



**Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens:
Memories of World War II**
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NAME OF PROJECT: *Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of WWII*
DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 17, 2011
LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Hamilton, ON
NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Antoinette Olivieri
NAME OF INTERVIEWER: Nadia Mior
NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER: Vikki Cecchetto
TRANSCRIBED BY: Melinda Richter
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Please note that all interviews have been transcribed verbatim. The language in this transcript is as it was provided by the transcriptionist noted above. The project staff has not edited this transcript for errors.

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ABSTRACT

Antoinette Olivieri was born in Hamilton, ON. Her father-in-law, Donato Olivieri, owned a hotel on Sherman Avenue in Hamilton. Many of the Italian immigrant men lived in this hotel, and worked hard to bring their wives over from Italy. Donato was the first Italian man in Hamilton to be interned during the Second World War. He was held at the Exhibition grounds in Toronto before he was sent to Camp

Petawawa and Camp Ripples, for a total of 33 months. Antoinette remembers the time of the mass arrests, when the telephone rang every day and her parents received updates on who had been arrested. A couple of Antoinette's husband's family were also interned. At one point, Antoinette's mother-in-law was arrested for one day and put in a Hamilton jail. Antoinette's parents, Ralph and Louise Di Filippo, came to Canada when they were very young (father, aged 9 months; mother, aged 3 years). They both lived in Montreal and then moved to Hamilton after they married. The Di Filippos were declared enemy aliens; they were fingerprinted, issued special papers stating they were Italian, and ordered to report monthly to the police.

INTERVIEW

AO: Antoinette Olivieri, interviewee

NM: Nadia Mior, interviewer

VC: Vikki Cecchetto, videographer

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:11]

[Text: Antoinette Olivieri. Daughter-in-law of internee Donato Olivieri]

NM: Okay. My name is Nadia, interviewing today. And we are at the home of Antoinette Olivieri. Okay. So, Antoinette, um, where were you born?

AO: In Hamilton.

NM: In Hamilton. And, um, when were, was your family, when did they come to Hamilton?

AO: Um, actually [camera zooms in] they were married in Montreal, got married in Montreal and came to Hamilton to, uh, to live. And I was born three years after they came to Hamilton.

NM: And did you know people here? Or did you have some...?

AO: Uh, my mother had a sister here and they came to live, uh, with them. And, uh, they started to work here and, uh, this was their home.

NM: I understand that a family member was interned. Who was that?

AO: Well, it happened to be, um, my husband's father. And, um, he was one of the first ones that had been picked up at that time. And at, and at, at that time I was just ten years old and my husband, at that time, was 12 years old. And as, as I remember hearing, the phone would ring and, "Who was picked up today?" But my father-in-law was the very, very first one to be picked up. And at that time he had a hotel, uh, on Sherman Avenue, that he had built and at that time there was rooms for rent for immigrant men that had come over that had left their lives, wives in Italy to come, be, come and get a job so they could bring their families here. And also in the hotel was a beverage room and they also had a dining room that they served meals for these men who didn't have wives, their homes here yet.

NM: Uh huh.

AO: And my father-in-law was sitting in his office reading the paper. And on the paper was "Italy declares war...Canada."

NM: Yeah.

AO: And there's a knock on my father-in-law's office door and he opened it up and there's two mounted police came and took him away.

NM: Let's backtrack just a bit.

AO: Yes. Maybe it's too much—

NM: No! No!

AO: information?

VC: No.

NM: We need your, um—

VC: Perfect.

NM: —father-in-law's name.

AO: And my father-in-law was Donato Olivieri.

NM: Okay. And you said you were ten years old. Uh, did you know the family before...?

AO: Yes. Yes.

NM: Yeah.

AO: My mother and father knew, knew the fam—And that, and, uh, we were, they were—'Cause my mother and father were new in town and they made friends with them.

NM: You were in the same—

AO: And this is—

NM: —neighbourhood.

AO: Yeah!

NM: Area.

AO: And it, uh, and as we grew up we were, uh, went to school and, uh, you know. [laughs] The magic.
[laughs]

NM: [laughs]

AO: [laughs]

NM: Now, how did you find out about the internment?

