

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

DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 5, 2011

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Edmonton, AB

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE: Assunta Dotto

NAME OF INTERVIEWER: Adriana Davies

NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER: David Bates

TRANSCRIBED BY: Lucy Di Pietro

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ABSTRACT

Assunta Dotto, an 89 year old woman, born in Italy, immigrated to Canada with her family as a young teenager. Her father worked for in the coalmines in Alberta, and the family settled in the coal-mining town of Cadomin in 1939. She recounts her early years in Cadomin, some difficulty with schooling and the English language, and her later move to and life in Edmonton with her husband and two children. At the outbreak of war with Italy, all the Italian residents of Cadomin were declared enemy aliens and had to report to the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police). She recounts this experience, noting that on the whole the Italian residents got on well with other families in the small community of Cadomin, even during the war period. She describes her work at the Great West Garment Company, including making uniforms for the military, and later career in the food service industry. Her husband's workplace injury at Molson's Brewery in Edmonton and the reconstructive surgery of his right thumb is also detailed. She also briefly speaks about her daughter Lidia Dotto's career as a science writer/journalist.

INTERVIEW

APD: Assunta (Paron) Dotto, interviewee

AD: Adriana Davies, interviewer

DB: David Bates, videographer

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:08]

AD: It's 11:45, May the 5, 2011 and um I'm Adriana Davies and I'm interviewing Assunta Dotto for the Italian, um, Enemy Alien Internment, um, project. Can you please tell me your full name?

APD: Assunta Dotto

AD: Where were you born?

APD: In a small village of Valvasone in Italy.

AD: What year?

APD: Nineteen twenty-two.

AD: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, your parents, grandparents?

APD: Yes, uh, my father had come to Canada to begin with in 1906 and he made several trips back to Italy to get married, then three girls were born, then he made another trip back to Italy and two more girls were born, so that was five of us. And my mother was not too impressed about coming to Canada because with five little girls, and you heard in Italy stories about Indians chopping their heads off, which this is way, way back in 1914, you know. However, after that he got caught there in the war and, uh, because he had broken a leg it was not, uh, good for the army. So he was a good cook, so he was, uh, hired or got in there to cook for the, uh,

armed forces. And then he came back to Italy and in the end conditions were—started to get bad, from bad to worse in Italy. Now we lived—my mother—he had a brother there and we lived in the same house, with his brother, his wife and they had a son, which he was privileged because he was an only son and, uh, and he was a boy. So, uh, he was my friend, even though I should have hated him. But we did good things together. Then I wanted to finish school. I only was able to go to grade three. But my uncle decided no I don't need it, I was a girl. And but his son did get it...get the education. He didn't like going to school. He was better working with his hands. And anyway, in the end things got worse, from bad to worse and we split it, whatever was left, there wasn't much left. And my father said, "Okay. We—I have nothing there. Now there's a big decision. You have to come because I will not come back." And so we came here in 1939 and I loved it because in the meantime I was 14 years old and we had split, we had nothing. I had to go to Milan to be a maid and over there you were treated less than human, if you're a maid. And if you were 14 years old, you're no good. And so when my father had done all the necessary documentation, I was in seventh heaven. And I've always—I've never forgotten my Italian heritage, but I am a Canadian from head to toes [gestures with her hands].

AD: What was your father's name?

APD: Albano.

AD: Albano.

APD: Mm hmm.

AD: And his surname?

APD: Uh, Paron.

AD: Albano Paron. And so you said he came in, in 1906 um—

APD: [Nods] He came here in 1906. He was pretty young.

AD: And where did he come to in Canada?

[00:04:58]

APD: Oh, he went in a small town called Cadomin in the coalmines because you either when you came to Canada, you either worked for the railroad or the mines. Some...went into farm...ing but that wasn't too good because you had to clear up everything. You know, it wasn't...the farm was ready there for you [gestures with her hands]. So, uh, that was about our life. Life in Cadomin, you went into the coalmines, there were friendly people. We got, uh—my father was well-known and he was well-liked and as he was a good cook, he was often called to cook for weddings. So, like I said we really had a good life there. When the mines—when the oil come in, in Leduc there was rumours, you know. But for a couple of years they were only rumours, rumours that the, that the, um, mines would close down. But then a couple of years later it became more evident and there was no way we could stay there. So our sum total of our money to come to Edmonton was \$400 that we managed to save. A couple of friends gave us, offered us their basement to live. They had two children then a third was born as well. And she was a good friend. The basement was an open basement with cement floor [gestures with her hands]. They put a couple of rugs down. We had a bed and a crib for the youngest one. And the oldest one, which were only two years apart, my girls, well I should backtrack [gestures with her hands]—they were born in Cadomin. And, uh, then, we went to, uh, my oldest one, my sister, one of my sisters that was in the Crow's Nest Pass, she offered to take her, to look after her. She says one less to help you out, and I sure appreciated that. With my mother, without my father, having grown up without my father, we were very, very close and my mother always

said, "Look after each other. Take care of yourselves." And we grew up to do just do that. Any one of us that needed any help, be it helping like my sister helped me or any other help that we could manage to give. It was given.

