

Italian Heritage Interview: A Neighboring Story

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INTRODUCTION

This is Nataliya Stefanova, Bulgarian born immigrant becoming the first Canadian in the family and the first to leave home. In 1998, at the age of 25, she made the brave journey to leave all she knew to enter a foreign land she knows nothing about in hopes to make a life for herself. In this interview, she tells us about her journey to Canada and how she began her life on her own and learning about a whole new world.

This interview took place on October 11th over a video call from, Guelph to Bulgaria by Michelle Naydenov. Nataliya left for Canada with nothing more than a small gym duffel bag posing as an Olympic gymnast to Vancouver, and then moved to Toronto to begin working and starting her life. This was also her first time flying, and she also did not speak any English and found it difficult to adjust or settle. Nataliya explained that the reason for coming to Canada of all places was due to love; at the time her long-term partner had received a Canadian visa and she decided she wanted to go with him and start a life for herself outside of where she has lived.



Nataliya in her first apartment in Toronto 1999. Photograph from the Private Collection of Nataliya Stefanova

OBJECTIVES

Throughout this interview, though not of Italian descent or heritage, our neighbouring countries share some similarities and allow us to recognize differences and learn about different perspectives of immigration stories. Nataliya immigrated to Canada far later than most stories studied in the course; however, this means that there are other obstacles and advantages to consider and look into. The purpose of this study is to learn and compare immigration stories through cultures. This interview is conducted so that we can study the history of Canadian immigration by using as much content as possible and making relations on how each journey through time has changed and what each person has had to go through to reach this new sense of home or nationality.

The aim of this interview is to compare stories on immigration but also with a focus on why Nataliya decided to leave home and start over from nothing in a strange place. This interview also focuses on how immigrants feel about moving and what is home to them, whether it's where you originated or grew up from or where you start a new life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Rather than conducting a questionnaire-type interview, the interview was semi-structured which could allow for more in-depth stories and conversations to fully understand the journey and story she wanted to convey. There were 12 questions total along with some improvised ones during the conversation and the questions consisted of the experience of traveling and settling into Canada in the beginning. This interview took place on a skype call, with video and audio, taking place in both Guelph and Bulgaria. Nataliya specified that while she did not bring any heirlooms or sentimental artifacts with her to Canada, she would write letters home from time to time and she has an old photo album which she was willing to share some of her favourite memories from Toronto. Unfortunately, she was not able to find her letters, but she has provided photos from her album to look at.



Nataliya at the CN Tower exhibit for the first time 2000. Photograph from the Private Collection of Nataliya Stefanova



Nataliya at her first all you can eat buffet, The Mandarin 1998. Photograph from the Private Collection of Nataliya Stefanova

RESULTS

During the interview, Nataliya discussed her journey settling in Canada and how she accustomed to this new life. She spoke on struggles she experienced in the beginning and over time, first arriving with a language barrier and with no documents, complications with hospital during birth, driving in cities, and more. Her obstacles were common amongst others, including immigrants during her generation, finding work wasn't easy, dealing with legal documents and procedures since she had arrived illegally and was waiting for citizenship, or finding a job that will take her without documents. She also enlightened on her experience as a Canadian, how planting her own roots in a new place gave her a new sense of belonging and starting a family changed her view on home as well, saying she feels more and more like a Canadian. One interesting story she shared is how whenever traveling back to Canada from international travels, greeters would say "Welcome Home" and it gives her goosebumps knowing she is returning to home.

Nataliya is very in touch with her home culture, she was always looking for certain foods and recipes to find in Canada and searching for communities. Though she is still very in touch and traditional in her culture she was also very interested and excited to learn about her new culture as a Canadian. She wanted to participate in all Canadian activities and holidays, and she even began a college degree, got her drivers license, and made new connections outside of the Bulgarian community. Another interesting feature Nataliya spoke about was the opportunity for change and freedom; she explained that in Bulgaria people were treated more as numbers and objects rather than people with free choice and opportunity. She expressed how coming to Canada was very refreshing to get that change and be promised that she can achieve what she wants to do and that she is cared for, valued, and seen as a person and as a citizen of her country.