AO: Well you—

NM: —about your father-in-law?

AO: —you know, I remember living in an apartment above the business where my father and mother-in-law, where my mother and father and the phone would ring every day in the morning or in the afternoon, “Oh my gosh. He was picked up today.” or what, and that how it was. So this is how I learnt that, we got a phone call.

NM: Hmm.

AO: And my fath—But at that time being the first one, nobody knew what it was all about...

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: Because he was—

NM: He was one of the first.

AO: —one of the first ones to be picked up. And nobody knew...why.

NM: Now, did your father-in-law ever talk to you about it directly after?

AO: No. Really, um, when he came home he never, never spoke—The only thing he would say, he was away at college.

NM: College.

AO: He called it college!

NM: He called it college.

AO: Yeah! And he, he would never, I never ever heard him and, and even after we were married or all the years or even with my children and grandchildren, he never once talked about it. He came home. That was it. He got on with his life.

NM: And, now, did he talk to your husband about the experience?

AO: Well, not, not that—

NM: [laughs]

AO: —you know? It wasn't, uh, a major issue in the home.

NM: Mmmhmm.

VC: Mmmhmm.

AO: The, the main issue was to go up and move on—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —and carry on.

NM: Hmm. Oh yeah. So was anyone else arrested in the family?

AO: Um, my husband's, well I would say my mother-in-law's sister, uh, her husband was picked up.

NM: Anyone else that you know that was...?

AO: In the family? I don't, I think one of the, my mother-in-law's brothers, I think, was picked up.

NM: Were any—

AO: Yeah.

NM: —of the women picked up?

AO: Well, now, we had, my mother, when, then the phone calls were coming and with this one, and then one day we got a phone call that they picked up my mother-in-law and, uh, another woman and they were brought to jail in Hamilton. And by that time everybody started to panic because they said, “Now what, now what are we going to do? If they—What are the kids going to do?” And, and I remember my two sister-in-laws and my husband saying, “Oh my God, what are we—? Now we got no mother, no father.”

NM: Hmm. Wow. And they—

AO: And they still had the business and they still had the hotel and they were living in the hotel at the time. So these k, kids, they said, “No, no mother, no father. What do we do?”

NM: Oh.

AO: It was panic but thank God it only, uh, was just for a day. I don't think they were there overnight or as far as I remember.

NM: Right. So do you know where your father-in-law was taken after being arrested?

AO: I think it was to the, just to Toronto Exhibition. Yeah.

NM: Do you know—

AO: That's the first—

NM: —how long?

AO: Uh, exactly how long they were there? I, not long. Not long.

NM: A few months?

AO: Because then they were moved on—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —to Petawawa.

NM: To Petawawa.

AO: Yeah.

VC: And, did the family visit them, while they were at the—

AO: Well, I—

VC: —Exhibition grounds?

AO: Yes. Yes. And the families were allowed to visit when they were in the Exhibition grounds. And I still remember, clearly, clearly, where my husband said he remembers, he was 12 years old and he went with his mother and his two sisters and they were behind a fence and all these men were paraded around, kept going around inside this fence and they had a circle on their back [touches her shoulder]

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —and soldiers standing with guns like they were prisoners. And they never got a chance to speak to their father or anything and just— And a 12 year old boy. Can you imagine how traumatized he was to see soldiers with guns pointing to his father with this, like a prisoner?

NM: Mmmhmm.

VC: Mmmhmm.

NM: Did he make contact with his father? Was he that close to...?

AO: Not, not really. You know, they're standing there and kept walking.

NM: Yeah.

AO: They had to keep walking because, "No. Keep walking." So, yeah. So, it was very traumatic—

NM: It would be.

AO: —very, for a 12 year old boy to see his father who was so special to him. And he was such a good, quiet, good father and he said, "What is my father doing there?" You know, this is how he [shrugs]—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —he felt about it.

NM: It was just a brief—

AO: And we all did.

NM: —visit.

AO: Brief, very brief.

NM: Then he was sent to Petawawa?