AD: Now what was your...what boat did you come on? And what, what's your memory of the journey both on the boat and then—

APD: Yeah, we left...

[David's voice in background, unclear]

[Fades out at 00:08:33]

[Fades in at 00:08:34]

[David's voice in background, unclear]

APD: We left, I believe it was April the ninth. I'm not too sure. We could have left April the sixth from home. But we went to Milan to say goodbye to some friends. We stop in Turin, because my sister the nun was there. And she was waiting to go to Ecuador at the same time. And, uh, we got here...I think it took, uh, I have it in my book, I think it took maybe 20 days altogether. I know it took a little over a week on the boat. It was a small vessel. It, uh, the cargo was not full and it was April [wavy gestures with her hands] and we had a very rough ride. One of my sisters and my mother just took to the bed right away. But my other sister Emilia and I managed to stay up and eat the meals and keep them [laughs]. It was...it was quite a thing you know and the fact was that I was leaving a life that was good in a sense because we had a good family life, but we had nothing, absolutely nothing. I had one dress for Sunday. My sister—the two—the

nun...she wasn't a nun then—she was the oldest, she had one pair of shoes for church. The other two were quite close together. They had one pair of shoes and one went to an early service and the other one to a late service and they exchanged shoes midway 'cause I guess you had to have shoes to go to church. And my other sister and I were about again you know a couple of years in age and we did the same, exchange the shoes midway and one dress for church. Uh, being poor didn't bother me because I didn't know I was poor, but when you start going to school and you see other kids with different dresses you start to wonder, Gee, what's happening, why aren't—nobody could give me an answer. And that was the life in Italy. You can imagine when I came here to Canada, uh, my father and, uh, a lady, a neighbour lady there of my father came to Edmonton to meet us and he pulled out, uh, a hand of dollars and gave us, and he told this lady to take us shopping and when I went in those stores, you know, I was let loose. But, uh, Emilia was the money-keeper and she soon, soon confiscated the money. Because coming to Canada from Italy for the four of us we had 20 American dollars. We didn't know whether we had to buy the food or whether—I know that the boat, you know, supplied the food, but we had a week of train and we didn't know that. We had no, um, knowledge of English. But on the boat we meet three Italian men. One was young. In fact he was born in Canada. They had gone back to visit family, but they had to run away from Italy because the war was imminent and they would be conscripted even though they were Canadian citizens. It didn't matter. If you were a man, you didn't get out of Italy. And then when we got here, I got, you know, I was happy and my father decided that he would send me and my other sister to school. But that was hopeless because the teacher she tried to help us but it was a class of 10, 11, and 12 grades altogether. She put us at the back of the room. We did not understand a word. She gave us a pencil and, and a scribbler. And then my sister lasted three days and she says, “I can't learn.” And I said, “Well I'll try it,” because school was my life. I tried it for a month and I decided it wasn't. So I had a girl there that talks Italian to explain to the teacher and the teacher agreed with me. So word got out that we were cleaning houses. Believe it or not, we cleaned a house, a full house, for the, uh, mine, uh, managers, you know, for the higher people,

one dollar a day...the whole house even including washing walls and windows. However, we could keep the money. We didn't have to give it back into the family, you know. We could keep the money. We were happy. And after that I thought it wasn't quite good enough for me to clean houses all my life or whatever. In the meantime, I had met the Dotto family which was nine children there and, uh, like Mrs. Dotto and my mother became very good friends because she was a hard-working lady with nine children and she was taking in boarders because it wasn't enough, one pay to feed nine children and two adults. So she took in two brothers and they would supply the food, and so they all—but boy it paid—she paid the price. She died when she was 54. She was overworked. And so that was our life over there.

[00:16:06]

AD: Can you describe, um, Cadomin, Alberta, what it was like when, uh, when you arrived?

APD: Uh, it was very, very strange because it was April and the snow was melting and the, uh, ground mixed with the coal dust, was quite messy. You know, you had to wait until maybe May until the grass got green and, uh, things dried up. Then it was a beautiful place. It was gorgeous. The mountains, in the background, you had the hills and the community was very friendly. Like I said before my father was well-known there and they, my father used to go down to the mercantile, order the food. He used to go down to the butcher and order the meat. Unless he caught [points towards the camera, off-screen]—that's my father there—unless he caught an animal, which he portion it and give it to different families and kept some for ourselves. So like I said it was a good life. Compared to Italy, it was heaven. And I've always appreciated being—then came the war. And so we were told, I don't know how my father knew, I guess there was notices, anyway, they were told that we had to go down to the RCMP barracks and register. That was a little rough because instead of giving us appointments, get maybe three or four at a time, they notify a whole bunch. There was only one room. You couldn't stay inside. You had to

