

# THE FRIULIAN-CANADIAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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#### Abstract

This essay reconstructs the Friulian immigrant experience to Canada through the works of some Friulian and Julian-Dalmatian writers. It highlights how while voicing the deep sense of loss that Friulians feel for their homeland, these texts also prompt a reconciliation with displacement and a reconfiguration of the idea of home which can include multiple belongings. It also analyses how these texts employ different languages, including Friulian, as a strategy of historical reappropriation of the immigrant experience and of renegotiation of identity.

L'esperienza migrante dei friulano-canadesi

L'articolo ricostruisce la storia dell'emigrazione friulana in Canada attraverso un'analisi di alcune opere di scrittori friulani e giuliano-dalmati. Oltre a dare voce al persistente dolore che affligge i friulani per la perdita della propria patria, questi testi evidenziano anche la necessità di superare il trauma della dislocazione e ridefinire i concetti di patria e appartenenza. Si analizza inoltre come l'uso di diverse lingue, tra cui il friulano, costituisca una strategia di riappropriazione storica dell'esperienza migrante e di rinegoziazione identitaria.

For my grandparents

### Friulian emigrants to Canada: a personal memory

When my grandfather arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1951 he did not have a place to stay, nor food to eat. The first nights, he and his fellow *paesani*<sup>1</sup> from Friuli found shelter in an abbey, where they slept on the floor. During the day they would go down to the station where they would buy a small bag of peanuts for 5 cents, the little food they could afford. There they waited to be hired for

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The term "paesani" refers to people from the same town.

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some job or another, disdaining none offered to them. Thus, when asked if he could mine, my grandfather said: «Yes, of course», even if he had never been near a mine before. He was soon embarked on a small plane that took him up north to the wild, perilous forests of Labrador. For some happy coincidence, he did not end up in the iron ore mines, though, nor as a woodcutter or timberman as his fellow countrymen, but was sent to work in the kitchens as a camp cook. The pay was good and the food abundant: it must have seemed like a real paradise for a starving wretch like himself.

It did not take him very long to save enough money to put a down-payment on a piece of land in the backwoods of New Brunswick and to bring his wife and son in from Venzone. After undergoing mandatory medical examinations in Rome, the young boy and his mother crossed the ungentle Atlantic for eight days in January of 1952 and made their epic journey to the Canadian wilderness. Here they were surrounded by mountains of snow, heaped higher than houses along the roads, and by endless hectares of dark forests and menacing wild animals. The little trailer house my grandfather had wheeled in stood on a small clearing in the woods, just big enough to grow a little garden patch in the summer and keep some fowl and pigs. The rest was utter wilderness. No houses or cities for miles and miles, the closest town being Campbellton, 50 miles away. No one there but a young woman and her seven-year-old son, patiently waiting for a plane to occasionally bring a beloved man home from Labrador.

About a year later my grandfather's older brother also made the trip across the Atlantic and joined them in New Brunswick with his wife and son. They all remained there, in the cold North American wilderness, for another short while and then decided to head west, lured by the prospect of better jobs in Canada's growing urban centers. My uncle settled in Montreal, while my grandfather moved to Toronto, two cities which were to host large Friulian communities<sup>2</sup>. There they were slowly able to rebuild a sense of belonging with their fellow *paesani* even if the family was separated once again.





<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Today the Friulian diaspora counts a fairly large community in Canada, concentrated above all in the metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City and Vancouver. Although it is impossible to determine their precise number, «there is no doubt» – as Guido Barbina states – «that Friulians constitute one of the most consistent immigrant groups to enter Canada in the 1950s». At the end of the XX century it was, in fact, estimated that approximately «80,000 Canadians were either born in Friuli or are at least partially of Friulian descent», of whom about 40,000 to 50,000 lived in the Toronto area ("The Friulian Community...": 48-49).