AO: Petawawa. And then they had, through a lot of, uh, red tape, my mother-in-law and her sister who her husband was interned, were able to bring their two sons to Petawawa on a train overnight, it was quite a w, quite a trip back at that time. And they only got a chance to speak to him for ten minutes.

NM: After all that.

AO: That was it. Yeah.

NM: And, now, did they keep in touch...um, while he was interned?

AO: Well, they, oh, they were able to write letters but everything was censored.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: Everything was censored. Yeah.

NM: Yeah. So it was—

AO: And one would call the other, “Did you get a letter today?” or you know, like that—

NM: There was no phone calls ever?

VC: [laughs]

AO: [shakes head and whispers] No. No. No.

NM: Now, were they ever told why he had been arrested and taken away?

AO: I don't think so.

NM: Was anybody ever told—

AO: No.

NM: —anything?

AO: No. It was just because, I guess, uh, Italian, and the Italians were the enemy at that time. And they, they belonged to, uh, a club that was to bring people together and to celebrate, uh, saints' holidays or, uh, uh, functions, or just a place to go to be together.

NM: Sure.

[00:09:58]

AO: And, uh, and I guess anybody who was a member of, of the organi—whatever. And, uh—But they had built, they were able to build, everybody got together and, uh, donated to this property that was on Barton Street. Beautiful, uh, place that you could have a wedding reception or you would have a banquet—or confirmation, birth, uh, baptisms—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —and, and for, for us children to go and even if we wanted to learn Italian—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —you know, because we were all talking English. We went to English schools. There was no Italian. But they thought their heritage—

NM: Mmmhmm. Sure.

AO: You know, it was their, they wanted them to know that.

VC: What was this place called?

AO: The Casa D'Italia.

NM: Casa D'Italia. Mmmhmm.

AO: [nods] Yeah.

NM: Now, when was your father-in-law released? And was he still in Petawawa at the time?

AO: Um, exactly how? Because from, he was 33 months that he was away...from, from the day he was picked up until he went home. But there was a period there that, near the end they, he was sent to Nova, no New Brunswick, I think.

NM: New Brunswick. Yeah.

AO: Fredericton?

NM: Fredericton.

AO: Yeah. Now, exactly time wise, I can't really tell you. But all I know, he was away 33 months and that's almost three years.

NM: A long time.

AO: Out of a family, you take a father away out of a family for three years? And in those days, women didn't work, didn't have jobs.

NM: Yeah.

AO: So they as families, one family was helping the other family. [nods]

NM: Wow. To survive.

AO: To, for, to for survive.

NM: Now—

AO: Yeah.

NM: —did your father-in-law talk about they did at camp? Did he—

AO: Well, they were very well taken care of. Uh, they had, who could cook would cook their, you know, spaghetti sauce and make the pasta or whatever. Actually it was really, they enjoy—I think they really, uh, maybe enjoyed it...to a point.

NM: Made the best of it.

AO: They made the best of it. Okay? But never—They were very well looked after, really. Like, they weren't abused or, or anything. No. It was just that they—

NM: They just had—

AO: Yeah.

NM: They were Italian.

AO: They were interned, yeah.

NM: But they had some freedoms to do activities—

AO: Yeah, but they were still in, they were still guards, there were still guards there, right? Yeah. Yeah.

NM: Yeah.

AO: They couldn't go—They weren't free to leave. [laughs] They were interned.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: They were prisoners of war.

NM: Now, did your father-in-law do any, um, painting or crafts or do any—

AO: Oh yes.

NM: —projects?

AO: Well, they all had something to do, eh?

NM: Yeah.

AO: Every one of them had some kind of talent. And, and I remember receiving, uh, a little jewelry box that my father-in-law had made. Wood.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: It had my name on it, “Antoinette.” I can still see it. With the little flowers on it that he painted. And I—

NM: Now when did you receive this box?

AO: Uh—

NM: It was later or?

AO: —it was sent through the mail. Yeah. Yeah.

NM: During the internment?

AO: Yeah! While he was interned! Yeah.

NM: Oh, isn't that something?

AO: So, uh, you know, and I feel guilty now that I still don't have it.