stay outside and so people were making snide remarks, “the aliens.” Most people were okay, you know. There, there’s no complaints there about most people. [Laughs] There was one lady, she went to the mine manager and said, “You better inter the Italians and Germans” because she said, uh, “They started the war and, um, [shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders] they might do something wrong to all of us.” So the manager said to her, “You know what?” says, “If I intern the Italians and the Germans,” says, “I would have to close the mine because your English husband will not go underground.” So that was his answer. And, uh, you know, we went there, we were fingerprinted. And then when I decided to come—and then when, that’s it, nothing else was, you know, said. Uh, when we went down to the mercantile to try to say the name to an object we wanted to buy, people were very friendly. They never laughed at us. And, um, so, like I said, it was a good life and I liked it. But then I decided to come to Edmonton so I went to the RCMP to get permission. So they gave me, it was sort of a passport, like you know, document and says you every month go there. And then through friends I got a job at the GWG [Great West Garment]. And I was more than happy there. I was making fairly good money in my estimation and keep it and I started making friends. I had, uh, you know, uh, nice friends. We started going out. I, uh, was trying all the things that could, that the English, uh, kids could do, you know, the Canadians I should say, but most of them I couldn’t, like skating...

[Fades out at 00:20:37]

[Fades in at 00:20:38]

AD: So...

DB: We’re rolling.

AD: Can you tell me whether you or any member of your family was involved in, during the war, in any political organizations, any...

APD: [Shakes her head] No, no.

AD: And did you have any contact at all with the, uh, Italian government? Did the consulate representative from Calgary or Edmonton come up to—

APD: Uh, yes if we needed it. I can't recall the exact, uh, thing that we needed to be in contact. I know that I needed to be in contact when I first started proceedings to get my sister in Canada. But other than that, uh, I don't quite remember having ever.

AD: Did you talk about the war and, and [Benito] Mussolini and fascism in, in Cadomin?

APD: Amongst the Italians you did but very, very, um, how would I say it quietly [laughs]. We didn't want to go, to say much about anything, and we felt, you know, that it wasn't fair what Mussolini was doing, but then on the other hand Mussolini to begin with, he was a good person, but once [Adolf] Hitler got a hold of him that was the end. And, uh, I think the Canadians too even recognized that, that Hitler was the end, was the cause of what happened over there. And that Mussolini would have done—he cleaned up down South there that was a mess. They couldn't get any, uh, farming. You know, everything polluted, and all that kind of stuff and he cleaned all that up. But then when Hitler came, he took over [shrugs].

AD: So you feel there wasn't really any fascist activity in—

APD: [Shakes her head] Uh, no.

AD: —coal branch?

APD: Not that I was aware of. Definitely not. Yeah.

AD: So tell me, um, a little bit about, um, your husband, how you fell in love and married and so on.

APD: Well [laughs] it was funny because he came around and he—like we were a bunch; we'd go on picnics and he was always coming to my side and I guess there was a connection there. And then he start writing to me and like I said [laughs], you know, his Italian was mangled, I couldn't understand. And, uh, and then he was teaching me the English language, you know, when we were together. But our love life was conducted by mail for three years, 1942 to 1945. And in 1945 he was sent down East 'cause he told me his mother was always so afraid that he would be sent overseas, but eventually it came, sent down East, and that meant you know you're going to ship out at the first opportunity. But apparently they have a good examination there. They classified him as a 4F, which meant you never go to active service. So he said to me, "Well this is what's happening" He said, "I'm going to ask the army to release me and to work in the mine." Because you can do that 'cause they needed miners. And then he said, "We'll get married." So we even set a date, uh, date at that time because we felt the government, if they can't send him overseas, they're going to use him in the mine. So anyway he wrote to me and he said, "Okay, I am—they gave me, you know, the thing to work in, in the mine." And, uh, he also said a funny thing, he says, "But I have to—from Halifax I have to report to Cadomin. It was just like another post. I can't stop in Edmonton." I was in Edmonton working then. And he says, "Would you get the wedding ring?" [Laughs] So here my friend and I went into a shop. You know, in those years it was unbelievable two ladies would go and buy a wedding ring. And my, my friend said to him, she says, "Well her fiancé is in the army and he can't come to Edmonton." So anyway I got the wedding ring and we got married August the 18th and, um, and

he, he work in the mine. But then he had, after he got permission to marry me, he had to get permission for me, if I was suitable and of course this is where the RCMP come in. Permission was given immediately because my existence in Edmonton or in Canada had been well documented. You know, I was fingerprinted. I was not a danger to anybody. So permission was given and we got married. [Shrugs] And that, that was it.

[00:27:02]

AD: So you got married where?

APD: In Cadomin.

AD: Cadomin.

APD: Mm hmm.

AD: What year?

APD: Forty-five.

AD: Forty-five.

APD: Yeah.

AD: So you know tell me a little bit about, um, your married life.

