

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

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** July 5, 2011

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** Coquitlam, BC

**NAME OF INTERVIEWEE:** Attilio Girardi

**NAME OF INTERVIEWER:** Raymond Culos

**NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER:** Anna Wilkinson

**TRANSCRIBED BY:** Krystle Copeland

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**PROJECT NOTE:**

**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 have not edited this transcript for errors.**

**ABSTRACT**

Attilio Girardi begins his second interview with a description of objects that belonged to his father, Bruno Girardi. The first object is a sign with a list of internee's names from Hut 32 where he was placed in the camp. He also shows a letter from the Canadian government that explains that he will be released from Petawawa on December the 13<sup>th</sup>, 1941 and will be provided with a train ticket to Vancouver for the following day. Attilio also displays two paintings by a German internee at camp Kananaskis that were given to his father during July of 1941, as well as a certificate from camp Petawawa for becoming the champion of the softball league, which is dated the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, 1941. Attilio also remembers his early experiences travelling around the city of Vancouver with his mother and shares both his opinion and his late father's opinion about compensation from the Canadian government to the Italian Canadian community.

**INTERVIEW**

**AG: Attilio Girardi, interviewee**

**RC: Raymond Culos, interviewer**

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:10]

RC: This is Raymond Culos, uh, talking with, uh, Mr. Attilio Girardi. And today is, uh, July the 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011. [Pause] Attilio, what do you have in your hand and what does it signify?

AG: Okay, this wa—I was lead to understand was the sign that was over top of the hut that my father was interned in Kananaskis, with the names of all the prisoners. There—most of them—I would say, 90 percent of them are German, and there are two Italians, which is my father and my uncle Attilio. [Points to the sign on his lap] And, uh, the numbers are there, prisoners of war, uh, numbers. And, uh, strangely enough that we found out later on that one, uh, two, uh, one of the brothers, Newmieher[?] brothers, became one of our clients. [Points to names on the sign and nods]

RC: [Long pause] The, uh, did you have, uh, uh, a memento from him that you had—

AG: [Leans forward in chair to grab something, then sits back to continue conversation] Oh yeah, well what happened is when we were going through my father's stuff, when my mom passed away, there was a, a dagger, a wooden dagger, like a letter opener [pretends to hold a dagger in right hand], carved by Newmieher[?]. Uh, he had given it to my father as a gift. So my father—I give it to my brother who in turn gives it to Newmieher's[?] son, which, which is his

client. It was a beautiful carving actually, because if you notice that there's, uh—the people interned usually do something; paint or carve or you know. [Nods]

RC: Yeah.

AG: So everything worked out fine. [Nods]

RC: And, uh, what year are we talking about?

AG: About 1941.

RC: And, uh...your uncle, uh—

AG: Uh, my, my uncle—I think—what I understand, my, my uncle was working out of town. When my father got interned, he had a message sent to my uncle. I don't know if he was up in the Yukon or someplace. And, uh, he showed up later. That's why he's sort of, more or less penciled in. [Points to name at the bottom of the page] Not, not printed like normal.

RC: Yeah. And, uh, did your dad ever say whether it was easy to get along with the Germans or was there a problem or—

AG: [Shakes head] My father said that, uh, he enjoyed his life at the camp because of the fact that the Germans and the Italians had their soccer games on Sunday. And they had their own chefs. And one time they would eat with the Germans and other times they would eat with the Italians. [Gestures to the left and right] To the point that the guards came in to eat with them. [Smiles]

RC: That's wonderful.

AG: They, they—you know, it was, it was—my father said, he said it was a beautiful place Kananaskis, just outside of Banff. He says it's, uh, it was nice and airy and healthy and, and, uh, he said that, uh, the w—everybody was starving out in Canada, depression times, and we were eating and sleeping.

RC: My God. [Says quietly] He also said that he thought that, uh, your mom and yourself—

AG: [Chewing] Well—

RC: —do, as well.

AG: Well, he, he was mad because the Canadian government looked at us as family of enemy aliens and therefore refused us any assistance under the social assistance act. So luckily my mother's family were in Vancouver, on York Street in Kitsilano. They had a house there. And they took us in. And actually it was the best thing that ever could happen to me because I grew up knowing my grandparents and they're very good to me, they treated me excellently. I was the only grandson at that time and it was marvelous. And my next door lived one of my mum's sisters, Olga. So, it was really good.

