

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

DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 8, 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 25, 2011

ACCESSION No.: ICEA2011.0032.0001

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, Alberto Severo Biffi, was born in Monza, Italy and immigrated to Montreal in 1912. When the First World War broke out Alessandro's father enlisted in the Canadian Army. Then in 1915, after hearing that Italy had entered the war on the side of the Allies he asked to be transferred to the Italian Army, where he served again on the side of the Allied Forces. Despite his dedication to his new country, 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. Alberto Severo Biffi was a successful importer of Italian goods at the time of his arrest and was also an important member of the Italian community. He was the secretary for the *fascio* organization run out of the Casa D'Italia and had ties to the Italian consul. He was also involved in the community life of greater Montreal, including involvement with the Liberal Party. He married a French woman whose family was from Normandy, and they and their son spoke French at home. After his return from the internment camp in Petawawa, Biffi successfully built up his business again, and his family enjoyed a similar standard of living as

before his internment, although they did move to a smaller apartment in Montreal, where they stayed until the end of their lives. Alberto Severo Biffi died of a heart attack in 1955. His son Alessandro, who was 10 years old at the time of his father's arrest, recalls the time of World War II in his family's history. He also reflects on the effect that his father's internment had on his own life and the relatively lucky and privileged situation of their family in the greater Italian community, as well as the fact that his family had more ties to Canadian Montreal than many other Italians. Alessandro also recalls the irony of the fact that he himself spent his life teaching physics at the Collège Militaire de Saint-Jean, a place where Italian Canadian men were held before being sent to internment camps.

INTERVIEW

AB: Alessandro Biffi, interviewee

JP: Joyce Pillarella, interviewer

AR: Adriana Rinaldi, videographer

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:10]

JP: Okay, um, we're here with, uh, Sand—uh, Alessandro Biffi. It's June—

AB: Eight.

JP: Eighth, thank you [laughs], 2011.

AB: [Laughs]

JP: My name is Joyce Pillarella. So, Mr. Biffi [laughs], why don't we start by talking about your childhood and when you were a young boy and tell me about what life was like then? You were born in...

AB: I was born in Montreal. Uh, my father was Italian, naturally. My mother was French from France, from Normandy, actually. And, uh, well, uh, I was born in 1930, which is quite a few years back. And, uh...I was living in Outremont on McEachran Street and well, usual life, I had, uh—I played around with the neighbour's kids and learned English that way. And, uh, eventually, I started going to school around six or seven years old and, uh, that was about it. A normal...Canadian upbringing.

JP: And at home, what language did, uh, you speak?

AB: Uh, since my mother was French and my father spoke good French, we spoke French at home. Uh, but, uh, as I said, uh, I learned English quite easily with the neighbours at a young age when it's easy to learn a language. And I also learned Italian with, uh—because, uh, of Italian friends who visited, uh, regularly, uh, with us and who made an effort to teach me Italian. One in fact was a professor of Italian at the University, and he was there nearly every Saturday evening, and that's how I picked up Italian. Though I don't pretend that my Italian is as good as my French and maybe even as my English.

JP: But did you parti—uh, did you have—your father, did he have Italian friends over and—

AB: Yes. [Nods]

JP: But with them did they speak Italian or—

AB: [Nods] Oh yes.

JP: Yeah.

AB: Oh yes, they spoke Italian. That, that, that's why, uh, any time we were with Italian friends, uh, I was in contact with Italians so that I could develop a sense of the Italian language, uh, the accent and, uh, so on.

JP: Where did your father come from in Italy?

AB: Monza.

JP: Oh, Monza.

AB: Yeah.

JP: Um, and so, uh, what kind of activities did you do as a kid? Like you, you played in the neighbourhood there in Outremont, uh, did you go on picnics with the families? Did you go to activities at the—

AB: [Humming in background while Joyce is asking question] Not, not, not, not really. No, no. Picnics, occasionally, uh, on a weekend or maybe on a Sunday we would go outside in the country or something like that, but, uh, we were—we went quite regularly up to, uh, Sainte-Adèle because we had a friend there. Uh, you may have heard about the Carrioto[?] farm. Uh, we knew the Carriotos[?] quite well and, uh, we went there quite often, had lunch there and came back. Tried to come back, uh, in the Sunday night, uh, mess because the highway was far from what it is today. [Smiles]

JP: Were you a big family? Lots of—how many children in your family?

AB: I'm the only one.

JP: You're the only child.

AB: Yeah.

JP: And did your—did you ever go to Casa D'Italia as a young boy when—

AB: Well, occasionally.

JP: —dances—

AB: No, not dances. Well, dances that was a, a way to, uh—I was too young to go to dances before the war [laughs]. Uh, but, uh, I did, uh, go sometimes with my father and, uh, to the Casa D'Italia like that. But, uh, I was never [makes a circular gesture with hands] really participant in the, uh, Italian life of, uh, Montreal, uh, as such. As a kid, my father was quite—much more im—implicated in the Italian colony naturally.

JP: [Speaking to Adriana] Is there a problem with the sound? [Long pause] [Alessandro adjusts in his chair while looking at Joyce] Oh, to look over here more? Okay. Sorry, [unclear]. [Speaking to Alessandro] Okay, um, what do you—um, I guess what did you remember of your father when you were a child? Because I realize this is going back so far. Was he around for you? Did he uh—'cause he was very important. He did—he really helped the Italian colony quite a bit.

AB: Oh yes, but no. Uh, he was, uh, quite present I mean I have no complaints that way.

[Laughs] Uh, I mean, we, uh, we, we had a nice life I think. Uh, as far as I'm concerned. [Laughs]

Uh, you must remember that, uh, by the war, by the time of the war I was only 10 years old so I mean, I was pretty young in the part, uh, before the war.

[00:05:32]

JP: And, um, when the, uh, the internments started to happen in—on June 10th, 1940, uh, your father was picked up where?

AB: He was picked up, uh, at noon, as he was, uh, going or coming back from lunch, uh, in one of the Italian restaurants on, uh, Drum[?] Street I think. Arborio[?] I think it was.