APD: It was good. It was poor, but it was good. Uh, we were, there was a couple...of couples, you know, that got married at the same time. There was a few hitches there because, uh, the, um, the Cadomin community when a couple got married they go—friends, they go all over the city collect money and then they buy a big thing for them [gestures with her hands]. They didn't do that for me [motions to herself]. And so the mayor of the town, when he heard that, you know, because he liked the boys, eh. And, uh, in fact Joe and Gus, my husband, they—he ran the, uh, the movie theatre and they helped him with that and so he really told these people off and they said, “Well, says, “her friends should have done that.” And, uh, he said to them, “You realize that they are Italian and their friends are keeping a low profile because they don't want to come in the forefront and, and be told you're not entitled to anything,” you know. But anyway the Italian families got together and gave me a set, a lovely set of dishes. That's okay [laughs].

AD: So—

DB: I'm just going to stop you.

[Fades out at 00:28:55]

[Fades in at 00:28:56]

AD: You arrived with your mother and sisters in Canada in 1939 and of course which was the beginning of the Second World War.

APD: [Nods] Yes.

AD: What memories do you have of Canada, the government of Canada, declaring, um, Italian Canadians or Italians resident in Canada as enemy aliens and internment?

APD: Uh, not, uh, not that it meant all that much because number one I didn't understand English [begins counting on fingers], and number two we knew that Italy had not been in the war yet with, um, Canada. And at that point we were not declared enemy aliens. It was after that Mussolini went in, which I don't know if it was May or June [scratches head and closes her eyes in thought] 'cause I know I was in the hospital with appendix surgery. And, uh, the doctor's wife substituted for a nurse once in a while if they were short. It was an ord—the hospital was then an ordinary home. And it had two beds for the men and one bed for—one room for the—two rooms for the men and one room for the women and I occupied. My sister came to visit me and we could hear Mussolini, Mussolini, Italy, Mussolini but that's all we could understand. So anyway the doctor's wife came through the room and she looked like she was ready to kill both of us. She let out a stream of words, which we do not understand. So we both kept so quiet. I said, "I wonder what's happening," you know. And, but we could hear something had happened because Italy and Mussolini, you know, maybe they declared war, which they had. Anyway, maybe 20 minutes after, she came back, with a dish of ice cream for each one of us, and we wondered should we eat it, maybe it's poisoned [laughs]. And I said, "We better eat it, because if we don't eat it, she might really get mad." So anyway, I'm here. But apparently she was upset, you know, and I guess she took it out on us and then realized that one in bed and the other one couldn't even talk English. What, what damage can we do, you know, so she sorta came back in the room and gave us the ice cream, so.

[00:32:03]

AD: So when did your—did you have a discussion with your parents about this and what this—

APD: Well yeah, we talked about it. And, uh, you know [sighs], people like us, we sorta accept things. If the government says this is so, so be it. We don't question, which is bad, you know. Now I would question.

AD: So how did your parents hear about it, um, the enemy alien designation and what that involved?

APD: Well my father could understand, you know, and there was a lot of talk at a, at a legion and a lot of talk in the mine and, uh, this is how, they, heard. But after a few months that I was going to report every month to the RCMP in Edmonton, when I was allowed to come to Edmonton to work, uh, the RCMP officer said to me, "Why are you coming here every month with that paper?" I says, "'Cause I was told from the RCMP in Cadomin." "Oh," he said, "wait a minute." So he went back; he came back, put a stamp on it. He says, "Don't come back." [Shakes head] So I guess he realized, you know, I guess I was about 17, 18, by then, what damage could I do?

AD: Was your father, um, a Canadian citizen?

APD: [Nods her head] Oh yeah.

AD: At the time?

APD: Oh yes.

AD: But he had to report?

APD: [Nods] Oh he had to report. He was mad because he had been a Canadian citizen for years. But look at my sister-in-law, my, my, my husband's sister, born in Canada. And the man that she married, he was about 4 or 5 years old when he came to Canada with his parents. And she had to go and be fingerprinted and born in Canada. This was taking it to the extreme, I think.

AD: About how many, um, people in Cadomin had to report to the RCMP? If you remember?

APD: Everybody that was not—well, I guess, I mean we all had to report.

AD: And about how many was that?

APD: Oh God, I, I don't know. Up in the hill, I would say there would be about 30 people. And then there was some people houses, you know, maybe 50.

AD: So, so would it be safe to say that the entire Italian community of, of Cadomin had to report?

[00:35:06]

APD: Oh definitely. Yes. Yes, they had to report, whether they were Canadian citizens or not. See by law, when I came here I wasn't 16; I should have been a Canadian citizen under my father. Well they didn't and I didn't know then. Then I was Canadian citizen under my husband when I married him. But then this man, that was the mayor at that time, he was very friendly with, uh, my husband, with the Dotto family, and he told Gus, he says, "Tell your wife to come down here, we're going to make her a Canadian citizen." By then I was over five years see, because she said, uh, he said to him, "This is no good; she has to be protected." And so I went

down there and he explained. I could understand a bit then, and, uh, he—the rest he, Gus, explained it to me, you know, and signed the paper, and I was a Canadian citizen. And that paper is the most valued thing I have besides my marriage license.