# Recording the Friulian immigrant experience

My grandparents' story, like that of many Friulian immigrants, is one that has long been wrapped in silence. It is one made of fragments of memory, entrusted only to the ears of those who care to listen. Being mostly of humble, rural origins, many Friulians have passed down their stories orally, following a deeprooted Friulian storytelling tradition, but very few have recorded their experience in writing. First-generation immigrants like my grandparents often lacked a medium to write in. Friulian, their mother tongue and the only language they used confidently, is mostly an oral language, which, still today, few speakers know how to read and write. Italian, the language they may have learned at school, is one they were not fully competent and at ease in, while English or French, the languages of acculturation, were for them tools of linguistic survival in everyday contexts of communication, which they used imprecisely and with some degree of hybridization with Friulian<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, most Friulian immigrants were peasants and labourers and, thus, not very inclined to writing or other forms of artistic expression. In her essay on "Writers from Friuli Venezia Giulia in Italian Literature of Migration to North America", Monica Stellin acknowledges, for instance, that although Friulians had a very strong impact on Canadian society which they contributed to build, «[T]hey could not, however, voice their feelings about their own immigrant experience in literary form because they lacked knowledge of either English or French, they suffered from fatigue due to their hard work, and they had little education» (124).

Joseph Pivato, who has had a prominent pioneering role in promoting critical studies on Italian and Friulian writing, similarly remarks that «[I]n terms of writers the Friulian community has a very small group compared to people from other regions of Italy» ("The Invisible Poet…": 24). Their writing has thus often remained invisible and neglected, even within the context of Italian-Canadian writing, itself a minority literature within the greater context of mainstream





While it is widely recognized that linguistic intermingling between English and Italian has spawned a hybrid form known as "italiese", little mention has been made to the development of what we could call the "friulanese" variety, that is, the hybrid code resulting from the mixing of Friulian and English among Canada's early Friulian community. Although similar in many aspects to "italiese", it bears some specific lexical traits that are indicative of its diverse origin: English words that in "italiese" have a typical -o ending, like "il sinko" (the sink), remain unaltered ("il sink") in "friulanese", since Friulian does not generally have -o endings. Other words which in "italiese" have typical -a endings (i.e. "la bega", the bag) often present -e endings among Friulian-Canadian speakers ("la/le beghe"). Verbs also follow the Friulian convention of ending in -â, or -î, rather than -are or -ire, i.e. "scuizâ" (to squeeze).

Canadian literature (Ferraro). The only anthology of Friulian writers is, for instance, *A Furlan Harvest*, edited by Dôre Michelut in 1993, which collects the unpublished writings of six Friulian women who participated in a creative writing workshop held at the Famee Furlane in Toronto. Most of the contributors had not published anything before the anthology; nor have they published anything since. They are thus not established writers whose literary masterpieces are being collected because worthy of a national literary canon. And yet, the anthology set an example of some sort, inspiring others to collect miscellaneous works and resist homogenizing politics in Canada.

Despite the scarcity of their productions or the literary value that can be ascribed to them in terms of traditional categories of high vs. low literature, those Friulians who have undertaken the endeavour of becoming scribes for their people are, nonetheless, worthy of attention. The body (albeit slim) of writing they have produced is, in fact, significant mostly because it constitutes an important historical record of the Friulian immigrant experience. It offers, in fact, a genuine account of what Friulian immigrants to Canada experienced in their lives and hearts: the hardships of departure and settlement, the nostalgic longing for their beloved Friuli, the love for their unique culture and language, the pain of assimilation, and even the disillusionment for the changes that have gradually occurred in Friuli since they had to leave. At the same time, while preserving the memory of a significant experience that has distinguished the Friulian people in past centuries and is now historically over, it provides a dialogic bridge between the migratory experience of Friulians and that of other immigrants. It echoes – as this brief overview will show – universal traits of the immigrant experience, which may help us foster a deeper understanding of the human tragedies faced by many migrants still today.

### The literary works of first-generation Friulian immigrants

The literary works produced by writers of Friulian origin are variegated in terms of themes and sensibilities, and they are written in various languages, namely English, French, Italian and Friulian, the minority language spoken only in parts of the Friuli Region. The body of writing referred to as Friulian also comprises writers of Julian-Dalmatian origin, who use Istrian, Dalmatian and Venetian dialects and whose homeland, once part of Italy, is now part of Slovenia or Croatia. Both communities share what Genni Gunn calls a "magnetic impulse" (*Faceless*: 12) toward their homeland, which they approach in various ways: at times, with the nostalgic yearning of the immigrant who is desirous to return home, or with the delusional stance of the illegitimate exiled





son; in other cases, with the dialectically critical gaze of the expatriate who writes back to the motherland, or the ethno-cryptic approach of the second-generation immigrant who has learned to repress the other homeland in favour of total assimilation.

