

Luigi Bontorin immigrated from Vicenza, Italy to Calgary in 1954. Unlike most Italian immigrants to Canada of his era, Luigi came to Canada a single man, but his bachelorhood didn't last long. He soon married his Irish landlord's daughter, Myrl. Luigi still jokes that her family was so cheap that they charged him rent even the month that they married.

Luigi first cut logs in the Kananaskis, then drove a delivery truck for an oil company. He lost his job with the oil patch stumbled in the 1960s. Instead of finding another employer, Luigi decided to go into business for himself. He had worked for his baker uncle in Italy when he was younger and decided to get back in the bread business. In 1962, Luigi and Myrl opened **The Calgary Italian Bakery**. At the time, there were seven independent bakeries operating in Calgary. Competition was lively, but the Bontorin's bakery would outlast them all.

Luigi and Myrl had two sons, Louis and David, who were quickly conscripted into bakery duty. The boys joke that as soon as they were old enough to count to twelve, their father put them to work in the bakery counting buns. Empty delivery boxes and bags of flour became the boys' playground. "Dad always said, 'You could've done anything but you chose this,'" David remembers, "But there was always a pull to the business. We were raised and groomed to be in the business, and part of the family's success was your success."

What began as a tiny downtown bakery with a couple of Italians up front and a couple more in the back has evolved into a huge facility employing 75 staff who can turn out 3000 loaves or 1500-dozen buns per hour. "When you are producing so much, you are not a 'bakery' anymore," David says. "You are a bread facility." The Bontorin's still supply bread and buns to Calgary-area restaurants, but these days copacking bread for retail outlets across Western Canada accounts for more than half of their business. The bakery has come a long way since the days they would deliver only what would fit on their bread truck.

Luigi is 81 years-old but hardly looks it, and even though Louis and David now run the business, Luigi visits every day. "Just to pass the time," he says. For his sons, the job is all-encompassing. The two brothers never take time off at the same time, and their children have never been on holiday together. David and Louis won't even travel on the same plane. If an accident befalls both brothers, there would be no one to run the business. "Dad once told us to go on vacation together, but when we got back we heard about it for six months," David says. "The fact is, the place runs best when we are here."

Such a massive operation is beholden to the temperament of the local economy. In 2006, at the height of the last boom, David and Louis had to shut down production a couple of times because they didn't have the employees to keep up with demand. The Bontorin's solved their staffing shortfalls with the help of Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) and the Temporary Foreign Worker programs. The brothers traveled to the Philippines to meet potential workers and hired 36 workers for the bakery.

"Dad has a soft spot for immigrants," says Louis. Remembering their own immigrant roots and their father's challenges as a new Canadian, the Bontorin's worked hard to make their foreign workers comfortable. The company bought homes for their new workers and provided them with furniture, linens and other household supplies. They greeted each worker at the airport and rode

the city bus with them to and from the bakery so they understood the local transit system. They opened savings accounts and demanded the bank not impose its customary waiting period for their staff to cash their paychecks. Of the 36 workers that Calgary Italian Bakery hired, 33 are on track to become Canadian citizens.

Next year, the Calgary Italian Bakery will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is a milestone rarely reached by family businesses these days. Luigi credits the Bakery's longevity to hard work and sacrifice, but especially to the support of Myrl, who passed away in 2002. "Without her I would have been nothing."