NM: Oh!

AO: I could give my grandchildren.

NM: No. That's okay.

AO: [laughs]

NM: No. That's okay. Um, was your family, um, your—

AO: My—

NM: —father-in-law's family, were they told about him being released? Did they know when he was

coming—?

AO: Not really. I don't think. I really don't think. I remember them saying, "Oh, well maybe next week or," uh—

NM: Day after—

AO: I think they might have had some kind of a, an inkling that, uh, you know, because—

NM: Others were coming home too.

AO: —they were coming out at different times, you see.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: But as it happened, it, uh, my father-in-law was the last one to come home. Yeah.

NM: First one in and then last left.

AO: [laughing] The first one. Mmmhmm.

NM: Now, did your father-in-law mention names of any others? [telephone rings]

AO: Um—

[fades out at 00:14:28]



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[fades in at 00:14:29]

NM: Okay. Did your father-in-law mention the names of any others he was interned with? Do you remember?

AO: W, well, um, yes, he would mention, wha, you know, different ones that, uh, were interned at the same time. And because everybody knew one another.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: You know, because they all came from the same area. And, uh, and, and, yeah, he did speak. And they, and they remained, um, well close, but everybody was busy, carrying on—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —with their lives and getting back into the workforce and, and you know, they had time, they had catch up time [laughs] to, to do. And, uh, so everybody, uh, just carried on.

NM: Carried on.

VC: Right.

AO: Picked up and carried on. With no complaints, no, no, uh, feeling of being, uh, you know—

NM: Wronged.

AO: —wronged, or, They, they were just happy to be in Canada.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: And wanted to make a new life, educate their children and become good citizens—

NM: Right.

AO: —in Canada. That was their main goals—

NM: Hmm.

AO: —after.

NM: Yeah.

AO: They didn't have no grudges, nobody said that they felt the world owed them something, or—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: No, no, no. None of that.

NM: That's great.

AO: Yeah.

NM: Now, what about your own family? Your—

AO: Well, now, see, now, we, we lived, because of our business we lived in an area that was strictly, um, English—

NM: Hmm.

AO: —Canadians, uh, Fr, uh, not, um, um, just English, really, English. And, uh, and it was a little difficult for my mother and father. And you couldn't, we couldn't speak Italian. Couldn't speak Italian because that—No, no. And you'd get a remark, “Well, why don't you go back from where you come from? Why did you come over here for?” Little notes under the door. When you open the door, your business in the morning you found a little note on the floor saying, you know, “You Italians, why don't,” you know, “why don't you go back where you came from?” And it, uh, and even at school sometimes the Italian, in fact, especially with me, being in the English district, um, it was a little difficult. You know, they never let you forget—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —you know? But we—

NM: You felt discriminated against—

AO: Yeah. Yeah. A little bit.

NM: Yeah.

AO: Yeah. Yeah. Little bit. But, uh, no, no, no. We, um, carried on. We—[laughs]

NM: Now, your father wasn't interned.

AO: No. No. He, because of, uh, I guess, uh, living where he was or just happened that he, that he, that he wasn't.

NM: Now, did they have to check in or register—

AO: Yes—

NM: —with the RCMP?

AO: —they had to, uh, because both my mother and father were born in Italy. Came over, uh, my mother was three years old when my mother came. My father was nine months old. But they settled in Montreal. Then they came Hamilton. By that time they'd be, they were citizens.

NM: Hmm.

AO: They made, you know. But they had to, uh, report, fingerprinted, had to have special papers to say that, uh, that they were Italian.

NM: Mmmhmm. Now, your mother-in-law would've had to do the same.

AO: Oh yeah. They all did.

NM: Yeah.

AO: Yeah.

NM: Yeah.

AO: Yeah. In fact, I think I still have the, the, uh, paper, the paper just with the pictures on it—

NM: Oh.

AO: —that, uh, they had to report. Yeah. Yeah.

NM: Now going back to your, your father-in-law, what was his life like after his release?