RC: And where, where was that place?

AG: In Kitsilano.

RC: Mm hmm.

AG: Uh, York, it's just a block from Kits—uh, Kitsilano beach. And I used to go in the, in the beach and learn how to swim.

RC: My God. And what were your grandparents' names?

AG: My grandfather's name was Pietro Chima[?], uh, one of five brothers who came to Canada. There was Pietro and Innocento and the other three I don't know because they went to the States. So Innocento, which was better known as aka Noce, and my grandfather Pietro. And my, uh, grandmother's name was Des—Desolina. Now my grandfather knew her in Italy before he came here. But he went back three times. Then he married her and brought her back in 1910. We found it on the, uh—uh, what do you call that the, uh... [gestures with hand while thinking]

RC: Ellis Island?

AG: Yeah, Ellis Island, but the boat, the—what do you call it? When they, when they got off the boat.

RC: Yes.

AG: Yeah, Ellis Island.

RC: Oh. Isn't that wonderful. So, uh, do you have any mem—uh, information about the—your grandfather's brother joining the, the Figli d'Italia?

AG: [Shakes head] No, no, no. Innocente, uh, Noce, as I know was a great guy. He was a—uh, he had hurt himself in a logging camp, uh, almost took his eye out. I don't know if a tooth came off

one of the buz—saws or something. But he was good. He used to go around the neighbourhood and, uh, when he died all the men were happy and all the women cried. [Laughs]

RC: [Laughs while speaking, unclear]

AG: No, I remember that because he was a—he, he used to live behind a shoemaker's shop on the corner of, uh, Pender and Heatley, just one block off of Hastings.

RC: Yeah, yeah.

AG: [Nods]

[00:05:24]

RC: By the school?

AG: No, no, no. On, on—uh, across from Gibbs Boys Club.

RC: Oh.

AG: There was Gibbs and then across the street was the shoe make—there was like a shoe maker's shop. [Pause] [Unclear] Meat Market, you know all that.

RC: Okay.

[Fades out at 00:05:40]

[Fades in at 00:05:41]

RC: So what do y—do you have in your hand now?

AG: [Unfolds papers in hands, looks at them while speaking] Well I have two paintings that were given to my father in 1941, uh, July. One is written in English July. And the other is written in German July. And, uh, it's for Hut 32 and these are the names of all the different internment, uh, prisoners, showing my, my uncle's signature and my dad's signature. And, um, each picture is a little bit different. If you notice the mountains are a little bit different so they were made at different times. [Holds up both paintings on paper and points to the mountains]

RC: And what would hav—they have done with that? Was that like a Christmas card do you think?

AG: [Throws one hand up in the air] I don't know, but my father sure cherished these. He enjoyed them, yeah. He, he kept—look at them they're immaculate. He kept good care of them. [Points to paintings]

RC: So do you think, uh, you—can you identify the, the, the, uh, artist? Do you know who—

AG: No, I don't know. I know that Kurt Ne—mieher—uh, Newmieher's[?] here and there's another Newmieher[?] over there [turns in chair to show the pages and points to names]. You know, [unclear], but I mean I don't know. Steamboat they called this guy. [Points to page] Kurt Newmieher[?] steamboat. [Turns to the camera and smiles]

RC: So, turn them to, to the camera so we can—like one at a time maybe.

AG: Yeah. But the—no, they are actually quite, quite nice. You know they're very, very good. And, uh, I mean he's kept them and I take good care of them also. [Puts them both down on the table]

RC: Great.

AG: Then there's another plaque here from my father at Petawawa. [Reaches to desk and picks up sheet of paper] And it says, "Member of the league champion, Bruno Girardi, softball competition." Dated the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1941. And you know it shows that, uh, there was a president and a secretary and a recording officer and, and event representative was my, my father. [Says while pointing to names on paper]

RC: And did he tell you whether the, uh—his team won?

AG: They did. It was the, uh, uh, league champion. [Points to page]

RC: League champion.

AG: Yeah.

RC: In softball.

