

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

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**NAME OF INTERVIEWEE:** Rita Van Brunt

**NAME OF INTERVIEWER:** John Potestio

**NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER:** Maverick Entertainment Group

**TRANSCRIBED BY:** Lisa Kadey

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**Please note that all interviews have been transcribed verbatim. The language in this transcript is as it was provided by the transcriptionist noted above. The project staff has not edited this transcript for errors.**

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**ABSTRACT**

Lori Elizabeth Rita (née Del Pino) Van Brunt was born in 1924 in Port Arthur, Ontario. During the Second World War, Rita worked at Canada Car in order to help with the war effort. Her father worked for the CPR as a machinist teacher, as well as helping to make airplane parts. He failed to receive promotions in his job, although the people that he taught did receive promotions. Rita believes this was because her father was Italian. Her father was also the first president of the Italian Society in Port Arthur. Rita talks about her father being visited by the RCMP during the Second World War, even though he arrived to Canada many years ago, when

he was only 11 years old. The RCMP asked her father about his past and about other Italians in the neighbourhood. Rita's parents hid this visit from her at the time that it happened and only told her about it when she became an adult. Rita says that when she found out, she was extremely surprised. Rita did know a shoemaker from the community who was interned, but she felt that her family did not face any real discrimination. She also says that there were a lot of things she hadn't realized about the challenges faced by the Italian community during the war.

#### **INTERVIEW**

**RV: Rita Van Brunt, interviewee**

**JP: John Potestio, interviewer**

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:10]

JP: This is, uh, John Potestio interviewing Mrs. Rita Van Brunt i—in my house at 216 Edward Place (?), Thunder Bay on June 7, 2011. Rita, as you know, this questionnaire has a number of sections, each one dealing with, uh, a particular aspect of your life. So, we'll go right into the first one, which is a bit of a background for you.

RV: Okay.

JP: Uh, Rita, can you give me your full name?

RV: Uh, Lori Elizabeth Rita Van Brunt (?).

JP: And can you also give me your birth name, or your maiden name?

RV: Uh, Rita V—uh, Del Pino (?)

JP: Thank you. Uh, when were you born?

RV: 1924.

JP: And where?

RV: In Port Arthur.

JP: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, your parents, grandparents, siblings, whatever comes to your mind?

RV: Well, um, my father was, uh, uh—and my mother were married in—quite a few years ago, uh, and of course, I don't remember that. But, um, I do, uh, remember when, uh, I was a small child. And there was my sister, Leona (?), and, uh, my ri—brother, we used to call him Sonny (?). And, um, I had a sister by the name of Valerie, whom I lost in a—an automobile accident. In fact, they put up the, um, barriers on, um, Memorial (?) after she was—and her boyfriend were killed there.

JP: Sorry to hear that. Um, uh, Rita, what do you remember most about your childhood?

RV: It was a happy one. And, uh, I had wonderful parents. I had wonderful grandparents, also. And, um, I had two uncles that were younger than me. So—on, on the Bowcache (?) side. And,

uh, my Grandma Del Pino had a very small family, uh, I didn't know some of them. Except there was my dad, and there was, uh, Victor and Ottomo (?) and, uh—I'm trying to think of all of them. Anyway, there we—the, uh, uh, my cousin—my, uh, Uncle Victor, I understand, was—died when—of a ruptured appendix when he was 11 years old. In those days, they didn't, uh, uh, have the availability to look after, uh, that kind of surgery.

JP: Right. I understand your father came from Italy?

RV: Yes. Apparently when he was 11 years old. And he came over in a boat, and apparently one of the children died shortly after he arrived, or else on the boat.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: And, uh, the on—like, I understand my grandparents had, uh, uh, five children when they came over. Uh, of course, I didn't know them.

JP: Right.

RV: I [unclear; 0:03:54.7]

JP: Your mother was born in Canada?

RV: My mother was born in Canada. My mother's mother was born in Canada. She was of French—

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: —origin, from Quebec.

JP: Okay, thank you. Now, let's move on, about your education. Uh, did you go to school?

RV: Yes, I did. I went to, um, St. Stan's (?) school. And then I—from there, I went to vocational school. And from there I went to business college. And after that, I was working. I worked at Canada Car in the office at that time. At—I didn't want to go to work at Canada Car, because it was a long distance to travel to work. But I was told that there was a war on, and you had to take—that they had first priority for anyone graduating from school.

JP: Sure. I think we'll get to that question a little—little later—

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: —so you can expand on it.

RV: Mmm.

JP: Um, what do you remember about your school experiences?