AO: Well he was, uh, always in the hotel business. And, uh, but what happened, my mother-in-law while my father-in-law was interned, could not handle the hotel without, uh, her husband and it happened to be on the same street as the army barracks on Sherman Avenue. And it was soldiers and the soldiers would come in to the hotel and cause trouble.

NM: Wow.

AO: Would break chairs or do damage and, uh, you know. And she just couldn't handle it. She had to sell it, the business. So when my father-in-law came home there was—So they, you know, managed for a while to be able to get their lives together. And he bought, got back into the hotel business and bought this one hotel downtown on, on James North—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —the Cecil House and, uh, and carried on. And that's, yeah. And was able to send his, his three children to university. Become, one became a, a nurse, uh, that was, was, uh, uh—She taught Tur, uh, Nursing at St. Joe's.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: And her other sister was a teacher. And my husband went to Niagara University. So his three children went to university.

[00:19:55]

NM: Good. And so how did your mother-in-law manage at the time, when...she'd sell the hotel and...?

AO: Well, at that time now her sister's husband also was interned. So they were—My, uh, husband went to live with her. And the two girls went to live with another aunt. Because they were close to, she lived close in Westdale, to Loretto Academy, where my two sister-in-laws were going to school at the time. So everybody was helping each other.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: Families would help [nods] each other.

NM: And, um, how did your father-in-law and his family view this experience, overall? You said they carried on—



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AO: They just carried on. It never seemed to be a big issue. Like, it wasn't something—Uh, I think everybody was just so happy it was over, so that they could continue to get on with their lives. And, and just so happy and, and, and proud to be here. Happy to be here because, uh, this is where their home was. And they made, they made it their home.

NM: Mmmhmm. And how do you view this experience?

AO: Well—

NM: He wasn't interned but—

AO: Well, you know, yeah, we all felt it. Every, every family in the city. Every Italian family in, in Hamilton—

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: —felt it.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: Every home had a—Like at one time, well, you were frightened because we didn't know what was happening. “Why are they picking up these men? They didn't do anything wrong. Just because they were Italian?”

NM: You were afraid to—

AO: Yeah.

NM: —speak your language.

AO: Yeah. We couldn't speak our language and, and we, you know, we—Like when you're little you think, 'Geez, am I so different?' [laughs] You know?

NM: Yeah.

AO: 'What's wrong? Why?'

NM: [Unknown]

AO: It wasn't an easy time but we—You know what? We dealt with it. Everybody dealt with what, what it was. Okay? And, and, move on. Move on. It's over.

NM: Mmmhmm.

AO: We did it and we move on. Make our lives better. And—

NM: Now, one thing I just thought of: when, uh, your father-in-law came home, now your husband or your husband's—

AO: My husband's father. Yeah.



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NM: —he was 14, 15?

AO: 12 or yeah.

NM: At the time he was released.

AO: He was released.

NM: Does he remember what it was like—

AO: Oh.

NM:—when his father came through the door?

AO: Yeah, because he was older when—

NM: He was released.

AO: —his father was released. Yeah.

NM: Did he ever tell you what it was like? 'Cause they didn't know when he was coming home?

AO: S...

NM: Right? So his father would have shown up—



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AO: [shakes her head] Yeah.

NM: —unexpected.

AO: Yeah.

NM: Did he ever—

AO: Oh yeah. It was, it was a very emotional, okay? Yeah. You know, and that was an adjustment.

NM: Yeah.

AO: A big adjustment. Okay? Because, uh, going through all that. And, uh, the fears, uh, “Is he going to come home? What's going to happen to us?”

NM: Mmmhmm.

VC: Mmmhmm.

AO: You know? [laughs] Like, when you think of it, it's devastating.

NM: Mmmhmm.

VC: Mmmhmm.

AO: Devastating...for, for, for all, for the wives!



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NM: Yes.

AO: And, and, it's—

NM: Totally.

AO: —you know, it's not like today, all the women have careers. [laughs]

NM: Yeah.

AO: Nobody had, you know. So, yeah. Yeah. Carried on.

NM: Yeah. Big adjustment—

AO: Yeah.

NM: —like you say, when he did come home.

AO: That's right. [telephone rings]

[fades out at 00:23:40]