

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

**DATE OF INTERVIEW:** June 23, 2011

**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** Saint-Lambert, QC

**NAME OF INTERVIEWEE:** Alessandro Biffi

**NAME OF INTERVIEWER:** Joyce Pillarella

**NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER:** Adriana Rinaldi

**TRANSCRIBED BY:** Emily Rondel

**DATE TRANSCRIBED:** September 30, 2011

**ACCESSION No.:** ICEA2011.0032.0002

**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**

Alessandro Biffi's father, Severo Biffi, was born in Monza, Italy and immigrated to Montreal in 1912. He was arrested while on his lunch break at work in June of 1940 and interned as an enemy alien in Petawawa for two years during World War II. Alessandro Biffi recalled his father's story in a previous interview. In this follow up to that interview, Alessandro Biffi recalls a family friend named Professor Nelli who was interned at Bordeaux Jail despite having little involvement in the *fascio* or the Italian community. Biffi wants to record the struggles of Nelli as he has no descendants to keep his memory or story alive. Professor Nelli was an Italian professor at McGill and Biffi believes that his stay in jail, although brief, was probably a serious stressor on his life. He recalls that Nelli did not seem healthy or happy after his internment and died soon after. In this interview, Alessandro Biffi also reflects on what it means to have more than one culture and national affiliation, in the context of himself, his father, and Professor Nelli.

**INTERVIEW**

**AB: Alessandro Biffi, interviewee**

**JP: Joyce Pillarella, interviewer**

**AR: Adriana Rinaldi, videographer**

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:10]

JP: —identify it.

AR: Okay, go ahead.

JP: Okay, it's, uh, June 23, 2011. My name is Joyce Pillarella, and I'm interviewing *Professore* Alessandro Biffi, part two.

AB: [Laughs]

JP: We're doing the follow up today. And you wanted to tell me about, uh, a family friend?

AB: Yes, uh, that is the one thing that I want to add to my previous interview. It's that, uh, we had a very dear friend, Professor Giuseppe...Nelli, I called him Uncle Beppe, uh, and he was a very close friend, uh, he came to our house nearly every Saturday, he was a good friend of my father. He was an older man. Pro—oh easily 10 years older than my father, uh, he was not a young man at that time. Sixty was an old age already, not like today. And, um, he was very nice, in fact, uh, he, uh, represented my real, um, godfather, uh, at my, uh, baptism. Uh, and, uh, he

was professor of Italian. I was told he was professor of Italian at, uh, the McGill University at the time...or had been. And, um, in fact, uh, when he came he always talked to me in Italian and, uh, I think that I learned most of my proper Italian, however proper it may be, uh, from him. Uh, at that time I was, uh, what, uh, seven, eight, nine years old. Um, and professor Nelli was a bachelor. It—consequently he had no family here at all, and no descendants to speak for him, and since he was a close friend, I think that I should, uh, represent him in your inquest because, uh, I'm probably the only one alive that remembers him and has known him. Uh, and what happened to him was, uh, quite dramatic for him. It had nothing to do with whatever happened to my father, but, uh, he was also arrested and taken, among other places, to Saint-Jean, and worst of all, Bordeaux Jail. You can imagine what it meant for all those men, and particularly for men of, uh, Professor Nelli's, uh, kind to find himself in a prison with, uh, ordinary prisoners and, uh, who had really gone—did, did an awful things. And, uh, that was very hard on him and when—I th—they didn't keep him very much, I think they, uh, released him quite early, certainly earlier than my father. And, uh, after that, uh, I saw [cat meows and Alessandro pauses to look down], after that I saw him once, uh, and he was in poor health, and I think that, uh, what happened to him, being interned like that and put into prison literally, uh, was—did actually finished him. And, uh, that is why I wanted this...to be recorded, uh, so that, uh, at least there will be some remembrance of Professor Nelli. That's it.

JP: Can I ask you—

AB: Oh yes.

JP: Okay.

AB: Definitely.

JP: Um, you're not aware as to whether or not he was able to work after he came out, eh?

AB: [Shakes head] No.

JP: [Unclear] And you—

AB: When he came out, uh, my father was still in, we hadn't much facility to, uh, go here or there. Uh, I know that because he was such a dear friend my, uh, mother fa—uh, uh, brought me to where he was living in a rented room, uh, where he was taken care of by the person who rented the room among other things, and, uh, he was then in poor health. But that is all I remember. I don't know when—exactly when he died [cat meows] and where he died. Some other people may have known him among those—some of the people you mentioned there, but, uh, that's about all I know about how it ended all. So the last time I saw him I must have been 10, at most 11 years old, it goes back quite, quite some time.

[00:05:18]

JP: And you saw him at this—

AB: At this—

JP: —boarding house.

AB: Yes, this boarding house, yeah. I think it was outside of the city. If I remember, I'm not sure about this, but I have the impression it was in Valleyfield [Salaberry-de-Valleyfield]...surprisingly enough. But that's, that's all. And that's [raises hand]—not sure.

JP: That's great, thank you so much.

AB: Are there questions?

JP: No. On Professor Nelli no 'cause I'm sure if there's anything else that you add about him...

AB: No, there's nothing else except that I was very sorry for him and, uh, I'm still sorry for him.

JP: How does it make you feel that this hap—

AB: I still remember him well.

JP: Yeah.

AB: We—I had, I had two good friends of my father—oh, the one thing I wanted to say is that, uh, I forgot, I sh—should have started with that that he was not, uh, seen around the Italian colony. Well he didn't participate in anything in the Italian colony, uh, that to my knowledge he was not a member of anything and, uh, didn't participate in any of the meetings or, uh, when I say meetings I mean the group, group of people that get together for a different reason, festivities and so on. Uh...