RV: Oh, I had a won—a wonderful school experiences. Uh, uh, all of—I loved all of my teachers except one. I won't go into that. [Laughs] But, uh, I was only about, uh—the first time I had her, I was only about ele—um, about ten or eleven years of age. And then I had her again when I was in junior third. And—but I had wonderful—the sisters were just wonderful teachers.

JP: So, you went to a Catholic school, then?

RV: Yes.

JP: Okay. And was that in Port Arthur or Fort William?

RV: Uh, Fort William, yeah.

JP: That's where you lived as a—

RV: We moved over there when I was five years old, because of my dad's job. He was able to walk to work from where we lived in Fort William.

JP: Okay. Now, let's move on to your, your work experience.

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: Uh, at what age did you begin to work?

RV: Well, I worked part-time in some of the stores, like, Zellers and places like that. And then as, uh—that was while I was in school. And then I started in the City Hall, I worked in the City Hall. And, uh, on the elections. I found that very interesting, 'cause we worked right where the aldermen were. And then I went to, um, business college. And from business college, I started to work over at Canada Car in the office there.

JP: So, can you elaborate a little bit more on the kind—uh, what kind of work did you do? You said you worked in, uh, in, uh, City Hall, did you say?

RV: Yes, I worked on—

JP: And what were your responsibilities?

RV: I worked on the elections in City Hall.

JP: What, what do you mean the elections? Every—

RV: Well, the elections at that time were made up by, uh—there were s—uh, little slips made up that were taken to the, uh—where they had the v—voting.

JP: Okay.

RV: And we made up the voter's list—

JP: I see.

RV: —from some of the things, uh, that were r—registered at the City Hall.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: The people that were allowed to vote.

JP: So, this was a temporary job you had, it wasn't a permanent one?

RV: Yes. No, it was just while—just preparing for the elections.

JP: Got it.

RV: Which—it took about three months to do this, 'cause things were done by hands in those days. They—

JP: Right.

RV: —they weren't done, like, by machine like they are today.

JP: Okay. And what other kind of work did you, uh, say you did? In an office you worked, as well?

RV: Yes, I worked at, uh, City Hall—um, City Hall on the elections. But when I was working at Canada Car, it was a big office, and they had, uh—I was they call the main office. There was an office in the plant, and there was also an office, a big office. Uh, which was called the main office. And I worked on the third floor. Mostly, uh, doing the pr—the price lists of the, uh, subcontractors.

JP: Mm-hm. And, uh, this was at Canada Car, you were saying?

RV: Yes.

JP: Do you remember what the factory in those days, what, what was that plant doing? Or was it—

RV: Make aeroplanes.

JP: It was making airplanes?



RV: Oh, yes.

JP: Uh, uh, did you know what kinds of airplanes? Were you interested in that kind of, uh—

RV: I did at that time, but I can't think of them right now.

JP: Right.

RV: Yeah.

JP: But they were war—war planes, were they?

RV: Oh, yes. Yes.

JP: Yeah.

RV: Definitely, yeah.

JP: And you were saying that you—that your dad worked, uh, at Canada Cars, as well?

RV: No. He did come—he did contracts for the Canada Car. He worked for the CPR.

JP: Oh, I see.

RV: He was actually a teacher, a machinist teacher. He was quite brilliant. Yeah, it was surprising, like, um, there was many people that he taught got promotions where he didn't. And I think it was because he was Italian.

JP: And this is during the war years? That he—

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: —he did these contracts?

RV: Yeah.

JP: Okay, we may be able to elaborate on that a little bit more later. 'Kay, can—let's move on to your neighbourhood now.

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: Um, where did you live in, in Thunder Bay at that—as, as a child growing up?

RV: At, uh, I, in—when I lived out then, I live on what they called John Street (?). It was between Dee Street Park (?) and the, uh—a baseball park. And, uh, there was a lot of activity around there. There also was a swimming pool right in our backyard. And we used to hang our swimming pool—our, uh, swimsuits on the line until they—we lost a few, because they were taken into the swimming pool. [Laughs]

JP: I see.

RV: And, uh, so we had to quit doing that. We had to dry them on the banister.

JP: And, and in terms of the people who lived in that neighbourhood, uh, what—were there many, uh, ethnic groups in your neighbourhood? People from other part—

RV: No, no, there wasn't. There were mostly Irish and, uh, mostly Catholic people.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: Uh, a lot of Irish people lived there. There was also, uh, not—a lot of non-Catholics because there was, uh, a Drew Street School (?) lived, uh—people lived around that area, also. So, we had a lot of Protestant friends as well as Catholic friends.

JP: Uh, was your neighbourhood fairly far from Italian organization or Italian church or anything like that?

RV: Yes. We weren't near—we weren't there close to that. We were—actually, we went to St. Patrick's Cathedral. At that time, it was just a church.

JP: Right.