Among the first-generation immigrants, there are emigrant-writers, like Ermanno Bulfon and Rina Del Nin Cralli from Codroipo, and Doris Vorano from Nogaredo di Corno, who have turned themselves into writers and recorded their personal immigrant experiences in Friulian, their mother tongue. Others, like Silvano Zamaro from Cormons and Aldo Gioseffini from Carvacco wrote, instead, in Italian, the vehicle which, as Stellin writes, they considered "wbest suited to express [their] feelings and to give prestige to [their] literary endeavour» ("Writers from Friuli...": 130). All have produced a single publication, which is autobiographical and dominated by a persistent elegiac tone, a trait typically found in all early Italian-Canadian writing as well. Zamaro's Autostrada per la luna (1987) and Gioseffini's autobiography L'amarezza della sconfitta, published in 1989, exemplify, for instance, the typical parable of the Friulian emigrant who faces the hardships of immigration with self-determination, but remains unable to fully accept the new country as his own because he seeks to return to his native Friuli. Zamaro lived in Edmonton, Alberta for only a decade and then returned home. Gioseffini, instead, who started his emigrant experience as a child in the 1930s, first in Europe and then in North America, had to admit his defeat and accept unwillingly that he lacked the means to spend his old age in his motherland, a country which does not recognize his property and social security rights.

The opposite prospect of recreating a Friuli in Canada is expressed by Ermanno Bulfon, who emigrated to Toronto in 1967 at age 25 after receiving his orders. He was an active member of the Friulian community in Vaughan where he was a well-loved parish priest until his death in 1985. In 1977 he published a collection of poems entitled *Un Friûl vivût in Canada* under the name Bepo Frangel. The poems, as Pivato has pointed out, are infused with a deep sense of loss: «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 Poetic Voice...": 68). His nostalgia for a disappearing rural Friuli, for the beloved land, friends and family members he had to leave behind, but also for the simple country life he enjoyed as a child and a young man before having to face the hardships of immigration and adulthood, is conveyed through the expressive potentialities of Friulian, his oral mother tongue, which is also the language of the heart. Being a priest, Bulfon mastered Italian and English as well, so his linguistic choice is not out of necessity, but represents a conscious desire to give voice to his personal feelings, and





also, I believe, to those of his fellow Friulian parishioners. The longing and sadness he conveys are those all Friulian immigrants in Canada shared: they were eternally homesick for "a mê tiare", "La Mê Cjase", "Il Mê Pais", "Mê Mari", and my beloved "Friûl". They eternally longed to go back one day soon to that land, as had been possible for generations of other Friulian emigrants before them. In his survey of Friulian emigration patterns, Franc Sturino underlines, in fact, that emigration was «woven into the daily lives of Friulians» at least since the 1500s, so much so that the region developed a «culture of emigration» ("Patterns of Friulian Emigration…": 34). Yet, since this emigration (directed mainly north of the Alps or within Italy) was usually temporary, it allowed many to maintain their small farms and return to their native villages (35). This cultural engendering about emigration led many Friulians in Canada to believe that their stay in North America could be a temporary one and kindled the illusory dream of returning, which kept many trapped in false hopes and idealized visions of their native homeland.

In the poem "L'emigrant", Bulfon, however, summons Friulians to recognize that, despite the profound sadness they feel for leaving Friuli, it is the new land that offers them and their children the possibility of a better future, which is theirs to build: «'O ài lassade/ la mê tiare./ Un siúm./ Mi sumìi ancjemò/ e speri/ al doman plui biel/ dai nestris fruz» (Un Friûl...: 38). A similar view is also echoed by Doris Vorano in her poem equally entitled "L'emigrant", where she shatters the illusion that dreams can come true and warns that the Friuli left behind is not what the returning emigrant will find: «L'emigrant.../ Al volares cjatà/ quant che al torne tal so Friûl,/ ce che a la lassât/ tanc agns prime [...] e invesit/ a si cjate devant la realtât» (Puisis...: 29). What he finds is, instead, a different, changed reality which has become so unfamiliar that he feels as alienated and lonely there as he does in the new land: «a si sint di gnûf bessôl/ come vie pal mont» (30). He is condemned to leave again and to eternally dream about the world he left behind hoping to return to it someday. His is a fantasy-world which continues to exist only in his dreams. Reality, the poet suggests, needs to be embraced without idealizations in order to find some peace of mind and heart.