AG: Yeah, in Petawawa. This, yeah, this was November. Just before he was released to come home.

RC: And, uh, how did he get home?



AG: Uh, they, they, uh, paid a, a, a ticket for him to come home. Um, they, they gave—they told him that he's gonna be going home and they gave him—uh, yeah it says here on this letter [pulls out paper from collection of documents in his hands] dated the December the 13<sup>th</sup>, 1941, "You'll be furnished with a railway ticket to Vancouver. You will leave Petawawa CPR Station at 1:12 am and the 13<sup>th</sup> of December of 1941."

RC: Gee—

AG: And as soon as he arrived in Vancouver he must contact the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police]. [Places paper on desk and reads from another letter] And he was given a cheque for se—five dollars and seventy cents. [Smiles and holds letter up]

RC: And that was his pay?

AG: That was what he, he, he said—uh, which represents the funds earned by you while in this camp. [Puts paper down on desk] And my, you know, and [laughs], and my father—uh, where is it here? [Flips through other papers in hand] I had a, I had a letter here showing that he had to, uh, go to the, um, RCMP right there—[begins reading from document] starting the 13—16<sup>th</sup> of December when he arrived in Vancouver, until the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1943. That was the last time that he had to attend.

RC: My God.

AG: He fulfilled his obligation. My father—one thing about it—he loved Canada. He thought Canada was the place to be and to respect it. He also told a lot of people who had never become Canadian citizens, that if it was for me [hand on chest], if you didn't apply in five years,

I'd send you back. 'Cause he believed that if you're gonna live here you should become part of it.

RC: Yes. And that's one of the interesting things. He was born in Canada.

AG: Oh yeah, he was born in Canada. My mother was born in Canada. I was born in Canada. But we were treated like foreigners at that time. Now I don't know why, other than I suspect that the governing bodies at that time were not Canadians, they were British. And therefore, their animosity towards Italy was a little bit stronger than if they had been real Canadians.

RC: I see. [Pause] Going back to your, your, your mother's, uh, early life...

AG: Yeah. [Puts papers down on table]

RC: ...could you, uh, tell us what you remember hearing about where she was born and what schools she went to and so on?

AG: [Points to Anna]

[Fades out at 00:09:56]

[Fades in at 00:09:57]

RC: So Attilio, uh, your mother was born in Vancouver.

AG: [Nods] Mm hmm.

RC: Uh, where did, uh—where was the family home when she was just a child and what school did she go to?

AG: Okay, what I understand that she was born in St. Paul's Hospital. Okay, one of the few hospital-born children of that family. There was 13 brothers and sisters. My grandfather was a longshoreman. And my mother—my grandmother was a homemaker. She used to have like a boar—in a boarding house in the sense that the single Italians used to live in little rooms around the city and come there for dinner and they would pay her for having a plate of spaghetti and a glass of wine. Now, uh, that's on, on Keffer Street. My mother went to Strathcona School. She was always a strong person for Strathcona School. She remembered the school cheer even when she was 80 years old. [Smiles]

RC: And, uh, did she graduate from, uh, Strathcona?

AG: No. No, well I think she went to grade six because everybody had to work those days. So I think she was about, uh, I would think about 15 when she left, and I think if I recall correctly, she went to work at Famous, uh, uh, Foods on Clark and Hastings. They were owned by the Towsie[?] brothers.

RC: Right.

AG: The original spaghetti manufacturer.

RC: So there was a little story between your dad meeting her—

AG: Well, what I'm lead to understand—and my father, uh, he wasn't one to joke too much—that he had gotten a job with Towsie[?] also at, uh, at Famous Foods. My mother was a

supervisor, and he was an employee. So he said to me, “I married her so she could not give me orders anymore.” [Laughs]

RC: [Laughs] That's pretty good. [Laughs] And, uh, so was that be—that was before the war?

AG: Before the war. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RC: And, uh, they must have gotten married around the time he started the newspaper.

AG: Yeah, he—they were married a year before I was...born. 1936 I believe.

RC: Okay.

AG: You know it's funny, we lived at 605 Heatley Avenue, and I at home found a receipt in my—amongst my father's stuff that we paid eight dollars a month rent.