JP: And how did your mum find out about it? And how did you find out about it?

AB: Uh, I don't remember.

JP: Yeah.

AB: We found out be—um, eventually the, uh, RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] came to our place to, uh, uh, look if there was anything, um, interesting for them, but, uh, that, that was it. Uh, they didn't find much. [Inhales sharply and laughs]

JP: And your father had a business before the war.

AB: [Nods] Yes, import business.

JP: Do you want to tell us about that?

AB: [Sighs] Well, it was an import business, mostly with Italy. Well, actually only with Italy at the time. After the war he did do some things with Belgium also and the marbles. But before the war he imported, uh, several things. He had quite a few clients in Montreal and, uh, different companies that, uh, required, uh, French—uh, Italian produ-produces. Uh [sighs], as I mentioned before, um, before the war, everybody wore a hat, and Italia—uh, Italy was, uh, a good producer of felt for felt hats, both men and women, and in the summer it was, uh, straw hats. Now, the straw [unclear] for the milliners to make nice lovely hat for the ladies, among other things. It was also cordage, something I forgot. [Unclear] *Nazionale* in Italy produced some good cordage for the, uh, uh, for several companies in Ontario in particular. And a cordage which, uh—kind of a rope which was used when you make hats, a man's hat, in particular. Blocking cord it was called I remember. Things come up like that [laughs]...

JP: [Laughs]

AB: ...as we talk.

JP: Where was his business? Was it in Outremont or down—

AB: No, his business was, uh, ah—he had an office in a building on Craig Street, which is now Saint Antoine. Um, I think it was 455 Craig Street. And—

JP: And did he, did he have a lot of employees? Was it a big business—

AB: No, he had, uh—it was small business. He had a secretary, uh, typist, uh, that was about it.

JP: And your mum, your mum was a...look after—

AB: Home.

JP: —the children and yeah. And so when—after he was picked up and he was interned, how did it work out at home for you and your mum?

AB: Well, my mother did her best, uh, so that I wouldn't feel much the effects. And I think she was quite successful because I don't remember much from that point of view. I remember naturally, uh, talking about Papa who was in, uh, in the internment, uh, camp and, uh, the letters came in and, uh, so on and so forth. And I eventually learned that it, it, it wasn't easy for my mother from the financial point of view. She, she has no—she had no experience in business at all. Well, luckily we had some good friends that gave us help. And that was it, uh, until my father came back. But—

JP: And, and the business when—um, after he was pic—interned?

AB: The business was—uh, I mean, uh, the, the, the business was closed. I mean there was nothing could be done with it. If my father had been not been interned he might have been able to switch his import knowledge to import from the States for instance, but, uh, that was not the case, he wasn't there. And when he came back well, uh, he found a job again with the help of some good friends in the Canadian community. And, um, eventually when the war ended he star—uh, he started, uh, developing his, uh, contacts with his old Italian firms and, uh, gradually built up the, uh, the business again. It wasn't going too bad.

[00:10:14]

JP: Was he—he was able to work? You said he worked elsewhere as an accountant—

AB: [Nods] Yes, he worked. Uh, he, he, he had—uh, he was given a job as a account of somehow, I don't know exactly, um, with the Saint James Club. [Shrugs]

JP: And you, you didn't—and you were very fortunate, I guess just the fact that you didn't feel the effect is really, um, a tribute to your mother.

AB: [Nods] I think so, yes. Oh yes, definitely. Oh yes. She was very courageous and, uh, it was a very hard time for her, there's no doubt about that. It's not like other people who as I mentioned to you, uh, before, uh, who, who had a, a, a store for instance where both the man and the, uh, the wife and the, the husband worked together both knew how the things went on and so on and, uh, well, uh, the wife was able to maintain the thing going especially if there was some, um, children that could help her. And some did better than others, but I mean that's, that's what happens.

JP: And you were lucky also because you were able to continue in school because you—

AB: [Nods] Yes.

JP: —you were going to, uh, Stanislas?

AB: Well, first of all I had my primary school in—um, at Mère de Dieu Marie[?]. And, uh, when my father, uh, when my father came back he came back in time to develop the change—uh, the, the movement back to Stanislas College, which was French naturally and that was an instance on my mother's part. And, uh, where I made some very good friends and had—I liked

very much. And from there on I went to, uh, uh, university afterwards, again in French, in the University of Montreal where I took, uh, a degree in physics before I started, uh, working.

JP: And then you were telling me you went to, uh, teach at, uh—

AB: [Nods] I went to teach—uh, it was my first and only job at, uh, as a, uh, teacher of physics at the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean. I stayed there for 37 years.

JP: And what, wa—what was interesting about being there? Was it—

AB: Well, for those, uh, Italians of the time, uh, they may remember, at least part of them, of being, uh, interned there at the Fort Saint-Jean, which became the Collège Militaire, uh, for about a month be—before being shifted elsewhere. Among other place, at Bordeaux Jail.

JP: I mean, uh—and you brought—well, you, you had the opportunity to bring one of the men who had been there to—

AB: Oh yes, a good friend of ours, uh, a very good friend of ours, uh, I invited him several times, a Mr. [Regolo] Gagliacco, uh, to the college. Unfortunately, uh, the year I went to Saint-Jean—that I got the job there—uh, my father died, so I could not bring him [says with emphasis on “him”] to Saint-Jean. I think he would have enjoyed it. [Smiles]

JP: Did the other man enjoy it?

AB: Oh yes, very much.

JP: What was—

AB: Oh, he was there and saying, “Well, you see the guards, the guards were over there and the...” [points in the distance] and so on so forth. Oh, he liked it very much, he enjoyed it. Especially, since he—we were at the mess and we had a heck of a good dinner. [Laughs]

JP: [Laughs] So, you were very fortunate that your mother was able to maintain a quite normal life for you as a child—

AB: Yeah.

JP: —even though, uh, your father had been taken away.

AB: Yeah.