Like Bulfon, Vorano chooses to write her collection of poems *Puisis e rifles-sions* (1983) in Friulian, the language that fills her heart: «La to lenghe/ che quant tu la sintis/ a' ti pas il cûr» (21). Through her linguistic choice, Vorano, who emigrated to Montreal in 1959, at age 15 and is sufficiently fluent in French, is thus making an important identity statement. She uses the language of home and family to counter the loss of language, culture and history occasioned by the immigrant experience, and to reinforce the sense of connection with her people by relocating this minority language beyond national borders.





Her poems, although personal, are directed to her fellow Friulian countrymen, who like herself, are part of a long-lasting diaspora and must learn to heal from that perpetual sense of nostalgia and loss that scars their hearts.

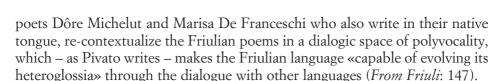
Rina Del Nin Cralli has also been writing poems in her native Friulian tongue since the late 1970s, although most of them have remained unpublished until recently. A first collection of some of her poems entitled From Friuli, appeared only in 2015, with their English translations. Before that, a few poems had been published in the Italian newspapers Il Ponte and La cisilute, in publications from the Famee Furlane in Toronto, and in A Furlan Harvest<sup>4</sup>. For Cralli, who arrived in Toronto in 1958 at age 29 with her husband, Friulian is the only linguistic choice available, as both Italian and English are languages she does not master fully. Yet, like for Vorano and Bulfon, it is a deliberately self-conscious choice aimed at establishing a link with her people, as well as an expressive medium through which to voice and overcome her nostalgia. As Pivato writes: «It seems as if this language lends itself to expressing feelings of nostalgia. With over 100 years of emigration from Friuli the oral language has been shaped with words of longing and loss» ("The Poetic Voice...": 67). The unbearable feeling of longing caused by displacement is evoked in poems like "Nostalgie e tulipans", "Il Distac", and "Emigrant", where the poet elegiacally laments the painful separation from her beloved homeland where she - like many other Friulians – has left her heart. In others, like "Une Vore di Strade", "Friûl", "Il Me Paîs" and "Statistichis", she is, instead, aware that her homeland has changed considerably and that «perhaps what I cherish/ in my heart is just/ an illusion» (From Friuli: 113). There is also a sense of pride for the achievements that Friulians have made in Canada and the awareness that «Our/ greatest satisfaction/ is to feel part/ of this nation» (31). She is, thus, welcoming, a reconfiguration of the ideas of home and belonging, which rests on an acceptance of multiple homelands at once.

What seems particularly interesting about this bilingual publication is its attempt to preserve a minority language like Friulian in a space that transcends geographical confines and to counter the disappearance of the Friulian immigrant experience by relocating it into another idiom. The bilingual character of *From Friuli* counters, in fact, the isolation of Friulian, a language that is slowly disappearing, and shows the beauty, texture and expressive power of this oral, mostly rural, language by placing it in dialogue with English. Indeed, the English translations done by a number of other Friulian immigrants, including





<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Some of Cralli's poems also appeared in a cassette recording in 1982. On Side A Rina sings five of her poems to the musical accompaniment of Gino Salvador and Valentino Taglione, while on Side B she reads 20 of her poems.