RC: My God. [Says very quietly] And, uh, I remember your place there. Uh, I've forgotten if it was second floor...?

AG: No, we were on the third floor, but we lived there twice. [Holds up two fingers] At the beginning, at the first until my dad was interned. And then we came back we lived on the third.

RC: I see. While your dad was away what did your mother do to help support the family?

AG: Well my mum, what I understand is she went to live with my grandparents and she got a job with, uh, an individual called Sammy Di Filippo. He had a coffee shop I believe on Denman or on Robson, I can't quite sure because this is—you're talking many years ago, eh. And I was

just a little kid. But, uh, I don't ever recall being hungry or cold or not loved, by my grandparents or my, or my par—my mother especially. 'Cause I only knew my mother, my father was in and out, he was a very busy person. As, uh, Mr. [Ray] Culos knows our fathers got involved in these functions, and I think he's just as guilty and he's never at home.

RC: [Laughs] Yeah. And, and you, uh, as a youth, you were a member of the Figli d'Italia.

AG: Well I, I was involved in the Figli d'Italia like Ray was. And like Larry Politano[?], but we didn't go for the meetings we went for the buns and, and prosciutto and salami at the end of the meetings. [Laughs]

RC: [Laughs] That's really—

AG: That's, that's the only reason otherwise we didn't go.

RC: [Laughs]

AG: And the picnics, there were fantastic picnics at Sweeney's[?] Park. You know, organizing picnics once a year. The, the women would be cooking on open fires pasta and the men would be playing bocce.

RC: Yeah. Did your mother ever get involved with the *Lega Femminile*?

AG: No, never. [Shakes head]

RC: Yeah. So—

AG: I don't, uh, I don't quite understand why [unclear] because my father was involved in the Figli d'Italia, he was a President for about 10 years. And he, uh, opened other organizations. So my mom, she was at home, she took care of the family.

RC: Yeah. And how many in your family?

AG: There's, there's, uh, two brothers and a sister. My, uh, sister Brenda, my brother Sandro, and myself. [Counts on fingers]

RC: And they were born after the war?

AG: [Nods] Brenda and—yeah. Brenda knew my grandparents. Sandro never did. [Nods] 'Cause there's nine years difference between him and I.

RC: So, uh, when your father's back home now, did your mother go to work then? When did she go back to work?

AG: My father was a person that...you stay home, I work. [Points to chest] And therefore he started, uh, the business, like the grocery stores. He had one on Prior Street and Jackson. He had another one 12<sup>th</sup> and Windsor. He had another one down in, uh—on, uh, Robson Street, downtown. He had about six or seven of them because, you know, they'd bring in import. Him and Towsie[?] were like, uh, competition in a sense. [Gestures with hands] Yeah. Then later on, he gave up the grocery stores and he became a ship chandler, supplying deep-sea vessels.  
[Nods]

RC: Yes, with your, uh, uncle Attilio.

AG: No, no him originally.

RC: I see.

AG: And my uncle Attilio, he brought him in after and made him partner. Then he said to Attilio, "You take care of the Girardi ship chandling in Vancouver and I will take care of Italian American down in Long Beach, California."

[00:15:16]

RC: When, when you mention the store on Prior Street and Jackson Avenue was that in Little Italy?

AG: Oh, totally. I mean, I mean all the famous Italians. The Brandolini family owned the Empire Hotel. All, uh, uh—Johnny Pastro—all these guys lived on that strip. [Gestures to street with hands]

RC: Yeah.

AG: Most of them were from, from Main Street all the way up Prior down as far as Campbell Avenue. Then you turn the corner, the Pasqualini's, everybody had their bakeries. All—everything was there.

RC: So the, the Little Italy boundary then just generally...

AG: Well, I would say, you know, I would say it was from Heatley Avenue to, uh, to Prior Street, and from Main all the way down to Hawks or Camb—uh, Campbell Avenue. From, uh, Heatley

Avenue over the, the Russians, other people there. Chinese... [Gestures with hand]

RC: And, uh, so you had lots of friends—

AG: Oh! [Says with emphasis] I mean I, I grew up with Chinese, Japanese, Italians, um, it was no problem.

RC: Yeah.

AG: Everybody was, was very friendly those days.