JP: Your father unfortunately lost the business; you were able to stay in school. Did you have to move?

AB: Yes, uh, right from the beginning, uh, where we were living was really too big and too costly for my mother. So we moved to an apartment not very far from the first place. And, uh, in fact, uh, the apartment was sat—satisfactory enough that we kept it throughout when my father came back and, uh, I ke—I kept on living there until I got married. May amuse some people, people here in Canada seem to be moving every year, I moved twice in my life.

JP: It’s true, you know, either jobs or homes you... [Laughs]

AB: [Laughs] I’m very sedentary.

[00:15:05]

JP: That's all right, that's good. But what else do you remember of that period? Like in the 40s when the men started coming back?

AB: Uh, well, suddenly—

JP: [Unclear]

AB: —my father came back, we, we were very happy and we reorganized ourself and, uh, and that was it. Uh, oh and, uh, it was wartime, time for victory gardens. My father was always a gardener. So not only did he plant flowers, we were on the first floor in the back part of the apartment house and, uh, there was a space there [gestures with hand] that was not all that nice and he started planting flowers there all over the place. And then, he had, uh—that was being [unclear] at the time—he had the city plow, uh, a nearby a vacant lot and he started, uh, um, planting vegetables there. And he kept on doing it even after the war because he—I remember he got some seeds from Italy to plant in there. [Laughs]

JP: So you ate well? [Laughs]

AB: Oh yes, oh yes. We always ate well. My, my, my mother was a, a very good cook. And, uh, my present wife is also an excellent cook. [Smiles and inhales sharply]

JP: And did, did his friends come by after he came out from Petawawa and Fredericton? Did they come by? Did they talk about it? Do you remember if he, uh...

AB: Oh, well they must have talked about it, but, uh, I don't really remember the details. I wasn't, uh, part of the conversation so much, uh, and they generally they, they talked about—they had other things to, to, to talk about I think, uh.

JP: Was it something that, uh, as time went on and you got older did he ever feel that he should talk to you about it? When he got older—when you got older rather.

AB: Well, no I mean it, uh, it came out naturally sometimes in the conversation, but, uh, we didn't make a big thing out of it. I mean he did express, uh, that well, he didn't like it too much, uh, naturally. [Laughs] But, uh, on the other hand, it was war and, uh, uh, they weren't badly treated in the—they were well fed and, uh, they were kept comfortable, nothing to do with, uh, whatever internment camp there were even among the Allies in Europe or England or elsewhere. I mean the, the co—the, um, circumstances were better—well actually Petawawa and Fredericton where they went, uh, were actually military bases. And, uh, I've never been to Petawawa, but I've been to, uh, uh, the Fredericton base, uh, several times as a professor at the Collège militaire and, uh, well...it's a military camp, that's it.

JP: Is there anything there that, uh, marks the, uh, the internment camp that was there at the time?

AB: No.

JP: Is there anything?

AB: No.

JP: How do you feel about that that there's nothing...

AB: [Sighs heavily] I really didn't really think much about it, to tell you the truth. Uh, my father rebuilt his business, we, uh—the whi—uh, life went on or developed, uh, peacefully enough and, uh...there wasn't, uh, much to say about that really.

JP: Your father, did he—your father was a proud Italian.

AB: Oh yes, definitely.

JP: But—and he was a member—he was, um—what did he tell you he was in the—in terms of the organization here in Can—in Montreal?

AB: Well, before the war I knew he was, uh, the, uh, secretary to the *fascio* naturally, which was, uh, an organization, uh, to keep Italians, uh, acquainted with Italy more than like a political question that there—in fact I know that there were some, uh, uh, some Canadian fascists, uh, and, uh, my father couldn't stand them because they were political. And, uh, no, uh, and after the war naturally, uh, well, uh...he had other things to do and, uh, he, he maintained his contacts in the Italian community because he had friends there. We did go back occasionally to the Casa D'Italia, mostly to eat in the restaurant downstairs. And, uh—but, uh—and we had quite a few friends among the Italians, both—some in the Little Italy and some who were living elsewhere around Montreal also. Uh, but, uh, it was mostly, um, friend—uh, friendship.

[00:20:16]

JP: Do you think it played out differently depending on, um...the social class that people had? Because somebody—like your father was a businessman, he was educated and—

AB: And he had lots of con—

JP: [Unclear]

AB: He had lots of contacts in the business world in Montreal also.

JP: Right, he was connected into—

AB: Yeah. [Nods]

JP: — he was plugged into Montreal.

AB: Yes. [Nods]

JP: Not just into the Italian colony.

AB: Ab—absolutely.

JP: And, so that was one scenario, whereas maybe, um, somebody else who was not, uh, at that—uh, who had that, uh, rank in Montreal, it played out completely different. So—

AB: Probably, I wouldn't know.

JP: Yeah, no, you wouldn't know that, but I'm just saying—

AB: [Nods] Oh yeah.

JP: —that must have had—that's—

AB: I was lucky. I mean we were lucky. In a, in a certain way we were lucky. I was lucky anyway.

[Laughs]

JP: Yeah, because you were able to go on and—

AB: Yeah.

JP: —I mean you've had a very successful, uh, career as a professor.

AB: I think so. [Laughs]

JP: So, it, it was a, it was a different situation. And did your, um—what do you think it meant in those days for those men to be part of the *fascio*? What did that represent to them?

AB: Uh, I don't know. Some of them were really enthusiastic. I've known a few who seemed to be very enthusiastic about, uh, what [Benito] Mussolini was doing in Italy and from afar he seemed to be doing good. I mean he put, uh—from an economic point of view, he reorganized the country and at the beginning of his, uh, reign anyway. Uh, and we were not very—I don't think that here it was very, uh, evident, uh, the, uh, darker aspect of his, um, uh, rule. So that, uh...*il fascio* and the other organization in the Italian community were more a question of patriotism as Italian than anything else. I think so. [Shrugs] Because, uh, my father was active in, uh, the Canadian community and, uh, politically he was, uh, involved, uh, uh—well, I, I don't mind saying he was involved with the Liberal Party and he knew some of the, uh, elected, uh, members, uh, and, uh, helped in, uh, in election time, um, because he thought that was the party that was leading Canada the proper way. [Holds out arms in defense] I don't want to get too much—too involved in the political question. [Laughs]

JP: No, no, but it's—it was, like you said, it's, it's so long ago, but in any case I mean he was, uh, he was a Canadian citizen...