JP: So here's this man, he's apart, uh, like not—

AB: He, he was apart from the colony, oh yes.

JP: Yes, separated...from the colony, teaching at a university here in Montreal.

AB: I think so.

JP: How, uh...

AB: And, uh, I don't know. He wasn't, he wasn't the only one, there were a few other persons that were, uh, at, uh, picked up and kept for a certain time, who were never seen amo—in the Italian colony to my knowledge. I won't give names because I'm not too sure about them, but, uh, there were quite a few of those...that were not—

JP: Were they professors, were they professionals?

AB: No, no, no. One was an architect, uh, [Luigi] Belmonte, I think was his name. In fact his daughter was well known recently, I mean she, she was a bit older than me. Uh, she was a do— she became a doctor, uh, very well known doctor and in, uh, in her field. Uh, uh, Mimi[?] Belmonte was her name. I think she's dead now, but I'm not sure. Uh, but, uh, there were others. And some others were never picked up. [Unclear]

JP: It sounds like, from these people like, um, *Professore Nelli*, they were people that were integrated into the Canadian society.

AB: Oh, definitely yes.

JP: They were, they, they were getting around and everything. They had an Italian name...

[Long pause]

AB: They were Italian.

JP: They were Italian.

AB: Definitely, I mean they were known as Italian in their field. For instance, if Professor Nelli was a professor of Italian, at the university, at McGill University, I mean he was known to be an Italian, that's for sure. But, uh, that was many in cases the only reason why they were picked up. And after a certain time, they were, they realized, that, uh, there was no problem there, they were released. Uh...

JP: Can I ask you this question? It's your opinion, looking back on it today, and you're looking back. In your opinion, do you think it was possible at the time to be a Canadian and an Italian at the same time?

AB: Well, depends, uh, how you define those terms. I mean, uh, my father was an Italian, he was born in Italy, consequently he was an Italian. And he had contacts with Italy, both, uh, family wise and, uh, business wise, since, uh, most of his business was, uh, uh, him, uh, as, as an agent for—he, he—uh, for Italian, uh, companies, uh, that were selling things here. And, uh, but he was a Canadian, he had his, uh, citizenship since before the First World War. I mean, he was a Canadian citizen and, uh, living here, he was a Canadian citizen. Um...anyway...he remained an Italian born person, uh, with, uh, naturally, uh...a liking for Italy and so on. But, uh, he was, uh, thoroughly Canadian at the end anyway because when he did go back to Italy after the war for a trip, uh, he, he came back saying, "I couldn't live there anymore." He was totally Canadian.

[00:10:16]

JP: No, I'm asking you—

AB: At the time of the war, uh [sighs]...but he did marry over here, a woman who was not an Italian, who was French, from France. Uh, and as far as myself, for instance, living in that family, I never considered myself anything else but Canadian. Consequently, the atmosphere in the home and the atmosphere in which I was living, with my father, uh, made me a Canadian, not an Italian.

[Long pause]

JP: Do you think it would be—it was a fair question to ask people whether their loyalties were to Canada or to, uh, England at the time? Or to Canada? Uh, not England sorry, to Canada or to Italy?

AB: Uh—

JP: In other words, it's almost saying, um—

AB: Make a choice.

JP: —you need to have a dual citizenship or dual identity like many of us have today. Or that they had to take a choice, was it possible for them to differentiate do you think? This is—I know you're looking at it back now and—

AB: [Holds up both hands] No, just a second, just a second. I'm, I'm just, uh, I, I, I, uh...I think that you can't...when you've been, when, uh, you've been born in a country and brought up in th—in that country until you were an adult, uh, you have a culture of tha—you're a part of the culture of that country. Uh, and you can't simply say that because I am now living in Canada forget about my culture. Culture wise, you do remain partly Italian, that's for, that's for sure. In



fact myself [laughs], up to a certain point, because of my French ancestry and I've been to France several times and I have family over there, uh, I feel that my culture is more French than that of many Canadian, even French Canadian. French Canadian have their own culture, which developed during the last 200 years. But, uh, naturally, uh, the culture question is one thing. The double citizenship that's a political affair. It's a question of, uh—and in fact there are a lots of people who have double citizenship now that it's allowed, simply because it's a practical thing to have. Uh, even some Quebecers that have, uh, that had, uh, parenthood sufficiently recent have taken up the French citizenship because it makes things easier for them when they go to France. So that's, uh, it, it has nothing to do with the, with the problems of, uh, uh, of the time. And at the time double citizenship wasn't allowed anyway. And my father was a Canadian citizen, he traveled under a Canadian passport all the time...even before.

JP: Are there any insights or, or opinions that you have that you want to just tell us?

AB: No.

JP: Okay.

AB: Uh, it's not that I, that I—

JP: No, that's okay.

AB: No, it's not that I don't want to tell, or that I, uh, don't have them, it's simply that, uh, they come out during a discussion, uh, but at—uh, to answer a question like the way you've given it—they simply—I simply don't think about them.

JP: I agree.

AB: It's when we talk that, uh, suddenly something comes up. [Laughs]

JP: No, I agree, I need conversation. Anyways, thank you very much Professor Biffi.

AB: I was quite happy and I'm glad you took the, uh, that you did come back just for that very short piece about Professor Nelli.

JP: It's worth it, everything was worth it. Thank you so much.

[Fades out at 00:14:44]

**[End of interview]**