

NAME OF PROJECT: *Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of WWII*

DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 10, 2011

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Timmins, Ontario

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Joan McKinnon

NAME OF INTERVIEWER: Travis Tomchuk

NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER: Travis Tomchuk supported by Kevin O'Grady

TRANSCRIBED BY: Louanne Aspillaga

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ABSTRACT

In her second interview, Joan McKinnon, talks more about her own father's experience as a Canadian soldier fighting overseas and of his capture as a POW [Prisoner of War] in Germany. This happened at the same time that her mother's father and uncle, Leopoldo (Leo) and Antonio (Tony) Mascioli of Timmins, were interned in Camp Petawawa. She also speaks of the strange incidents that happened to her family during the internment period, such as the poisoning of their family dog on Christmas Day and the attack on her uncle in their backyard.

INTERVIEW

JM: Joan McKinnon, interviewee

TT: Travis Tomchuk, interviewer

KO: Kevin O'Grady, videographer

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 0:00:09]

TT: Uh, this is Travis Tomchuk...interviewing Joan McKinnon. It is May 10, 2011. Uh, we're in Joan's hotel room in Timmins. Um, okay, so my first question, um, to you, is based on your, um—the fact that your grandfather and, you know—was interned during the Second World War, your fa—your own father was a POW, um, in Germany—

JM: Mm hmm. [Nods]

TT: —um, how, how did your mother cope with, uh, with these situations?

JM: She, uh, was an exceedingly strong person and I think she had to be an exceedingly strong person. I can remember her, uh, telling us a story that, um, uh, you had to be like a Spartan. You just had to deal with things, put a sm-smiling face on and keep on going. And that, um, you had to live for the living and that, uh, both her father and, um, our father [emphasises “our”]—her husband—were both living. And, uh, she was also, uh, quite a strong Catholic. She'd been brought up very strong Catholic and, uh, uh, uh, really believed that it was important to pray, uh, that things would turn out right. Um, especially in the case of my dad when before he was a POW, he was in some rather nasty battles in which, one in particular, where about two thirds of his company was killed, so, uh, it, uh... And the other thing is, uh, we were young and she would say that, um, uh, "Your dad is in the army and he's expected to be a soldier and he's expected to carry on and that's the least we can do." Um, she sort of kept saying to us, "Be little soldiers like your dad." [Nods and smiles] Yup, you know it was, face it and keep going.

TT: And I understand your grandfather he didn't really talk about his camp experiences, it wasn't a subject to be brought up?

JM: No. Nobody talked about it. [Shakes head]

TT: Right.

JM: It was, um...uh, universally it seemed that everybody just wanted to keep their heads down—they said, "Keep your head down." You know, just sort of try to disappear. Uh [sighs], and I guess it was a defense mechanism against, uh, a lot of unpleasantness that was happening. Um...uh, no, they just didn't—they want—they wanted it just to be forgotten [gestures with hands] and to get on with life, after granddad came home. I was aware that they had, uh—as a young girl, I was aware that they had hired a v—what they thought was a very good lawyer to represent him, uh, from Toronto. And, uh, that, uh, there was going to be a court case and, and eventually that granddad was exonerated. Uh, but not a lot of details. Uh, and what details, uh, you heard maybe earlier from Norman, and certainly, um, several of them were very good cooks [chuckles] and the, uh, guards appreciated the fact that their cooking was better than the [says chuckling] guards' cooking! And, that's when of course the guards bought them food and they cooked for everybody. But, uh, and, and those little stories. Um...he was in the camp when I—I don't know whether I said this in another interview or not, but, um, they had good company. And, um, for instance, there was a [James] Franceschini, uh, from Toronto, who, uh, was quite a wealthy Italian man. He had several gravel pits and he was quite a businessman. And so he and granddad got along very, very well. In fact, um, even in camp they were a pair of characters, because they were thinking they should, uh, buy the King Edward Hotel in Toronto, together. And so I guess if you're a businessman whether you're in or out of a camp, uh, uh, you, you think about these things. [Smiles] Uh, and co—of course, uh, Mayor Camillien Houde of Montreal was in there. So there was some very good company. [Nods and smiles]

TT: And your own father, did he ever speak about his experiences?