AB: Oh yes.

JP: ...your father.

AB: Well, don't forget that my father came—that's something that yeah—my father came to Canada in 19...12, I think...it was. Uh, he enrolled in the Canadian Army, uh, in the First World War. And when Italy in 1915, uh, came into the war on the side of the Allies, uh, he asked to be transferred to the Italian Army. And he made the war in the Italian Army mostly in, uh, around Greece and Albania, uh, where the Italian, uh, the French and English were, uh, fighting against, uh, Austria in the, in those parts. Uh, and but, uh—and he had his cit—his Canadian citizenship since about that time, I don't know. [Shakes hand in uncertain gesture] So he was at least, uh—well it takes, uh, 17—well he must have had his, uh, Canadian citizenship by the time he got enrolled, something like that, I don't know how—what were the rules at that time to become Canadian citizen, but he was a Canadian citizen.

JP: He was also, he was also friends with a Consulate here right? With the—

AB: Well, naturally, uh, especially since he was involved, uh, quite, quite involved, uh, in the, uh, Italian, uh, community. And he was naturally, uh, serving the *fascio*, it was normal that he would have contact with the Italian Consul. Uh, who as a Consul representative of Italy would have been interested whatever the, uh, system in Italy as a Consul would have been interested in, uh, the Italians present in Montreal. It's normal enough.

[00:25:20]

JP: Was it considered a tight community back then? Like with people helping each other quite a bit in the Italian colony?

AB: I th—I, I, uh...I'm not sure. I, I...I wasn't involved in, uh, in those things even as a kid I wasn't, uh—but I think there were organization to get the Canadian Italian—well, there was Casa D'Italia for instance. And, uh, there was, uh, another organization, uh, I Figli D'Italia, uh, who, uh, uh, tried to help the Italians probably get them together and help those who needed help, that's for sure. But I don't know, I don't remember much about that.

JP: But it's interesting because I'm just thinking if I was, I was part of that group and I would meet you, um, you were, you were not the norm—

AB: No.

JP: —of the Italian kids in any way, shape or form.

AB: No.

JP: [Laughs] Right? So...

AB: Absolutely.

JP: No.

AB: I was, uh, I was more within the Canadian and French Canadian, uh, group than the Italian group, there's no doubt about that. [Holds hands in a cup like fashion to demonstrate the community he was a part of] And my whole education, my whole life was a—ax—axed[?] that way.

JP: Yeah, from your education—

AB: Yeah. [Nods]

JP: —to where you lived. To—

AB: [Mumbles] And, and well then and my work and all that.

JP: Everything was not part of the norm.

AB: Yeah.

JP: So—but yet you had, you had close friends—

AB: Oh yes.

JP: —that were, um, part of the—

AB: [Nods] Italian colony, oh yes.

JP: Yeah.

AB: Oh, I knew, I knew quite a few. And, uh, well that's how I eventually, uh, ended up learning Italian. [Laughs]

JP: Did you go to Italian school?

AB: No. [Shakes head]

JP: No. You had private lessons.

AB: Uh, not even. Well, private lessons, uh, when I was—before going to school in, uh, how to speak it, uh, and, uh, so on. At, uh—I learned Italian about the same way as I learned English and maybe more so French as a kid, uh, as a child learns a language, uh, not in books. Naturally, later on, French naturally and also English. And I did try and look up a bit of Italian grammar, but that was it.

JP: So what do you think they should have—like the way the government at that time, considering it was the war and then they, they came and they rounded up these men. Other, other people were, um, considered enemy aliens and they had to register and they had to show up at, uh, Place d'Armes once a month. Um, just the way the government handled it at the time?

AB: Uh, well, you—

JP: Looking back on it now with your wisdom that you have today.

AB: Well, I don't know. Here—uh, uh, uh, I really don't know. [Fumbles with pants] Uh, it's difficult. Uh...governments sometimes reacts strongly. Their, uh—they go wi—th-th-they go mad a bit [throws hands out by the sides of his head], a bit wild, you know and, uh, th-they're surprised. And the—things were going bad in Europe at the time, at that time. I mean, the Allies were losing, uh, France was going down and, uh, the entrance of Italy surp-surprised them or at least, uh, them took them aback and, uh...it's difficult, you know? Uh, other countries, uh, went a bit that way also. Think about the way the, uh, the Americans treated, uh, the Japanese people that were living sometimes for second or third generation, uh, in, uh, the, uh, Pacific Coast and moved them elsewhere. Uh, this was done also, uh, for Japanese, uh, in Can—in

Canada, in British Columbia. Uh, there weren't only Italians in the concentration camp, there were also some Germans...I think.

JP: Yes, ther-there were.

AB: Yeah. So you see Germans, uh, they were afraid those people, uh...could react in a way favourable to the enemy. And up till they were certain that it—this wasn't so, they'd rather keep them out of circulation I suppose. Um, yeah...you can't excuse them for doing what they did, but you...up to certain point can justify. That was a, that was a bit the attitude of my father when he came back. That, uh [long pause]—my father said, uh—thought that Mussolini was doing a stupid thing by going to war. He—before the—that happened he was saying, "They're in a privileged space. They've got contact with both sides. Why should they go to war?" But...I mean...

[00:30:41]

JP: Do you think part of that was a way of, uh, the government also showing Canadians that they were doing something?

AB: No, I don't think so.

JP: [Unclear]

AB: [Mumbles] It wasn't—um, um, they didn't, they didn't think that far. I don't think so. I think they just went, uh—there's, there's a term I want to, but I can't find it.