RC: You went to Sacred Heart School and—

AG: Well, because they wouldn't let me go to Strathcona anymore. [Smiles]

RC: [Laughs] Why, why was that?

AG: Well, because I, I was not impressed with school too much as a kid. So I always got into trouble. Which again, at Sacred Heart I always got into trouble. So I mean it was—that's, that's the way I was.

RC: Yeah.

AG: I don't understand why I turned out like I am now, doing different professional jobs that I do, that I could care less when I was in school.

RC: Yeah. Your father was, uh, a good friend of the Sacred Heart Parish—



AG: Oh. [Nods]

RC: —priest.

AG: Father [Gioacchino Joachim] Bortignon. Very good friend. Uh, my father was a good friend of Father Bortignon, as in later on years he was a good friend of Father Sordi; they, they did charters together. But Father Bortignon, uh, was the type of priest that he didn't know how to organize. So my father got in there and started organizing. They rebuilt the Sacred Heart Church. My father got the funds going. My father was the first person to get authorization from the Pope to, to, uh, to, uh, have Christmas Eve and Easter Eve masses on the radio.

RC: Yes.

AG: Those days it was on [unclear].

RC: Tell me again—uh, 'cause you'll remember—what was the, uh, the, the radio station, uh—

AG: Uh, CKL—uh, CKNW.

RC: CKNW.

AG: With Jack Kyle.

RC: Jack Kyle.

AG: Yeah. It was called *Musica Italiana*. It was for two hours, totally financed by my father. 'Cause those days, there was no advertisers.

RC: Mm hmm.

AG: I mean guys like Towsie[?] before he pulled out a dollar forget it.

RC: [Laughs] Well I remember *Musica Italiana*, but what year are we talking about?

AG: Oh God. I would say in the 40s, late 40s.

RC: Yeah.

AG: I would say that no, no—uh, not before that because in the 50s we had the travel business. And in '56 I went to Europe. So I mean it would have to been the late 40s.

RC: So, when you were, um, in Italy you, your mother likely already started, uh, uh, the, uh, the retail business that she, uh...

AG: My father and my mother started importing magazines, Italian magazines for the Italian public. Okay. Uh, they—my father had an, an office at 123 East Hastings, which is in the Ford Building and we had another place down the street, uh, that my—it was a travel agency. In the back there was—it was a magazine distributorship. So my father used to deliver and I would deliver them by hand and this kind of stuff. It kept ongoing and my mom took over that's why it's called [unclear], after my mum. Okay. And then, uh, bit by bit, bit by bit and then my brother—when my parents passed away, my brother took over and he moved it to a warehouse in Richmond.

RC: And, uh, your father, how old was he when he, uh, passed away?

AG: He was 82.

RC: And that was, uh, in 1975 was it?

AG: Uh...

RC: Something like that.

AG: ...ninety-five.

RC: Ninety-five. Thank you.

AG: Yeah. Yeah, '95 'cause my grandson was born. And it was an, it was an unfortunate situation that he di—he died on the operating table from, uh, kidney—which I'm, I'm a believer that my father did not want to live if he was going to be an invalid. Because I think he could have taken another approach, but he, he fulfilled his life...

RC: Yes.

AG: ...and he had done so many things... [Shrugs]

RC: Yes. And you used to have these conversations with him.

AG: Oh, all the time.

RC: Because you worked in the same stores, so to speak.

AG: [Nods] I followed him from every profession that he got involved in. He was a partner with JD Sweid, I was—I became a meat cutter. He, uh, was a ship chandler, I became a ship supplier with my father. We travelled, we did everything together. So I grew up with him.

RC: Yeah.

AG: It's, you know, it was a tough life. Lots of, lots of action, no money.

[00:20:13]

RC: Now, did he ever tell you one story that sticks in your mind because it's the best story that he told you? What would that have been, uh, do you know any? Uh, did he talk about his youth at that time? Or when he was in Venice? Uh...

AG: No, he talked about his—my grandmother had opened up a big house in B[?] and, uh, my grandfather was there and he—my grandfather came in and somebody had broken a branch on the olive trees 'cause the kids used to climb them, eh. So he said, "Who in the heck broke it?" And the guy said, "Bruno did it." And so he said, "Oh, that's okay." [Laughs]

RC: [Laughs]

AG: That—those are the things I remember. He never spoke about his nautical school in Venice, very little. When he left Italy, he left Italy.

