work of some Friulani writers in Canada. We can look at the work of Doré Michelut, Ermanno Bulfon, Marisa De Franceschi, Doris Vorano or Bianca Zagolin to discover elegiac elements. We will look briefly at the first three writers.

In the anthology she edited, *A Furlan Harvest*, Michelut explains the dilemma of the Friulano language, also called Furlan, "Furlan alphabetized in the first part of this century, was not taught in schools, hence, most Furlans speak their mother tongues but prefer to write in Italian." (Michelut D, 1993, 16) The anthology, *A Furlan Harvest*, is the result of a series of writers workshops Michelut conducted at the Famee Furlane in Toronto in order to rediscover the literary culture of Friuli and promote the work of local writers. Of the six women in the anthology only two women wrote in Friulano. Maybe it is too much to expect that the Friulano language will survive outside Friuli, outside rural Friuli.

The poems and sketches in this anthology are dominated by a nostalgia for a Friuli of the past. There is a sense of loss, a childhood in rural Friuli, a lost pace of life, a lost culture and a lost language. The poems of Rina Del Nin Cralli are in this vein. The very anthology in its collective attempt to capture this slowly disappearing culture becomes an elegy. A harvest after all is the end of the life cycle.

An elegy is a lament for the loss of somebody or something. These writers are lamenting the loss of the rural culture of Friuli, the Friuli of their childhoods. And they are writing about this loss for future generations. Writing in Friulano is a paradox since the language and folklore of Friuli survived all those centuries as a oral tradition. Now that it is disappearing it is being written down.

In Toronto in 1977 Ermanno Bulfon published a collection of poems in Friulano entitled, *Un Friûl vivût in Canada* (a Friuli lived in Canada). The title suggests that Friuli, or at least a Friulano culture, can be reconstituted in Canada. Does Ermanno Bulfon literally believe that you can live as a Friulano in Toronto, or is he suggesting you can do this only symbolically, or is he being ironic? It is only when you begin to read the short lyrical poems in Friulano that you detect the sense of loss. In the poem, "Sabide in Canada," there is the obvious loss of the immigrant who must leave his family, country and culture behind. But there is also the sense of loss due to the changes in the region of Friuli. The poems recall a rural Friuli of small towns, church bells, a sunny quiet country of farmers and fields. The titles are "La Mé Cjase," "Mê Mari," "Il Mê Paîs" and "Friûl di Primevere." In this last poem addressed to Friuli as if it were a familiar person he comes back to, Bulfon declares that:

Tu sês
simpri compagn,
Friûl, simpri compagn.
Ogni volte ch'o torni
ti cjati a spietâmi

content
ta muse
di amis e parinc'

(Bulfo E. 1977, 44)

As much as he might deny it, this is a Friuli which was disappearing for the 30 year-old-Bulfo in the 1970s. So "Friûl di Primevere" is wishful thinking. And it is odd to find in poem after poem this deep sense of loss for these simple country pleasures in a young man. This man too had to leave Friuli behind. This nostalgia is tempered by the realities and necessities of emigration. In the poem, "L' emigrant," he explains the deep regrets of having to leave Friuli for the cold of Canada, but all for the new future:

'O à lassade
la mê tiare.
Un siúm.
Mi sumìi ancjemò
e sperì
al doman plui biel
dai nestrìs fruz.

(Bulfo E. 1977, 38)

There is deep regret in leaving Friuli. He still dreams about it, and yet "al doman plui biel" is in Canada. This is the future for the children, "nestrìs fruz."

Is this concern for the future of our children a political question? In the statement explaining the theme of the 2004 conference in Udine we are asked to move beyond history. To move beyond this history we have to move beyond Italy.

Marisa De Franceschi has published a collection of short stories about growing up in Canada, called *Family Matters*. One story in this book could be about many families in Friuli. It is called "Royal Blood" and deals with a young woman trying to find out about the history of her family. She learns that her grandmother was the daughter of a countess, but had married an ordinary man. Her grandfather had served "as bodyguard to an Austrian Emperor. That was when our part of the country was under that country's rule." (De Franceschi M, 2001, 66) This is the only allusion to the history of Friuli in the book. The protagonist is curious about this lost history. It is a story which needs more explanation. Her grandfather had been rich. He had been mayor of their town. She asks her father:

"Daddy, if Grandpa had so much land and so much money, how come we came over here?"

"He had a lot, but he had to divide it into six parts because there were six of us who had to share it all. It really didn't leave much for any one of us."

It made sense, but for some reason I thought that if you come from a rich and almost royal family, that family should remain rich and almost royal. Why did it all have to come tumbling down? (De Franceschi M. 2001, 69)

Why indeed? Why did we emigrate? There was not enough room for everyone. Take this farm, even a large rich farm, and divide it into six parts and there is not enough land to support six families. The farm is a metaphor for Italy. This woman has lost her royal blood, but is trying to regain her history. She sees it as necessary for her future. Some of the stories in this collection have families who have forgotten their history and who can't envision their future.