JP: Like an overreaction—

AB: Yes, overreaction, that's it.

JP: It was like a knee jerk reaction—

AB: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, absolutely. [Nods] And, uh, and uh, my impression—I can't swear to it—but my impression is that w—that was my father's attitude later on.

JP: 'Cause in, in some ways, I guess, they had that reaction, but then I guess it's a question of looking back on it now, um...did they go too far? Did they give a man—the men a chance? Did they allow them to state their piece?

AB: Uh, well, um, they did examine the things. Uh, they started liberating some of them one by one. Uh, it took time. And, uh, naturally, uh, if you were more involved with the Ca—Italian community, uh, you were looked at, uh, more closely, if I may say. [Laughs] It's normal enough. I don't know. [Shakes head] No, at that time mind you, uh...when the war started I was 10 years old, when it finished, well I was 15 so I mean, uh, it was a period, uh, 10, 11, 12 where you don't feel or see or those things, uh, very clearly.

JP: Yeah. No, I guess I'm asking you from today's perspective. Looking back on it now—

AB: Yeah.

JP: —you know, now you're looking at it and, um—you know—

AB: Well—

JP: —even in the way the government—sorry?

AB: You see so many—we've learned about so many horrible things, both that were gone—that gone—that had gone on during the Second World War and also in other words afterwards and elsewhere, that [sighs and shrugs] what happened to the Italians, uh, in the concentration camp was quite—not very—I mean they weren't, they weren't tortured, they were well fed, they were—I mean...the...the problem was that they were away from home and couldn't help their families. That was the worst of it.

JP: Yeah.

AB: When you think of what happened elsewhere.

JP: Do you think...the government should have done something years after to compensate those families...and the men?

AB: Well, I suppose compensation is always welcome, but, uh, uh...certainly if, if it could be established really that, uh, they had gone too far I think they should, that's for sure. Uh, but, uh, you're taking me a bit short here and talk much about it.

JP: Okay. And, and, uh, do—what kind of stories should, should people remember? Students who want to study what happened? Um, children of the families? What should they be told? What should they know?

AB: Well, [heavy sigh] uh, they should try and be told the truth, what—how it happened and, uh, its, uh—how it developed. And, uh, from there well, you get into a complexity of facts because, uh, each—for each individual it's a different story, so, uh, it all depends on the, uh, history of that particular family, that particular individual, his family, his children and, uh, what effect on—it had on them on the long run.

JP: Yeah, because I think that's what wonderful about telling stories like this, like you are today, because it helps remember what happened. It's also a tribute to, um—

AB: Yes. Yes.

JP: —that period—

AB: Oh yes.

JP: —and what went on.

AB: Oh yes. Uh, and, uh, the views are different very often, uh, uh, depending on, uh, how we've lived through that. For some people's been rough. For my mother it was pretty rough. But once it was over, it was over. Uh, for other people it may have left some long—much longer effects. [Gestures with hand]

JP: What do you attribute the resilience of your family to? 'Cause it sounds like your father was very resilient, he came back and he bounced back into work and he went at it again.

AB: Oh yeah.

JP: And your mom too and—

AB: [Shrugs] Well I don't know, uh, uh, that was his, uh, uh, his psychology, uh, that was what he was. Well mind you, uh, he had to be resilient because already, uh, leaving Italy...out of—uh, what were they, six or seven, uh, in the family, uh, in his family in Italy. Uh, leaving Italy to come to, uh, work here as an *immigré* in, uh, Canada, that took already—had all those people

who decide to leave without being really forced to—there are those who are—who want to escape something. I don't think it was my father's, uh, case. He came in because he wanted to see the world and thought he could make better here than in Italy. But he did have already an education, uh, I think he was a geographer[?] or something like that before he left and then he came in and started working as a salesman, and, uh, uh, and so on. Well, that took resilience to start with, so it's no wonder that by the end of his life, he had managed. But it did kill him I think, because he had lots of problems and so on and he eventually died of a heart attack at, uh, an age of, uh, what would be considered quite young today, 65.

JP: Did he ever visit Italy?

AB: Yes. Uh, well after the war. Naturally he had been in Italy for the First World War. He went back to Italy in 1927, I think with my mother. And afterwards, uh, I was the one to go to Italy the first, in 1951 and, uh, I was 21 at the time or something like that. And then in 1953 he went back and saw his family, his brothers, he still had brothers and sisters over there. [Joyce coughs in background] And, uh, '53, well in '55 he died. So, uh—but he was glad to go back to Italy, have a look.

JP: What was his impression after having been gone for so long?

AB: Well, I was just thinking about that, uh, something he was saying. Before going he said, "Oh, what a life is to retire on the lake of Como." [Rubs hands together] He went back over there, when he came back he say, "Things have changed. I enjoyed my trip, but I couldn't live there anymore."

JP: Interesting. [Long pause] Was it 'cause Italy had changed or was it because he had—

AB: Both.

JP: —adapted to—

AB: Both, both. Certainly he had adapted to life over here. Uh, and, uh, well Italy may have changed a bit at that—on that point of view, but I know that, uh, he was used to the—I think it was mostly because he had, uh, he had adapted—[Joyce coughs in background] listen after 19, well lets say 19...17 when he came back, uh, 17 so that gives 255, that's, uh, nearly 40 years [counts on fingers] of living here and, uh, working and in the, in the, uh, so—Canadian society.

[Long pause]

JP: Hmm. [Long pause] You didn't have grandparents here did you?

AB: [Shakes head] No.

JP: At the beginning. No.

AB: I never knew my grandparents. My grandparents were—on both sides—were dead before even I think that my parents met and married. So I never had any, uh, con—except for a picture that was [unclear]. There w—I ne—I never had any contact. On the other hand, I had uncles and aunts in Italy. Uncle in France and now, uh, I have cousins and then my wife has family in France. They're Italian, but they're established in France for a long time. So, uh, I still have contacts.

JP: That's great. But I was curious now, 'cause on your mother's side they were French. When your, when your father was, uh, interned d—um, uh, what kind of reaction was there from your mother's side of the family, from French side?

