

Immigrant experiences come to life at Aurora Public Library



Erminia Tonnelli emigrated to Canada from a small village in Italy, aged just 13.

A difficult journey for anyone, regardless of age, she rose to the occasion ? or, as her husband, Sholom says, ?ate challenges for breakfast.?

Having passed away in 2017, it's left to Sholom Wargon to tell her story as a new Canadian, and the masticated challenges that popped up in her path. But he's also sharing the story of so many others who came to Canada from so many different places ? for so many different reasons ? in *The Immigrant Story*, a new installation that opens February 1, at the Aurora Public Library.

Designed by Wargon, the installation focuses on the words of each immigrant as they tell their stories. Representing nearly two-dozen countries, they may have come from a variety of nations and cultures, but are united by the drive to seek a better life for themselves and their families.

?In 2018 and 2019, I had a major exhibition as a tribute to her entitled, '?My Invincible Wife: The Erminia Tonnelli Story' which was well-received ? and I thought for my next project, I could do something that would allow other immigrants to tell their stories. There are about 82 stories now in place and growing and we continue to add stories.?

As he developed the ever-evolving installation, Wargon sought out stories from his friends and colleagues in Toronto. As he says, '?Toronto is the melting pot of the world, or close to it,?' so he had myriad experiences to draw upon. He also reached out to other professional writers for contributions, many of whom had previously published on the lives they had led.

?There are always surprises and new twists,?' he says of the collection process. '?There are certain ongoing themes that present themselves [such as] people overcoming obstacles. For someone to come across an ocean, which is usually the case, that's a big deal. If I have to drive to Hamilton, it's a big deal ? and I have to make sure I have an energy drink in the car! People often came with no money, often without knowing the language, so it's a big deal.

?Our platform is open to people from all walks of life, all ethno-cultural religious backgrounds. The only real criterion is they immigrated to Canada at some point, or wherever the story is about. It could be a family member, it could be a friend.?

Another criterion, perhaps one that is a bit unusual for an exhibition like this in our current climate: no religion or politics.

?We're focused on what happened to you before you came to this country, what happened on the way to this country, and what happened after you got here,?' Wargon explains. '?It's basically starting your life from scratch, those common threads that are often

interwoven in the stories. The funny thing though is the people who feel like they haven't gone through really significant obstacles in their mind, they're not escaping from war ? they often say, 'My story is nothing special,' but that's not true. Everybody's story is special. It is my job as the writer to ferret out the interesting details.?

Libraries, he adds, are often great places for installations like these because they allow him to 'ferret out' details from those who come to absorb the stories of others.

'It's that magic moment when someone says, 'I want to be a part of this',? he says with a smile. 'I even had someone come up and say, 'Why isn't my story here?' and I love that. I want their takeaway to be that everyone has a story and everyone's story is interesting, riveting, compelling ? whether they were born in this country or whether they emigrated. This all goes back to my late wife ? I owe it to her to tell the world what a great person she was and just about everything I have in my life right now that's good is because of her. That's how it started, but it has evolved and I'm always super-excited when I get a story from a country I haven't yet covered.?

The exhibition will be in place in the Colleen Abbott Gallery, and in other parts of the Library complex, through to the end of March.

Wargon plans to attend the exhibition regularly throughout its run and, on February 27 in the Library living Room, he will be part of an Artist Give Back Talk and Q&A from 7 ? 8.30 p.m.

By Brock Weir