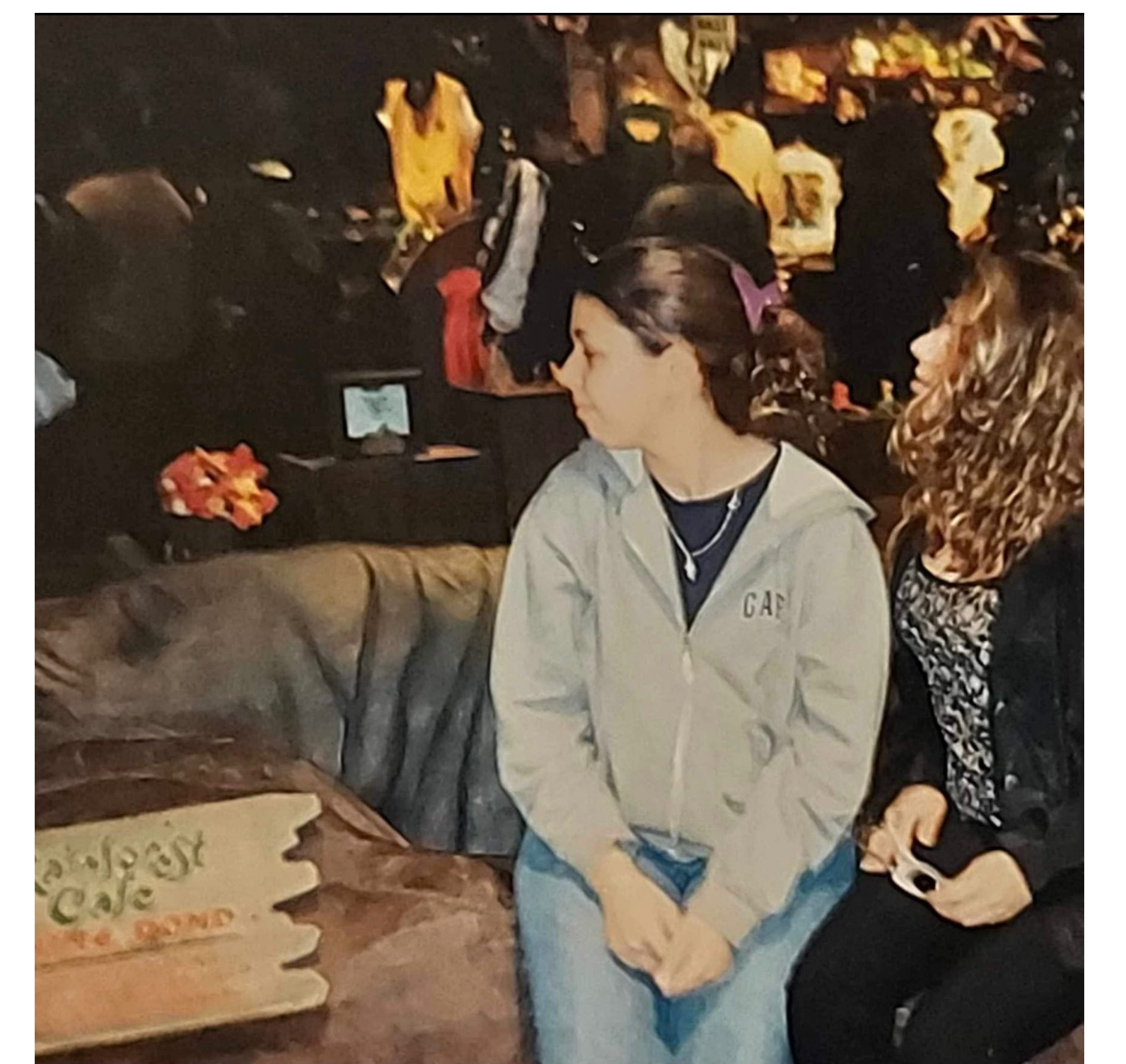


Nataliya with Bulgarian friends at the bar she worked at 2001. Silver City. Photograph from the Private Collection of Nataliya Stefanova

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the entirety of the interview, Nataliya expressed how eager she was to change her life, expressing how the experience changed her life for the better. Overall, her story was very different and interesting to hear and to learn about the different experiences that immigrants go through as well as learning about how she feels about her nationality and what she thinks of home. Though she is born and raised in Bulgaria and that will always be a home to her, Canada is the first and only place where it was her own home and started her individual and new life and holds significant and dear meaning to her now. Her story about her experience helps to visualize how immigration has changed and how the experience is different for each individual, while also answering the question about how immigrants feel about where is home and what it's like to adopt a new culture while still holding onto your own.

Hearing this story was interesting to learn something new and it makes me curious to hear more within my family. My father was also an immigrant around the same time, but I do not know of his immigration experience. Learning about my family's experience immigrating to Canada is very very interesting to look at how history has evolved and how we are now.



Visiting the Rain Forest Café in Niagara 1998. Photograph from the Private Collection of Nataliya Stefanova

REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All Photos are provided by Nataliya Stefanova

Naydenov, Michelle. Italian Heritage Interview: A Neighboring Story. October 20, 2023. https://youtu.be/EHr-I_FSZUs

To learn more about the Italian-Canadian immigration experience explore the following resources:

<https://www.italianheritage.ca/list-of-projects/italian-communities-in-canada-heritage-cultural-and-ethnographic-studies/>

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