AB: Well, as I say, by that time during the war, we had no contact with them.

JP: Yeah. That's true because she didn't have anybody here.

AB: No. [Shakes head]

JP: That's right, sorry [unclear]

AB: [Laughs] No, I—

JP: At school you didn't have any problems?

AB: No, no, no.

JP: You didn't get any type of, uh, discrimination or anything?

AB: [Shakes head] No. The only discrimination I had when I, I was in primary school was, um, some of the kids laughed at me because I was rather chubby. [Laughs]

JP: [Laughs]

[00:41:05]

AB: [Laughs] That was the worst of it.

JP: Typical children, uh...

AB: Absolutely.

JP: [Unclear]

AB: Oh no, I knew—uh, in fact [laughs], I was, uh, in school at that time and among my school mates were—there was—I won't name him because [mumbles]—but there was one whom I kept on knowing because we ended up going—we were both going to Stanislas, who became, um, a minister in the PQ [Parti Québécois]. No problem. [Gestures with hands]

JP: So you had networks really spread among—amongst everyone and all different groups, it didn't matter.

AB: [Shakes head] Not at all.

JP: When you think of your father how would you describe him? What kind of a man?

AB: [Sighs] Uh...first of all, he was a handsome man. Mustache [touches finger to upper lip], not many hair [gestures to head] because, uh, it seems that, uh, the hat that they had to wear during the war was a cause of, uh, losing quite a bit of his hair—that's what I was told. [Holds hands out in defense] But, um, he was intelligent and, uh...sometimes hardheaded, but not enough that I couldn't work with him in summer in the office to the point of replacing him. Shows that I managed to acquire enough Italian to do that, to, uh, to replace him. In 1953 during the summer when he went to Italy, I held the office here and, uh, made the

correspondence even in Italian. [Laughs] But, uh, sometimes we had some, uh, fights. Not really fights, discussions, hard discussion about bus—about way of doing things.

JP: Right.

AB: Now—

JP: And for the record, your father's name? Because remember I, I—

AB: Ah.

JP: —said it wrong?

AB: Alberto Severo.

JP: Seve—Severo.

AB: Severo. Uh, not Severino or...

JP: [Laughs]

AB: ...anything like that. [Shakes head] Uh—

JP: What did he like to eat? When he came home, like what did he like to eat?

AB: Phoof [makes sound with mouth], uh [sighs], I don't know. Well, we had pasta, naturally, occasionally. My wife—uh, my mother did—made good pasta. Well, she also did, uh, good, uh, French cooking, he was used to that. Uh, it all depends. [Shrugs]

JP: I imagine he was a very well dressed man also.

AB: Yes, yes, yes. With, um, *pince-nez*. [Gestures to his glasses and his nose]

JP: With what?

AB: *Un pince-nez*.

JP: *Pince-nez*? [Unclear]

AB: [Laughs] It's those, uh—instead of having, uh, glasses like this with [points to arms of his glasses]—

JP: Oh yeah—

AB: —it's the one where you just [pinches bridge of nose]—

JP: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

AB: It holds on the nose only. [Smiles] At the time, it was...the, uh—something quite usual.

JP: And he always went out in suits and a hat and—

AB: Oh yes. Well, he was a businessman. A businessman had to be well dressed. I mean, you can't—you couldn't, uh—that wasn't, uh—at that time you couldn't go do business with an open collar shirt and, uh, the things like that.

JP: He had a car?

AB: Oh yes. We had a car before the war, and, uh, we—he picked up one, uh, well as soon as business started moving enough. We always had a car. Except during the war naturally.

JP: And during the war, um, for f-for food, you never had any problems with that? You didn't need, uh—your mother was able to, uh, feed the family obviously.

AB: Oh yes, oh yes. I had more trouble getting enough butter because of the rationing, but that was... [Laughs]

JP: Right. What places do you remember in Montreal?

[00:45:30]

AB: [Looks at Joyce with puzzled expression]

JP: What places do you re—

AB: Well, what, what do you mean by places?

JP: Places. Like did you go to Shamrock, um, um, fields where the Jean-Talon Market is today? Did you go to, uh, um, um, Madonna della Defesa?

AB: Yeah, well—

JP: Did you go to, um—

AB: We, we knew—

JP: —Madonna del Carmine?

AB: I went to Madonna del Carmine once. Uh, mostly when I, uh, had to do with the Italian church was, uh, uh, la Defesa. And, uh, well I knew some of the, uh—I, I, I remember a name for instance, which I think was well known, Padre [Benedetto B.] Maltempi.

JP: Of course.

AB: [Nods] Mm. I knew him quite well. And, uh—but otherwise, well I don't know, uh, I went to Belmont Park.

JP: Okay.

AB: Uh—

JP: Do you remember the Cosentini [Emanuele Cosentino] band? At—they used to play at Belmont Park. They used to play in—

AB: Uh, no.

JP: —uh, the, the band, uh, they did the processions—

AB: [Nods] Oh yeah, [mumbles], well I do remember the processions occasionally. Yes, I've seen the—uh, to, uh, uh, Saint-Antoine-de-Padoue, and, uh, others. In fact I-I've went to Padua.
[Laughs] I've been there.

JP: [Unclear]

AB: [Laughs] And, uh—no, uh, uh, I don't really—I've been to, oh, quite a bit all over Montreal, I mean after nearly 80 years living there [laughs] or close by.

JP: Yeah. You were saying you knew Mario Duliani?

AB: Uh, yes, I remember him. Uh, pfft [makes sound with mouth], remember him, remember seeing him, maybe meeting him yes, but, uh, no more than that. I mean he was, he was not of my age. Even when I say, I mean I was—he was older. But I think my father knew him pretty well, yes.

JP: He would do shows, right? At—

AB: [Nods] Yeah. [Pause] Well, he was a journalist also, and, uh...

JP: And, uh, you didn't go to the Italian church then, if you lived in Outremont?