## Second-generation writers from Friuli

Both Dôre Michelut from Sella di Rivignano and Marisa De Franceschi from Muris (San Daniele) are second-generation writers who emigrated to Canada as young children and experienced the loss of their mother tongues under the pressure of forced assimilation to the new country. In many Friulian-Canadian households, it was, in fact, not unusual for adults to use Friulian only among themselves, and address their children in Italian, considering it more prestigious than the oral idiom. As adults, however, both writers felt the need to retrieve their lost mother tongues as a necessary part of their quest for identity. Thus, although they write mainly in English, the language of acculturation and education which they learned in Canada, they also reclaim their other languages, Friulian and Italian, by creating a heteroglossic continuum among the three languages in their lyrical collections. In the poem "International Cuisine", for example, De Franceschi celebrates her Friulian roots by placing the Friulian names of typical rural dishes like «Polenta e frico», «Musèt e Bruàde», «Salam cul Asêt» and «Radricc cul Ardièl», alongside Italian and English dishes, in a culinary feast which culminates in her acceptance of all traditions: «A mi plasé dut/... I love it all» (150-152). In Loyalty to the Hunt (1986) and Ourobouros: The Book That Ate Me (1990), Michelut resorts, instead, to self-translation to celebrate her plurilinguistic and pluricultural identity<sup>5</sup>. As she explains in her autobiographical essay "Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue", the retrieval of her Friulian mother tongue through selftranslation allows her to engage in a polyphonic dialogue with herself, which enables her to achieve a unification of identities within her fractured and hybrid self, where «each language still speaks me differently, because it must, but each speaks me more fully» (170). Re-appropriating her Friulian mother tongue was, thus, seen as a necessary part of the process of renegotiation of selfhood which allowed her to overcome the sense of displacement she felt in relation to both cultures, the Canadian and the Friulian/Italian, and to embrace a transcultural identity.





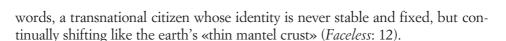
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Michelut's use of self-translation cf. Saidero. "Pluriliguialsm and Self-translation...".

Many Friulians who were born or grew up in Canada faced a similar loss of their linguistic and cultural identity and experienced the trauma of living between cultures and of feeling compelled to neglect one in favour of the other. Some writers have thus chosen to shun from using Friulian or language-mixing devices, and to engage with their ethnic roots in a more cryptic manner. In Quebec, Bianca Zagolin from Ampezzo, Philippe Antonio Poloni from Porcia and François D'Apollonia from Codroipo all write in French, while in Vancouver Genni Gunn from Udine writes in English only. Their approach to their Friulian ethnicity is diametrically opposed to that of writers like Dôre Michelut, who even changed her name from Dorina Michelutti to signal her overt, dialectical engagement with her Friulian roots. Gunn, instead, conceals her real name, Gemma Donati, behind her English alias, just as she deliberately encrypts her engagement with her heritage culture in her poetic texts<sup>6</sup>. Never at the center of her creative world, her ethnic search for identity is always part of a deeper impulse to come to terms with all her selves and to situate herself in a global landscape. Her Friulian and Italian heritage is, thus, a somewhat marginal presence and is expressed through the powerful metonymic and metaphorical images she creates, like that of the faceless woman which, as I have argued elsewhere, is an apt metaphor for the migrant subject (cf. Saidero. "Le maschere dell'io"). In her poetry, personal memories about her family's immigration to Canada or about her childhood years spent in Friuli surface silently, like an underground river that flows under the surface of the text, erupting here and there on the page. In the poem "Fossil Highway", for instance, from the collection Faceless, the reference to her Italian origins, «I found my name half buried in Italian earth/ and still the roots cross an ocean», is placed within an artfully woven web of metaphorical associations between the human body and geographical-geological spaces, where rivers are «arteries nurturing the earth», «water sings birth songs», «the mountain speaks stone erupts its language/ from within», her hand is «a fossil highway» and her wbirth tongue echoes/ in the beat of wings» (Faceless: 18-19). Likewise, in the poem "Incendiaries", the memory of her dead father and «the ocean of untold stories» (Faceless: 17) she never asked him about when she was young, reverberates in the burning forests of British Columbia, which are metonymically associated to the flames of burning memory. The landscape becomes here, as elsewhere in her production, a metaphor for memory, emotions and relationships and symbolizes her endeavor to inhabit and belong to multiple realities – to be, in other





<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Gunn's self-censorship of her ethnic identity could also be seen as a response to the dangerous work of her father during WWII as a military officer working for the British allies in Trieste. Recently, Gunn has spent time in Trieste, her birth town, searching the archives in order to reconstruct her father's past.