[00:04:41]

JM: Not a lot. Um, [clears throat] he, uh, did speak about it a bit. Uh, the, um, uh, some stories that, uh...were not—were, were rather grim, but he, uh, didn't go into some of the, what I call, the really gory details. He, uh, did talk a bit about the POW camp, but he kept a very good diary. And he hid the diary actually in the wall, 'cause they weren't allowed to have a diary. Now how he got his hands on it in the first place, I have no idea. [Shakes head] But he recorded a lot of what went on, uh, daily activities, and, and, you know, if—somebody was always digging an escape tunnel and, and I said, "Were you involved in the digging?" "No, I was just a decoy outside, you know, playing baseball or, [stutters] uh, uh, uh, or a watch-watch out—watching person, that sort of thing." But, uh—and, um, he did, when he came home, um, showed us how he could take—they had something called KLIM and it would come through the Red Cross parcels. And they came in tins about this size [gestures to size of tin with hands] and it was really milk spelled backwards. It was dried milk, uh, which they—the products they could not gi—were not given by the Germans. Uh, in fact their diet was, uh...bad. And, uh, they put—cu—break open the cans, put them together, they made a little stove [makes gestures to show process while speaking], and they could actually, uh, cook something on top of it if they got some food from their Red Cross parcels. But during—towards the end of the war, uh, there was problems with the Red Cross parcels getting through and, uh, instead of getting a full one, they would split them in half. And they never got any sort of sweet or sugar and very little protein so these parcels were really important. [Says with emphasis on "really"] Uh, nevertheless, he still came home weighing 98 pounds. He was not a big man, but, um, like he never weighed more than about 149 pounds or something like this, so. But, uh, so the diet was very poor and, uh, camp life was boring. It was, uh, um—he did tell one story. He was in a transfer camp...uh, on, on, on his way to *Oflag 79*, which was the camp where he eventually ended up in. And, uh, there'd been some problems with the prisoners and, um...the night, uh, before they left, uh, they just sprayed them with cold water and left them outside and it was winter. [Nods] And, uh, that was the end of that.

TT: Hmm.

JM: S-so, you know, there wer—and, and they travelled in cattle cars and, uh, you couldn't sit down, uh, uh, you're jammed in so tight everybody had to stand up. So, the conditions were not good.

TT: Okay.

JM: Not good.

TT: Do you know if your [clears throat]—

JM: I'm sorry?

TT: Do you know if your fa—your father or your grandfather ever talked about their own camp experiences?

JM: Um, what do you mean by camp, uh—

TT: Well, well, you know, if—did your father ever talk to your grandfather about like, you know, what, what was your grandfather's experience like in the camp as opposed to his like—do you think—or do you know if they—

JM: Um...if they talked about it I wasn't present. [Nods]

TT: Yeah.

JM: Uh, I can't say. And they may have, but I wasn't, uh, present. And granddad wasn't around a lot. He wo-worked—his life was work. He worked since the age of nine. And, um, [clears throat] he would visit, but, uh, not often. And he was—well after he returned from the camp, pretty well after Second World War, he, uh, never lived in Timmins full-time again. He, uh—I, I say he lived a life of a gypsy. He, he—if he was, uh, rebuilding the, uh, Empire Hotel in Huntsville, he always had a room set aside for himself and he lived there. Or, uh, often he lived in a room in the Empire Hotel in North Bay. Um, when he came here he did have his home here, uh, where his son Danny lived for many years before he me—was married. Um, and I know he worked in Sudbury, and I—uh, Norman mentioned that. And, uh, he—again, he had an apartment within the complex that they were building and he would live right there while the job was going on. And it wasn't till about three or four years before he died, that he, uh, found a lovely lady, and bought a permanent home in Toronto. And I would say he had maybe the last three or four years of his life, um, some semblance of a happy family life, if I can say that. It wasn't until then. [Smiles]

TT: [Long pause] And while your f—grandfather was interned, there were some people within the commu—Timmins community that were working towards his release. Is, is that correct?

JM: [Nods] Yes, there were some prominent people who, uh, b—truly believed in him, in that he was not, uh, an enemy alien, which, uh, uh, was the name that the Italians were dubbed with. And, uh, for instance the mayor spoke up for him, the city clerk, the, uh, city, um, auditor, the local MP [Member of Parliament], the, um...uh, let me see who else? Oh yes and Roy Thomson, um, who eventually became Roy Thomson of Fleet. In fact, my grandfather loaned him money for his first radio station. And, uh, actually granddad hold the mortgage of the radio station [chuckles] and, uh... So these are some of the people in the town who actually went against the grain of some of the people in the town and spoke up, uh, and, uh, gave character

references and said that both my grandfather and his brother, Tony, should not have been in the camps—or in the camp.

[00:11:11]

TT: And the name of the, the mayor at the time in Timmins?

JM: Um...

TT: Do you know?

KO: [Whispers] [Jim] Bartleman.

JM: [Looks at KO and shakes head]

KO: [Whispers] No?