AB: Uh, no. Uh...I went to—our parish church was, uh, Sainte-Madeleine. And when I moved because I was on the wrong side of the street I ended up in Saint-Viateur. But, uh, Sainte-Madeleine was two blocks away so I kept on going to Sainte-Madeleine. [Laughs] Uh, though, uh, well for instance, um [looks down at the ground thinking]—uh, there's a name escapes me there, uh [sighs]...

JP: With the church or—

AB: Yeah. Uh...Martucci!

JP: Who?

AB: Martucci.

JP: Martucci?

AB: You don't know?

JP: No.

AB: Uh, Martucci was, uh, Jean Martucci was about my age. Uh, his father was, um, *un tailleur*—a tailor. Yeah, he was a tailor. And I knew his, uh—I, I knew them very well. He had a sister also. The sister is still living I think. And, uh, he had several aunts. Uh, they lived right [gestures with hand]—uh, Saint Lawrence Street—uh, what's the street, uh, west of Saint Lawrence?

JP: Saint Urbain?

AB: Uh...

JP: Clark?

AB: Uh, must have been Clark, be—near Saint Zotique. That, uh—the streets, the streets are different there anyway. But Jean Martucci became a priest and, uh, I've always known him very well, uh, he's the one who married us when we got married and so on. And he was living out there and, uh, he was, uh...local priest, naturally. But, uh, he's one of the descendants of the Italian colony. Unfortunately he died suddenly, uh, quite young. Relatively young, I'd say around 60. Uh, heart attack again.

JP: So you don't re—you didn't go to the, uh, Madonna della Defesa then when they had the, the Mussolini covered up.

AB: Uh, I, I, I, I've been there when it was covered up.

JP: Oh, you were.

AB: Oh yes, I've been—well I had occasion of going to the Madonna della Defesa several times. For instance when, uh, uh...I think that when Jean Martucci was, uh, made priest at, uh, uh, uh, it had been at, uh, Madonna della Defesa and I went there for a funeral a couple of times. My father was buried there—when, when my father was buried, his, his funeral were at Madonna della Defesa.

JP: Did they have a big—uh, was it a big funeral when—

AB: [Nods] I think so.

JP: —your dad died?

AB: I think so, yes.

[00:50:23]

JP: I'm sure there was a lot of people who wanted to come—

AB: He was—especially since I think among a group of friends like Marizano[?], Pizzagalli and so on, and, uh, Pasquale, I think he was the first one to go. It struck them. It struck them hard.

[Long pause]

JP: Wow. What, um, what souvenirs do you have left of your dad then? What are your—'cause you were saying about the rug and...

AB: Oh [sighs], well th—those are things that are left from, uh—that came out of, of his business, but, uh—because he was there, we happened to have, uh—he was importing rugs so we had rugs. Um, the, uh...the furniture in the—in our, uh, living room there he imported that.

[Gestures to room behind him]

JP: Wow.

AB: He imported it, uh, in—unfinished. And, uh, I know that the, the—these were— those they've been remade several times afterwards, but, uh, they were made by another fe-fellow who was not Italian, though not withstanding his name Pistoro[?]. He was, uh, at one time one of the best, uh, to, uh, make up or repair furniture of quality and so on. But, uh, oh we have a few things naturally.

JP: When he came back from Petawawa he didn't bring anything eh?

AB: Oh yes, he brought back, uh, things. You know they had, they had lots of time over there. So they worked, uh, doing small things, um, boxes, uh, in wood you know, they worked wood to make little boxes, little ashtrays and things like that. And we, uh, we have—oh, he even brought back a fork, uh, about this big [indicates size with hands]—I could show it to you—uh, with three, um, tines, that, uh, is used for sp—uh, uh, when cooking spaghetti. And I'll show it to you later. [Laughs]

JP: Oh nice.

AB: We still use it. [Laughs]

JP: That's nice.

JP: And did your mother correspond with him by mail?

AB: [Nods] Oh yes. Oh yes. D—

JP: Would she read you the letters or—

AB: Uh—

JP: —she would just give you information?

AB: She gave me information, uh, mostly. Uh, they had probably some private stuff to say maybe, I mean. Not for the ears of a 10 year old [laughs], I suppose.

JP: What else? Is there anything else that, um...

AB: [Shrugs] Not really it—

JP: ...you want to talk about that, um...

AB: Uh, I'm glad that you have been asking the questions because, uh, you did it very well, because otherwise I wouldn't have known from where to start nor where to end. [Smiles]

JP: [Laughs] Your-it's your story.

AB: [Nods] I know, but, uh, you, you have to be, you have to be—to have somebody special to bring it out. Because, uh, there's so much of it on one way and so much that has been forgotten, that it takes a clue here and a clue there to, to get it out! [Gestures to his right, then left]

JP: Well, it's my curiosity.

AB: [Laughs]

JP: I'm very curious—

AB: Well, that, that's important in your job. [Points to Joyce]

JP: I think so. But, also I enjoy listening to these stories a lot. 'Cause I just—it's—I, I think it's important that these stories get told and recorded because—

AB: Yes, yes.

JP: —otherwise you lose them.

AB: Yes, and I think—

JP: Because then how do you feel the fact that you could, you could pick up any history book and this era of our, our history—

AB: [Nods] Yeah.

JP: —as Italian Mon—

AB: [Nods] In Montreal has been—

JP: It doesn't exist.

AB: It doesn't exist. No. Well, it's mentioned in fact that the probably in the history books that during the war the, uh, foreign, uh, people, uh, of ours nationality had to be, uh, taken into con—uh, concentration camp at least, uh, to make sure that, uh, they were nobody that could harm the country. Uh, it's probably as short as that that you'll find in a history book, if it's there.
[Raises finger while making point]

JP: So you're basically relegated to a footnote.

AB: Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:55:14]

JP: So how does that make you feel that your whole—you're like this whole generation is—and is—this thing that happened is just in a footnote? [Laughs]

AB: Well, uh, it happened—well it's a question of, uh—the duration of it was what two, three years depending on—

JP: Depending.