AD: Do you think that the Italian community in Cadomin suffered as a result of the enemy—

APD: Not very much. There wasn't much hardship. There was one thing, sugar and coffee was rationed. So that wasn't a necessity. But one thing that really flabbergasted me, whiskey was, uh, what is it, um, was on the list.

AD: Prohibited or rationed.

APD: Rationed. Yeah, I was thinking about the word. And I was wondering why the whiskey. But anyway, you could go to the doctor and get a prescription for brandy, and he would give you a prescription for brandy, and you could buy a bottle of brandy with the doctor prescription. Now whiskey and brandy doesn't make much difference. The Italian people, not me, was the Italian men mostly, they like a bit of brandy or whiskey in the morning coffee. And my father, I was going to the doctor for some injections on my back, and my father says, "Ask the doctor to give you a prescription for brandy." I said, "Okay." So I asked him and he said to me, what he said, "With the injections I'm giving you, you're not drinking, uh, you know, this stuff." "No, no, no," I said, "it's for my father". [Laughs]

AD: So you feel that there was—

[David speaks in background, unclear]

[Fades out at 00:38:20]

[Fades in at 00:38:31]

AD: Do you think that the enemy alien, um, designation affected the relationship between the Italian miners and others with the rest of the community in Cadomin?

APD: Not particularly with the miners, because the miners are a special group. They all go down there [points down]. They never know whether they're going to come up [points up]. So there was no hardship there. Absolutely. However the families of one bunch and the families of the other could have had, you know, maybe English people were angry because Italy, with all the things that Canadians were privileged to be here and then Italy does that. Yes, there was. But as far as I know, I don't think it was to the extreme that would make the Italians suffer. I mean there was some, you know, uh, stuff there that could have happened. But not with the miners. [Shakes head] The miners are a special brand of people because when it takes courage to go underground. I've never been underground but they say it's something that you don't want to be there. And yet my father and my husband did it every day.

AD: So do you think that, um, [long pause] there was any long-term impact on the Italian community of Cadomin and Edmonton where you came to live as a result of that enemy alien designation?

APD: Uh, not necessarily. I never felt it, but like I say I was a, you know, young girl. And, uh, at the GWG, I never felt it. They—I asked my friend, can you see if I can get a job there, and I said, you know, language is a problem. Language is not a problem. If you operate a sewing machine, that's all you required.

AD: So when did you start working at GWG?

APD: I think in '42... '42, '43, '44, '45. Forty-two. I don't know if it was early '42 or mid-term. I cannot remember 'cause I know my father, I was down in Edmonton with my father because he had cancer and he went under surgery and so I stayed here even when the rest of the family, the rest of the family, my mother came down, you know, when, for the surgery, but after that we had to be at the mercy of friends. And we were, didn't want to be, put them out that much, you know, with so many people because my sister from the Crow's Nest Pass, that she has moved there with her two children and her husband had come to Edmonton, so there was about six people and forget it about hotel accommodations, we didn't have the money, you know. And these people were very good, different, two or three families. So, but in the end I stayed here and, uh, I needed to support myself, so I asked Mickey[?], her name was, that she became my landlady after that, I says, "Can you see if I can get a job there and just tell them I can't talk English." And so she says, "You don't need to talk English. All you need is to operate a sewing machine and that's it."

AD: Was, was, um, the Great West Garment company, um, making uniforms for the military at that point?

APD: Oh yeah. Mm hmm. [Says while nodding]

AD: Do you want to talk a bit about your work and the uniforms.

APD: Well my work, I don't know much about the coveralls they were making for the army. And the shirts, I know about those. They came later for the officers. It was this khaki-colored shirt and it was fine material and it was—I wasn't certain the sleeves here [motions towards right shoulder]. It was murder. But prior to that I was trained and I was making the, what we called the, um, uh, army whites, no, the whites, it's not the army...

AD: Navy?

APD: Navy whites. I was inserting sleeves, but that material was quite, uh, sturdy, you know. It was a whiz to get the machine, I mean, the sleeves through. But oh man, the, the officer's shirts with that thin sorta material, very beautiful material, was, was murder [hand gesture] to sew. And, uh, I never did go to the coveralls because after that the floor lady, which we called her, took me and put me in the annex, what they called it, different building. And I was there to do the work shirts and so the work shirts were, was okay because you know they had those, uh, uh, different, uh, materials and very sturdy materials. Like they had, uh, oh I can't remember what they called that material anyway, and, uh. So you know the more you worked, the more money you make, but you did work hard. That was one of the things.

AD: So how long did you work at GWG and then what was your next job?