## Julian-Dalmatian writers

Other writers who reimagine their sense of belonging in terms of cosmopolitan citizenship are those belonging to the Iulian-Dalmatian diaspora. Gianni Angelo Grohovaz from Fiume and Caterina Edwards whose maternal family is from Lussino, emphasize, for instance, how for them the idea of home is necessarily decoupled from that of nation-state<sup>7</sup>. Since their Istrian homeland is no longer geographically part of Italy, it is merely a place of memory. In her creative autobiography Finding Rosa: A Mother with Alzheimer's, A Daughter in Search of the Past, Edwards pieces together the dramatic vicissitudes suffered by the Istrian-Italians during the World Wars, emphasizing how they were forced to shift their national affiliations and ethno-cultural and linguistic identification, but also to acknowledge their stateless-ness as they passed under various regimes - the Reign of Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Fascist Rule, the Nazi regime, the Allied Command and the Yugoslav Communist regime. Further displacements caused by their forced deportation to internment camps in Eastern Europe, to refugee camps in Caltagirone, Sicily, or by immigration overseas fostered a sense of up-rootedness and unbelonging to any place, which necessarily creates «a porous border between familiar and unfamiliar, neighbour and stranger, heimlich and unheimlich. Between at home and lost» (Finding Rosa...: 320).

In her historical account Edwards ironically comments on how the Italian-Istrians were considered «untrustworthy» (*Finding Rosa...*: 216) by Italy and denied their citizen rights when they were massed onto train cars and herded off to Sicily like animals going to slaughter. In some of his poems written in the "fiumano" dialect (*Per ricordare le cose che ricordo*, 1974), Grohovaz vehemently expresses a similar resentment toward the mother country who turned her back on her exiled sons, like a wicked stepmother. In "Io ti ripago: Italia senza core", for instance, he inveighs against Italy for having signed the Treaty of Osimo and ceding the so-called "Zona B" (the section of Istria just south of Trieste) to Yugoslavia. Italy is here deemed responsible for having deprived the Italian-Istrians of their land and for having condemned them to a life of exile. This position lingers in the works of some of the other Friulian writers discussed





<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Another writer from Istria is Mario Duliani (1885-1954) who recorded his experience of internment in Canadian concentration camps in *La ville sans femmes* (1945).



in this essay who perceive the immigrant experience as an injustice and blame the homeland for letting them go away. They also feel betrayed and blame their beloved Friuli for not recognizing them as her exiled sons when they return.

## The legacy of Friulian-Canadians

The love Friulian-Canadians feel for their mother country remains, nonetheless, unconditional – it is an intimate, visceral bond that transcends space and time and that is passed down as a legacy to the following generations. The descendants of many Friulian immigrants who have made their home in Canada continue cherishing this legacy. Among them are noteworthy critics and scholars like Joseph Pivato, Linda Bortolotti Hutcheon, Olga Zorzi Pugliese, Roberto Perin, Diego Bastianutti, Konrad Eisenbichler, Monica Stellin and Anna Pia De Luca, who have greatly contributed to uncovering the silenced histories of their Friulian ancestors, by investigating their literary, artistic and historical achievements<sup>8</sup>.

Friulians are certainly a significant tessera of the multicultural Canadian mosaic, a society they have not only assimilated to, but which they have contributed to forge with their many talents, crafts and simple daily endeavours. Their stories constitute a valuable voice, which must not be forgotten, nor discarded as minor and thus insignificant. The various writers who have recorded these stories and spoken for their people contribute in their own, very special and peculiar, way to inserting the Friulian experience within a broader transcultural context, in which the experience of Friulian immigration can enter into a Baktininan polylogue with those of other migrants. In this dialogic and polyvocal space, pain and trauma can ultimately turn into pleasure and «absolute delight» as Michelut writes (*Furlan Harvest*: 18).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Cf., for instance, Eisenbichler (ed.). An Italian Region in Canada...; De Luca (ed.). Passion Meets Paintbrush...; Principe and Pugliese. Rekindling Faded Memories...



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