AB: [Sighs] In a lifetime, you end up by looking at other things. And I think it's good because if we were always trying to go back to that was terrible and that was, uh—if there had been something really terrible, uh, deaths, people who had been mistreated, then that's another thing. But...I don't know.

JP: I guess you're looking at it in context. You're putting it into context. You're saying, "Look at it in terms of the bigger picture," right?

AB: Well, uh, especially—uh, uh—and again it all depends on, on a personal experience. Uh, if the rest of the life has been ruined by that, then naturally it's a, it's a mess. It's something to be remembered and something that, uh, uh, probably would require compensation somehow, or at least a person would feel the need for compensation. But if things were redeveloped and apart from a very difficult period to go through, but how many people go through difficult times in their life, for other reasons completely different.

JP: Mm hmm.

AB: Uh, once they're through, if they c—always come back and come back on that, and come back on that, uh [sighs], they'll never get out of it. I don't know.

JP: There's a little bit your father's spirit too.

AB: [Nods] Possibly. Possibly, yes.

JP: 'Cause like you were saying, he just got up and he was resilient—

AB: Oh he—

JP: —and he moved on.

AB: Moved on, yes.

JP: And I'm seeing the same thing in you now. What you're saying.

AB: Well, that is what I'm saying. Maybe not, uh—I don't know if I would have been able to do the same thing. That's another question. [Smiles]

JP: Well, you know your dad, so what—how do you think he would look back at this years later and having to tell the story for future generations?

AB: Really I don't know how he would do it. I really don't know.

JP: I mean it's just a guess obviously because you're not there, but when your father—

AB: Not only is not there, but don't forget that dad died in 1955, that was 50 years ago. Mm, I have good memories of my dad, yes. I se—I have pictures in my mind at times of, of this happening or this happening [gestures to left and right] in the house, the car, the, the, the—I

see him on the balcony, see him, uh, in, in his garden. Uh, they are pictures. But, uh, to go into details after 50 years is a bit difficult. I mean it's—uh, he died in '53, we're in 19...it's uh...

JP: [Unclear]

AB: ...it's, it's 55 years that I haven't seen him, that I haven't spoken with him, that I haven't, uh... [Says softly]

JP: And I guess when people came and they talked about your father they must have talked—like there afterwards his friends, did they come and tell you stories about him?

AB: Occasionally, sometimes yes. Well for, well for instance I was mentioning, mentioning, uh, Mr. Gagliacco, he knew him very well. And naturally when we got together naturally he did talk about my father. And he could talk about him because he had, uh, experience, uh, experience, uh, with him, he had, uh, had business with him even, even before, uh, uh, when he came from—when this gentleman came from Italy, uh, and they had business together and so on. Uh, certainly with people like that, uh, people who have a history of past—have past history together will talk about it that's for sure. When I get together—together with other professors at Saint-Jean, which happens about once a year, well, what do we talk about? The old times, [unclear] especially since we talk about other people that, uh—at Saint-Jean we—there's the community of the teachers, and there's also the community of the students, who have gone ahead and whom we meet again, who are now generals. So, uh, there's a double action there. We speak about the old times, and we speak about our former students who are now doing interesting things.

JP: Mm hmm.

AB: Marc Favreau[?]. I, I, I didn't have him as a, as a, uh, a student, but I saw him because he, he went through another course other than mine and he ended up going into the, uh, uh, space.

JP: And is there anything that I missed that you'd like to talk about? Would you like to show the sp—the fork on camera?

AB: Well, it's not a very lovely—it, it—it's one of the roughest things that he did bring back, but it's the one, it's the one that we use. Well, it means that I have to go into the kitchen.

JP: Yeah, we'll stop the—

AB: Stop the camera.

JP: Yeah, stop it.

[Fades out at 01:01:23]

[Fades in at 01:01:24]

JP: Okay.

AB: Yeah, so this is the, uh, fork for the pasta, for the spaghetti, not all pasta, but for the spaghetti. [Makes stirring motion with it] Eh, it's rough, it's very rough. Uh, he br—he brought back other things, made by other people also I mean. Uh, uh, I don't know where it is now, but there was a lovely little cribbage, uh, plank, you know, for the card game? Uh, very well—with piece of wood all cut in and so on. I have on my desk above a kind of little box to put in doodads, uh, I've got some, um, paper clips in them, [unclear] now. Uh, a few other things. Oh,

what was popular at the time over there was, uh, cigarette boxes, made of wood, which open in—you must have seen some of those, uh, at uh—when you saw—when you interviewed other people.

JP: Yeah.

AB: Yeah.

JP: I never had anything like that. All I have is the [Guido] Casini, um, drawings.

AB: Oh?

JP: The drawings that I showed you—

AB: Yeah, yeah, yes, yes, yes. But—

JP: And those documents. That's all I have.

AB: But I, I, I—what you have—but you, you may have seen them, uh, must be some people around there who still have those boxes yes.

JP: Yeah.

AB: Yeah.

JP: That I never saw.

AB: [Laughs]

JP: That I never saw. That's really nice.

AB: [Places fork on table] And as I said, uh, uh, some, uh, some rowboats, you know, rowboats.

JP: Oh really?

AP: [Nods and smiles] They were, oh, they were—I, I played with them a lot when I was a kid, when he came back. But, uh, that's it.

JP: Wow. Is there anything else, um...I'm good, but is there anything else that I missed?

AB: Oh, I don't, I don't think so. I think that you've, uh, been able to, uh, get to the bottom.

JP: [Laughs]

AB: [Laughs]

JP: Okay, well thank you so much.

AB: Well, it was a pleasure.

JP: Thank you.

AB: It's the first time that I get interviewed that way.

JP: Really?

AB: [Laughs]

JP: No, it's a really good story. I'm really happy, I'm so happy that I met you. [Laughs]

AB: Well, I hope I did it all right. [Laughs]

JP: No, everything was right. It's your story. [Speaking to Adriana] All good?

[Fades out at 01:03:48]

[End of interview]