[00:44:59]

APD: [Speaks while looking up in thought] Okay, I worked there 1942 to 1945, got married and, uh, in Cadomin I did not work. Oh let me see. Did I work in Cadomin? No, not until we get to Edmonton and first I met this woman, she used to belong to our church and she owned a coffee shop and so she wanted me to work. I work in the food service. And I work there for, off and on, for two or three years I believe. And after that for some reason the same company had taken over the service at the Workman's Compensation cafeteria, so I was there working for about maybe a couple of years. And, uh, then the lady, it was only two girls, eh, the manager has quit, and she said to me, "You take over the job." I said, "You kidding. I can't take over this job because we had to do the bookwork to, uh, the, uh, the, um, payroll and everything."

[Unclear] two people. "You can do it." She says, "You know what happens if you don't take it over. They'll hire somebody and you're going to train that lady to do the work." So I took it over

and I was there for a couple of years and then I got into a scrap with the manager because I said there's too much work here I need a four-hour girl. He gave me the four-hour girl and then he says fire her. I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because it's costing us money." And so, he was mad. And it was during the line-up, you know. So I came around the corner, took, I was at the cash, my apron off and I says, "Here you do it." And he said, "Hold it, hold it, hold it," you know. But then I had made my thing. I don't want to threaten them and not come through. I says, "I'm still going." And then the manager came down. He says, "I'm not trying"—the manager of the compensation—"I'm not trying to hold you," he said, "we've been happy with you and I'm sorry this has happened." Because he says, "We are not looking for money, we are just want our staff to have proper food and thing for lunch." But anyway, I left and, uh, then one of the managers from Toronto came up, because the company was Versa Food Services was based in Toronto. And he phone me and he says, "I hear you're free." And I says, "Well, not exactly." And he said, "I have a position for you at the Glenrose School Hospital." And, uh, so he said, "Go there and meet Mr. O'Neil, he's the manager there." So I went there, and he says, "I'm going to put you in the office." I says, "I want the cafeteria work." I says, "How do I know what—I mean, I only got a grade three education." And I says, "I don't know." I says, "How much staff have you got here?" And he says, "About 90 people." I says, "90 people. I can do payroll for 90 people?" He says, "You do for one, you do for 90, it's the same thing." "Okay, I'll give it a try." I was there 15 years. And, uh, I retire 'cause I figure, my husband had to retire because he was 65 and, uh, he had to retire. Now if I stayed at work, he wasn't driving, and if I stayed at work I would have tied him down. And we made a good move, I tried to—we tried to figure out what we had, can we make it comfortably. Not luxuries of course, and we decided we could, so I quit. And we took quite a few trips. We had saved enough to go for some cruises. Uh, we went to Palm Springs a couple of times with friends and any...

[Fades out at 00:50:13]

[Fades in at 00:50:14]

APD: Pleasant five years that we did some traveling and after we had done all that he died, so I was ever, ever thankful that we didn't let the money come in our way, to keep it in a bank and just not do what we did. [Gestures with hand]

AD: Now, after your marriage you lived in Cadomin, and you came to Edmonton when the mines closed. Can you tell me a bit about that, when the mines closed?

APD: Well yeah. It was a very, very sad thing you know. We had bought there a lovely, lovely home. It had a five-room home, which you didn't find in the coal branch. And it had a full basement with a furnace because you only have a heater in the living room and a stove in the kitchen. My house was very nice and warm. I had a pump in the house, you know, that I didn't have to go up in the hill and get pails of water [camera view shifts]. I had a shed with a stove in it, and that I can do the washing, you know, put the washing machine there. And so it was again, very, very good life. Like I said before, you know, rumours started and, uh, it was very sad. And you believe it my husband spend a month tearing the house down, board by board by board. There was 15 windows there. We put them in the garage. And then [sighs]...we—there was people from other towns coming up to buy things, when they heard you were leaving they didn't buy anything because they can come and help themselves. All we got that house, was we sold some lumber to the Catholic church in Edson for \$100. And like I said to add the 400, or I don't know whether it was adding the 400 or whether the \$100 came to 400 that we had and it was a struggle...a real struggle. Felt very sad to leave Cadomin. The people were friendly. And, uh, it was a good way of life.

AD: Why did the mine shut down and when did it shut down—

[Slight camera movement]

APD: 'Cause the oil come in. Didn't need the coal [shakes her head].

AD: So it affected all of the Italians—

APD: [Nodding head] It affected all the Italians and everybody else that lived in the mine.

AD: So how many of you came to Edmonton? Do you remember?

APD: Uh, I would say at least 12 families. Some had left before for the Crow's Nest Pass. And some had stayed, went to West, you know, and some stopped along the line. There was still some mines working, uh, so smaller, like Mercoal, Coalspur and all that, and Luscar. Very minimal, bu,t uh, some people you know, if it's only husband and wife, if you didn't have a family, you would manage. But then, you know, you couldn't stay very long because the mine would close the utilities. The doctor would go. If you have family, you don't dare stay where there's no doctor.

AD: So this was around 1948, '49 [unclear]?