In Marisa De Franceschi's 1994 novel, *Surface Tension*, the landscape of Friuli is very much a distant memory of her childhood which Margaret cannot recall. There are references to her father and cousin, Tino, involved with the partisans during the war and to reasons for leaving Italy. It was an Italy of devastation, a place to escape. After they settle in Canada, members of her family only return to Italy to deal with crises. Margaret recalls, "It was such a regular occurrence that for a long time I used to think of Italy as one gigantic chronic care hospital of sorts where people were forever suffering dreadful diseases and lingering at death's door." (De Franceschi M. 1994, 103) Is this her young view of Friuli? There are only passing references to this culture and one quotation in Friulano. It is only after Margaret finishes university that Italy becomes a place to escape to. She goes back there to be with her Italian lover, Daniele. But this is not the provincial Friuli; it is the international Milano. She returns to Canada to marry her Canadian boyfriend.

Surface Tension ends with Margaret again returning to Italy twenty years later. This time her son, David, goes there to study architecture, and she finally realizes that she wants to be with Daniele. Despite the many references to Italian mountains and forests, it is not Friuli she returns to but Milano. In one chapter the sleepy village, her hometown, is contrasted unfavourably to the culture and order of Italian cities. (De Franceschi M. 1994, 272) In this narrative about an Italian-Canadian woman from Friuli, Italy becomes a place to return to. In this story of love and deception, Margaret wants to confess her betrayals and end her days in Italy. It seems that only in Italy can she finally be true to herself and end a twenty year lie. The immigrant story is often an escape from Italy, so when Margaret escapes back to the home country, it is an act of reverse migration. This intentional reversal of the normal immigrant pattern makes us question our relationship to Italy. Like Margaret do we have a different view of our provincial home towns in contrast to the progressive big cities? In the new unified Europe the large Italian cities become more and more international urban centers. What will happen to the provincial, rural culture of Friuli? As we move beyond history, we can ask is there a future for Friuli? I Have spent a lifetime trying to understand these problems. (Pivato J. 1994, 34-37)

In 1986 Dore Michelut (Michelutti) published her collection of poems, *Loyalty to the Hunt*. In this volume she included two poems in Italian and one in Friulano. The Friulano poem is called "Ne Storie," a story, and laments her own loss of the Friulano culture and language. Her English translation reads:

I walk in this language of walls
wet with a bitterness that seeps into
my mouth, that shocks my teeth like

icy well water. I shudder as this suffering
history greets me with kisses,
tells me I've been bad, says: "Where
have you been? We'll settle this at
home."

* * *

The river Stèle swallows the tongue and
carries it to the world in pieces. And
we see each other only when the Stèle
floods from the mouth of the storyteller...

(Michelut D. 1986, 37)

In 1989 Dore published her essay, "Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue," which explores the place of Friuli and the Friulano language after she had to learn standard Italian and English. She laments that Friulano is in a remote third place.

The balance that Furlan and English struck within me long ago is so very entrenched it feels saturated and inaccessible. At a certain point, my two acquired languages, Italian and English were forced to come to terms with each other within me. It was this experience that led me to consider ways of approaching the more remote Furlan. (Michelut D. 1989, 145)

The essay is an elegy to this mother tongue. It is also a statement about the role of the ethnic minority writer as translator of a language, a literature and a culture. Sherry Simon has written a great deal about the complex role of the translator of a literary work. Some writers like Dore Michelut are translating among their three languages. The Friulano writer is not only translating a different language, but also reconstructing a literature which existed orally and is rapidly disappearing. (DeLuca A. 1999, 104-9)

In this short essay I have tried to look primarily at those writers who use the Friulano language in Canada to see what it tells us about moving beyond history. There are other writers who deserve to be included in this study. In Montreal Bianca Zagolin writes in French about her experiences of dislocation in the novel, *Une femme à la fenêtre*. And in Toronto the late Gianni Grohovaz wrote in Italian and Fiumano dialect in *Strada Bianca* and *Per ricordar le cose che ricordo*. Grohovaz was a displaced person from Fiume and understood the fragility of human culture. For over a decade Silvano Zamaro was in Edmonton and published *Autostrada per la luna* before returning to Friuli. The subtext of this essay can be expressed with the question that Ermanno Bulfon used in 1979 at the Conferenza Regionale dell'Emigrazione held in Udine, "Spriamo o non spriamo?" (Bulfon E. 1995, 55). Will we disappear as Friulani in Italy and in the world?

I will end with a quote from a Montreal poet, Doris Vorano, who was born in Nogaredo di Corno, the same village as my mother. This Friulano poem, "L'emigrant," is both optimistic and pessimistic about the future.

L'emigrant a lè
E al restara simpri
Un anime
Plene di sperance
Plene di ricuars
E plene di siumps,
Che mai no podaran realisâsi
A tuart o a reson

(Vorano D. 1983, 29)

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See the volume *Shaping History: L'identità Italo-Canadese nel Canada Anglofono*. Eds. Anna Pia De Luca & Alessandra Ferraro. Udine: Forum, 2005.