JM: Um, I, I'm, I'm sorry I can't remem—I have it written down. But I'm sorry, I, I don't know.

TT: Do you remember any of the other names of the individuals outside of Roy Thomson?

JM: Uh, yes. Um, there was a Mr. Ross and he was the town auditor. And, um...I think to this day his firm still does auditing work for the family. And the, uh...I'm sorry I can't remember, uh, oh, uh—oh! Excuse there was, um [looks away in thought]...no, memory fails. I can give you those names afterwards.

TT: [Long pause] Were there any, um, uh, business fr—business friends, colleagues of, uh, your grandfather that were also involved with trying to secure his release from the camp?

JM: Um [looks off in thought]...not that I know. [Nods]

TT: [Long pause] Did you experience any, uh, or did your family experience any, um, any kind of harassment or discrimination because your grandfather had been interned?

JM: Uh, no, I, uh...n-no, I would say not. Uh, and I think part of it was, my father—um, my mother's husband of course—uh, was with the Algonquin Regiment and had been with the Algonquin Regiment as a, uh, when it was the militia, before the beginning of the Second World War. And then when the Second World War began, uh, in '39, uh, dad immediately signed up. And, uh, so mother was in a situation where her, uh, husband was fighting for, uh, the British Empire and our, and our co—company—country. And her father was supposedly, uh, sub-subversive on the other side. Um, a, a, a terrible situation when you really think about it. The only incidents—and, and there were a couple of incidents that didn't make sense. Her brother, Danny, who was not married at that time—Dan Mascioli—would visit almost every night on his way home from work and he'd just check in and see how she was doing and if everything was okay. And, and, um, they were the two closest relatives [brings palms of hands together] and I think they held each other up. And I know one night, uh—oh I don't it was around six or seven o'clock at night, but the winter it's black. And Dan had come to our back door and I, I don't know what happened, but somebody clubbed him over the head. [Shakes head] Uh, and, um, we, we sort of heard a noise and we went outside and found him on the ground outside the back door. And needless to say we got a very bright light after that over the back door. And I can remember trying to find his glasses and so on. We have no idea...w-what caused that. There seemed to be no answer. And the only other odd thing that happened, we had an enclosed

backyard and a dog we dearly loved and it died of poison one Christmas Day. And, uh, whether that was deliberate or not, who knows.

TT: Mm hmm. And the, the poisoning of the dog, did that happen during the war?

JM: Oh yes, oh yes. When, when granddad was interned. Oh yes, very much so. Both these incidences. [Nods]

TT: Hmm.

[00:15:02]

JM: And the only other thing I guess was, uh, my mother didn't tell me that granddad had been taken. Mind you, they were taken without the family being told in the first place, until later. And, uh, but word had got out, and, um, I must have been in grade one or two, I can't remember. Um, I came home crying, s—telling my mother, my granddad was in jail and, and, uh, this girl who told me and she and I had a fight actually over it, um, but, um—because I had told her that that wasn't right, that was not true. Uh, and then mother who, I guess was trying to shelter us, uh, had to try and explain why granddad was in jail. [Nods] Yeah, so you know those things are tough.

TT: [Long pause] The other question is a bit of, bit of an aside and we, we talked about it a bit earlier, um, at Norman's. What can you tell me about *Hush* magazine?

JM: Well, it's—it was, uh, uh, a newspaper that was printed in Toronto. I can't tell you very much about other than the fact that, uh, it, uh, was—seemed sort of a trashy paper, if I can use that term. Uh, it's kind of like these things you see in the, um, supermarkets now, you know,

exposé [throws hands around in a flashy manner] or something like that. Uh, the, um—dealt in sort of sensational, uh, type articles, uh, that were a little, you know [shrugs], uh, maybe pushed the limit. And, uh, and that article that you have, uh, was written by a local Timmins person who, uh, obviously, uh, was not on my grandfather's side. [Chuckles] Yes, Mr. Bartleman.

TT: And what was, uh, Mr. Bartleman's, uh, standing? Like did have a position in the city, was he a businessperson, a member of government of some sort?

JM: He, he was a businessperson. I can't remember what—exactly what he did. And I know he ran for council and I believed he was mayor at one point [says with slight hesitation], but not at that time.

TT: [Long pause] Okay, well those were the questions that I had.

JM: Okay. [Shrugs]

TT: Was there anything else that you might wanna share that you didn't have a chance to either in this interview or the last one?

JM: Um...right now I can't think of anything else.

TT: Okay.

JM: Yeah.

TT: Alright.

JM: Okay, thank you very much Travis.

TT: Thanks for your time.

[Fades out at 00:17:42]

[End of interview]