

Who Wants to Be a Professore?

Walter De Marco (July 15, 2008)



An Italian-Canadian faces ordinary bureaucratic life in Italy...

If you've lived in Italy long enough, or if you have ever seen 'Ciao, Professore!', directed by Lina Wertmuller, you know that professore (masculine) and professoressa (feminine) mean not only 'professor', but also a middle- or secondary-school teacher.

Antonella Gatto, an Italian-Canadian teacher from Toronto, has known that she wanted to be a



teacher ever since she was a girl. Little did she know, however, that it would take her over 30 months, and countless phone calls, service fees, and meetings with bureaucrats—not to mention the emotional turmoil—to learn that she could teach in Italy. Ironically, when she finally got her letter of approval, it was too late to apply for a position this school year.

‘What’s most upsetting’, says Antonella, ‘is that the school board did not accept my application to teach because it was late, but it was late just because they did not do [their work] on time.’

A native of Sora, in the region of Lazio, Antonella was 14 when she moved with her whole family to Canada, where she completed high school and university and then got her teaching credentials. After teaching there for four years, she decided to return to Italy, determined to continue to work as a teacher. She assumed that it would not be terribly difficult: she is an Italian citizen, and, having lived here nearly half of her life, she is fluent in the language.

Antonella had already done substantial research on the requirements to get her Italian teaching credentials, officially called *abilitazione all’insegnamento*, before arriving in Sora in January 2005. When she wrote to the Ministry of Education in Rome, requesting an appointment, the reply did not take very long to arrive. The public official who looked at her application left her with high hopes, never hinting that two years later she would still be waiting to receive the final letter of approval.

‘A few months later, the Ministry of Education wrote to me to let me know that I was qualified to receive my teaching credentials, but first I had to pass an oral interview at a local public school’. The interview was supposed to be organized by a school board official, who, in turn, had to select a principal and two teachers to form an ad-hoc committee. And that’s where Antonella’s application suddenly came to a halt.

She had just found employment as a tour guide in Rome. Preoccupied with her new job, the oral exam became a secondary concern. But towards the end of the year, she decided to call the school board in Frosinone, her home province, to find out about the status of her application. After countless unanswered calls, the head of the Office of Foreign Credentials (*Ufficio Equipollenze*) explained this was not their job; she would have to contact the Equipollenze office in Rome.

She traipsed from one office to the next, and from meeting to meeting between the school boards of the provinces of Frosinone and Rome, and several teachers’ union offices—with no results. Only later she found out that the school-board official in Frosinone had not been truthful with her.

In early 2007, Antonella found a new job in Florence. Having lost all hope of hearing from board officials in Rome and Frosinone, she requested permission from the Ministry of Education to interview in Florence. The ministry approved her request within weeks, rekindling her hope of finally obtaining her long-anticipated ‘prize’. When, several weeks later, she had still not heard from anyone in Florence, she decided to call the Office of Foreign Credentials for an explanation, and was subsequently summoned by a board official.

‘The head of the *Ufficio Equipollenze* said that he had never seen my application, and he started to look for it through a pile of files on his desk in my presence, until I lost my patience and offered him a copy of the application I had made for myself’, says Antonella.



She spent the next few months calling every office at the provincial school board in Florence and meeting repeatedly with the head of the credentials office to make sure her application was being processed. She passed her long-awaited interview in July—which was great news, except that she had missed the June application deadline for the current school year.

Antonella could have gone back to Canada at that point, but she has chosen to stay in Florence and continue to juggle two part-time jobs while waiting for the next round of applications to teach in an Italian school. Stay tuned for the outcome.

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