APD: Let me see. [Looks up thinking] Was I still...yeah, yeah, yeah. Because the girls were, Lidia was born in 1949, and, um, let me see, 1949, and she was about two years old. Yeah we left...we left in 1951, '52, I think.

[00:55:00]

AD: And what did your husband do when he came to Edmonton?

APD: He had, um, his sister was here and got him a job at West Steel. I don't know what that was. It's a factory, you know, here in Edmonton, and, uh [reaches for tissue off-screen], then I don't know where he was one day [wipes nose] and he met [sniffles] a fellow from Cadomin and this man work at Molson's Brewery. And he said you should get Molson Brewery 'cause you know you get a little better pay there and Gus said yeah, try to get in, you know.

[David and Adriana speaking in background, unclear]

APD: [Laughs] Okay, okay.

[David walks across screen]

APD: And, uh [looks off-screen at David]...did I manage to wreck something?

DB: No, I think it's okay. Just uh... [Walks on screen and adjusts mike on her jacket. Walks off-screen]

APD: Oh boy, you have to be an acrobat to get around my living room.

DB: Go ahead.

APD: Anyway, then the parish priest came to visit us, you know, from Cadomin. He knew where we were. And he came to visit there, so he was asking how we were. So Gus told him about Molson, you know. "Oh," he said, "the general manager was my commanding officer during the war because I was serving as a chaplain in that outfit." Says, "I'll give him a talk." And so this guy phone us and I got the phone call and he says, "Tell your husband to report tomorrow at Molson's." He got the job.

AD: So what did he do?

APD: Oh right at the bottom, washing the tanks. He was a labourer, you know. And, uh, he had, he was very, very [sighs]—it's too bad that he couldn't have an education, because he study for his grade 10 'cause he only could go to grade nine. But then he study for his, uh, pit, uh, mine, um, not pit-boss... There's two things there, one is, uh, you know you direct them in and take them out if there is danger...and he got that. Oh through the years even before that, he was, uh, with the, uh, St. John Ambulance. He was always you know upgrading himself. And then he had these papers that he could be a fire-boss in the mine, but that time the mine almost was closed so he never did get work on that and, uh, the rest of the time at Molson there. Then in the end there, I think, uh, no I think he went fishing first, it was on the eighth of December and to ice fishing and, uh, he...had a stroke. He was by himself. But he had caught a fish and put it in a seat in the car. And he drove home, about 6:00 in the evening, which is in December is dark and somebody behind—my husband must have been going like this [makes swerving pattern with hands]. This man thought, presumably, that he was drunk. And grab him by the chest [grabs her shirt]—my husband only remembers—oops—only remembers that, and I guess he called the police. The long story short is my husband appeared at home. He couldn't tell me where the car was; he couldn't tell me who got him home; and, uh, so I phoned the doctor and he said take him to the hospital, you know, to the emergency. So he was there, at the hospital, for a month nursing his, whatever it was, that he, he, it did have, uh, they call it a cerebral hemorrhage. And, uh, so when he was well to get home, we couldn't get a doctor nowhere in Edmonton where they could assess him as his condition. I know he couldn't drive because I just didn't let him drive, but for the rest I didn't know. But anyway, the family doctor, he said, “What do you think?” And I said, “He seemed to be okay,” I said, “but I can't be a judge on this condition.” “Would he be safe at work?” And I said, “I don't know.” But anyway, they put him on a baler, which means they throw in the cart—the cartons of beer flat, and, and then, you know, I don't know. They do something with it, anyway. But it got caught and instead of

stopping the machine, he went in with his hand, and the machine grabbed him here [gestures to her hand, but not visible]. And he stripped this. And he cut this off. But it is amazing.

DB: Can you raise your hand higher?

APD: [Looking at both videographer and interviewer off-screen] Pardon?

DB: [Unclear]

AD: Can you raise your hand? Show us your hand.

APD: [Lifts her right hand in front of her face]

AD: Show, show us your—

APD: Oh. It stripped this [point to right thumb] and it cut this in half [indicates right index finger]. It is amazing. It was a Japanese doctor that cut the tip off 'cause was no use [points to index finger]. Put it here [indicates the right thumb], cut a piece, an open piece here [points to chest area] an L-shape, put the skin over it [moves right hand towards chest] and stayed like that...

[Fades out at 01:02:12]

[Fades in at 01:02:13]

[Talking in background, unclear]

APD: Okay. Stay like that for a month and, uh, he, uh, uh, I don't know what happened then, uh, how they took it off, anyway, but it healed and so they cut him off there [points to chest, but mostly off-screen] and this was like covered [pointing to right thumb, mostly off-screen] you know with like big thick flesh, uh, from here [pointing to chest]. Then they took a piece of flesh, uh, skin from his leg, from here [looking at her leg] and covered the chest and that would not heal for a long time. And I remember him going to the Misericordia [Community Hospital] for surgery, then coming at Glenrose for recovery and I was there, I could see him every day, you see. And then in the end, the doctor come in, he opened something that he had and he said, "I hope this would do it." He had a piece of skin. I don't know who from. But anyway, he put it on his leg and it healed up. He was able to work 15 years after that.