RC: Yeah.

AG: When my grandmother died and the estate was settled, he told my uncle, he says, "Look it. We came here. The people who stayed there, give them the stuff. Let them have it." And my uncle said, "No." But he said, "We came here. We came to Canada. We made our life here. Let them take it."

RC: Yeah.

AG: So they sold it to my, my, uh, cousin, Pierluigi.

RC: Nice.

AG: It's still there.

RC: It's still there.

AG: [Nods]

RC: And did you visit that place—

AG: Oh, numerous times. I slept in the place. I slept in the bed that my father had when he was a kid. Yeah. My grandmother was, was, uh—she still had a vocabulary of English that was outstanding.

RC: Wow.

AG: Yeah. [Nods]

RC: And, uh, so your mother then, did she, uh, offer you a favourite story or a story that related to the hardships of the time when your dad was away? Did she—

AG: [Shakes head] No, no not really. The thing is that I don't recall that because it was, it was always full of happiness. I think my mother didn't like living with her parents, but it wasn't difficult. They didn't make it difficult unless—that I know of, okay. We used to go downtown, my mum would take me in the stroller. And, uh, we used to see Fonsie, who used to take a picture of us. She'd take me to Stanley Park, you know, this kind of stuff. So I don't recall any, uh—my mum was a, a very simple type of person. She had, uh, her sister, uh, Mary Delfonso, uh, uh, Caesarina M[?], Margaret, uh, Petrone[?]. They were the closest. Uh, Freddie would come and visit, her brother, Freddie. Guido would come and visit. Cecil, he was a cab driver, he'd come once in a while. [Nods and pause] But you know, it was, it was—those days the families were, I wouldn't say dysfunctional, but they all had their own hardships. [Holds arms extended out in front]

RC: Yeah. Now in—around 1990, '92, something like that, the *congresso*, uh, sent a group out from, uh, Toronto to talk to, uh—

AG: Yeah.

RC: —former internees.

AG: And my father was a spokesman. And he—

RC: Can you tell us about that?

AG: Well what my father told me—and I saw the, I saw, uh, a disc on it—that he got up and he was telling them, he says, "Hey. Why do you guys waste our time? Wait a few more years and you can bring flowers."

RC: [Laughs]

AG: "Forget about the money."

RC: And—

AG: "Because we're all, we're all gone."

RC: Yeah. And he was right.

AG: He was right. Sure because the Canadian government wasn't going to compensate the Italians. Why? I don't know. They compensated the Germans; they compensated the Japanese, but not the Italians.

RC: And if you had a moment right now, to talk to the Prime Minister of Canada about redress or compensation, what would you say to him?

AG: I would say to him, Look it. You have an obligation to the children of internees. If they had suffered hardships because of your underlings, uh, exploiting the authority that they had by disallowing us assistance. If I didn't have my grandparents either my mother would be washing floors or on the streets, one of the two. So I was lucky. So, what the problem is—I mean you don't even say you're sorry. Or thank you, or go to hell. [Says with emphasis and waves hands]

RC: Yeah. So do you want them to do something now?

AG: [Shrugs] Well, I, I think they should before we're all gone. You know, I mean, I don't know what their problem is. I showed you a paper from the Globe and Mail. Quite a while ago, they were gonna do something. Nothing ever happened. You know, so I mean, you know, the Canadian government for some reason—and I mean, the Italians have done an awful lot for Canada. I mean if it wasn't for the Italians in Ontario, which was three quarters of the Ontario population at that time. And Veltri[?] who had, who had brought the, the railway across and brought all the people over from Italy to work. I mean the Italians did a lot. You go around Vancouver. Ferrari Court [points to right], Europe Hotel [points], they're all built by Italians. You know, I mean it's, it's, it's ridiculous.

RC: Yes.

AG: The Italians had to make their own companies because the Canadians refused to employ them.

RC: That was well said. Thank you very much, Attilio.

AG: [Nods]

[Fades out at 00:25:00]

**[End of Interview]**