AD: Now were you involved in the Italian community in Edmonton?

APD: Uh...there wasn't such a thing as the Italian community. We played cards together; we associate that way, but it was just a small group. Uh, the other thing that we did...it was mostly involvement with the Catholic Church. You see, I was told that I had to be the, uh, treasurer. I says, "What do I know about money." And the President says, "You know what," says, "numbers are the same in all language." So I was the treasurer—

AD: Of which church?

APD: The Catholic Church, it was, uh, St., uh, what was it...it was in Cadomin anyways, a little church. They had three churches there: Protestant, and, uh, Catholic, and, uh, the, uh, another one. [Long pause] And but that's how we associated.

AD: And what about Edmonton? Were you involved with the Italian church, Santa Maria Goretti?

APD: Uh, no, because Santa Maria Goretti is way [says with emphasis] across over and my church that we built here it was 10 minutes away and so I've been very involved then, but I gave all of it up now because I think they should get younger people in there to do the things that we did. But we did bazaars, and we held, the men held bingos, and, uh, we really work hard to get, to pay for the church.

[01:05:35]

AD: Now you have two daughters. Lidia, uh, Dotto, um, has had a wonderful career as a science journalist. Do you want to talk about Lidia a bit?

APD: Yeah. Well she was interested in that. When she started to work for the *Globe and Mail*, at that time it was the astronauts' thing. And she was asked to cover the recovery of the first [motions hand down], when they came down. And of course, she just put L. Dotto. And when the, uh, captain realized she was a woman he went out of his mind. A woman amongst a thousand men. [Laughs] And she said, they said, "No you can't." And, and, and she said, "I was accepted, that's not acceptable." And she did go. But what they did was to hire an artist to paint, to draw the uh, uh, whatever was going on there—another woman. So she couldn't be, Lidia couldn't be a, a, a woman with a thousand men. But she had a ball in all her, uh, things. And she got, there's quite a few books in there [gestures off-screen] that she has written, you know. And now she is into photography. She must have taken it after her father. Her father was quite a photographer. Uh, uh, like movie, movie. He has documented our family inside out, you know, from, um, birth to anything that went on. And not only our immediate family, my extended family, his extended family, their children. We have thousands, and thousands, and thousands of film. We got some on, on tapes, but, uh, Lidia's looking into trying to put them on DVDs, you know, because, pretty soon there'll be no more tapes.

AD: So now, reflecting on, you know, being in Canada for...72 years, I guess, what, what do you think, you know, about being in Canada and immigrating—

APD: I think it's just wonderful. There's no other word for it. I think it's just wonderful. I have the freedom. I have, in my humble way, I've accomplished something because writing that memoirs there [nods in a direction towards the camera], it was something that really pleased me, because, not because I wanted people to know, it's because I could do it. And, uh, the fact is, whatever you try to do here, you can do it, which was not an option in Italy. And, uh, sometimes I'm stumped when they ask, even though you ask me, about my education. Okay, I went to grade three. There was a village school that didn't go up more than three. And my mother, my sisters, my uncle—my mother had a brother that was a priest, and he says, “At least the last one, give her an education. She's got a good brain; let her.” And my mother says, “I can't do nothing about it.” You know, the brother-in-law, or my father's brother, uh, didn't want to let me go. And then the fact that I met up with Linda Guyet[?] and I had articles in that book [nods in a direction towards the camera] that's who got me started. And, uh, I feel that I have accomplished something. The grade three—okay, there was two kilometres to go to grade four, but I was too young to go and my mother talked to the teacher. She said, “Can you keep her in school to—so she won't forget things?” And anyway, it ended up that I stayed there two years. And then finally I went to grade four. I was in my glory and I of course passed with four with honours and then I wanted the five. The five was the ultimate. [Gestures with hand] Couldn't do it [shakes her head]. ‘Cause my uncle said, “No.” And he kept saying no, and I couldn't do it...to my regret. But I feel...I feel satisfied with myself. Now what I need to do is to master that darn-gone computer [laughs and shakes head]. But anyway, I'll, I'll try it, and of course this problem, health problem that I had, really dragged me down this last few months.

[01:11:54]

AD: Well I'd like to thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for the Columbus Centre, um, Villa Charities, um, Enemy Alien and, um, Internment research project. Um, thank you so much.

APD: Oh you're very welcome. I enjoyed this. And, uh...so maybe if you can locate Linda, I'll get, uh, word to her because I don't like to make the books, to reprint the books, if I don't.

AD: This is, this is your memoir which...

APD: Yeah.

AD: ...you're gifting a copy to the project.

APD: Yeah.

AD: Thank you so much.

APD: You're very welcome.

AD: Good.

[Fades out at 01:12:47]

[End of interview]