RV: And, uh, we used to go to St. Pat's from there. But, uh, no there wasn't.

JP: Okay. Now, as you were growing up, did you live in a house, an apartment building? How would you describe your—

RV: We always had a house, pretty well. We had an apartment for a short period of time until my parents found a house for us. But, uh, we lived in a small cottage on John Street, and, uh, it was of—an ideal location for a family, because we had the park—Dee Street Park, the swimming pool, and the baseball park, and the, and the, the arena rink right in that area.

JP: You called it a cottage. What do you mean by cottage?

RV: Uh, it was a two-bedroom.

JP: Like a bungalow, more?

RV: Yes, yeah.

JP: And was it already built, or did your father build it?

RV: No, it was already built. It was a home that he, that he bought. We moved to, um, Fort William, and stayed in an apartment until he was able to find a house that he felt appropriate.

JP: Okay. You lived in that house until you got married, then? Pretty well?

RV: Yes, I, I guess I did. But, uh, we had moved after, um—well, quite a few years after he became a subcontractor for the air—making aeroplanes.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: And he had about five men working for him. And he used to, uh, contracts, these aeroplane parts. And the thing was, my mother would run the, the pieces down on a lathe.

JP: Mmm.

RV: And then—in a rough way, and my dad would put the finishing touches on it. But at the same time, he was working at the CPR.

JP: Okay. Your father did this work, uh, finishing work, uh, in, in his basement? Or in his backyard?

RV: Yes, yes. In fact, the lathe was in the kitchen for a while. [Laughs]

JP: Is that right? Very interesting. And this w—w—work was for Canada Car, then, you were saying?

RV: That's right.

JP: Okay.

RV: The war was on at that time.

JP: Right, right. Okay, let's focus a bit on your social life. Uh, what kinds of social activities were you involved in?

RV: Oh, I belonged to—

JP: As, as a teenager, as an adult?

RV: Yes, I belonged to several organizations. Uh, I was president of the CWL at one time, and also St. Joseph's Hospital Auxiliary. I was also, um, president, uh—I belonged to the Girl Guides, and I belonged to, um, the Italian organizations, both of them. And, uh, of course, the Da Vinci wasn't there when I was very young.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: But, uh, I belonged to both of the Italian organizations.

JP: You mean, the Da Vinci wasn't there where you lived? Because the—

RV: Yeah, but it wasn't there when I was lit—young.

JP: Right.

RV: It was there as I became a teenager.

JP: Right. Because the society itself was founded in 1909. I think you mean that it was in the east end—

RV: That's right.

JP: —and then it was moved.

RV: Right.

JP: That you could—

RV: There was a building of—the, the new building that they had.

JP: Right.

[0:15:00.0]

RV: I think there was an organization before that—

JP: Oh yes.

RV: —but I was not aware of it at that time.

JP: You were not aware that there were two Italian organizations in the city?

RV: Only the—I knew about the Italian one in Port Arthur.

JP: Port Arthur.

RV: Yes. In fact, my dad was president—

JP: Yes.

RV: —of that organization. In fact, he was one of the founders.

JP: He was one of the founding members.

RV: And he was their first president.

JP: Yes.

RV: Yes.

JP: Indeed, yes, he was. I, I did some work on the Italian society.

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: And I interviewed your dad, actually.

RV: Mmm.

JP: Okay. Uh, so you were involved in a number of clubs and, uh, uh—church clubs as well, or were you just, uh—

RV: Church, and the hospitals.

JP: Okay.

RV: Mostly. And Girl Guides.

JP: Oh.

RV: You know.



JP: So, v—very active, then.

RV: Mmm.

JP: Uh, did you attend, uh, church services? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

RV: Yes. I was a regular at St. Pat's church when I was a child. And then I started going to other churches, Catholic churches, uh, according to where I was living. I lived close to St. Pat's church when I was very young, and of course, I went there fairly steady. But I—when my husband, when I married my husband, I was moved to Calgary, and I had to go to churches in Calgary. And then, he was moved to Montreal, and I went to some of the churches in Montreal.

JP: Okay. And you, you said you were a Roman Catholic all your life, of course?

RV: Always.

JP: Yes.

RV: Yes. In fact, my husband was a convert.

JP: Oh, I see.

RV: Yes, and he became very active in the Knights of Columbus.

JP: Oh yes.

RV: As he got—as he was—became older.

JP: Okay. And Rita, did you belong to any sporting clubs...in your younger years?

RV: Well, I, I, I, uh, didn't belong to any sport clubs, but I did play, um, uh, baseball and things like that.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: Uh, we used to—in the schoolyard—the, the schools each had their own baseball team, and we would play with St. Peter's and Ogden Street school, and, uh, that's, uh, about the limit of, uh, my, uh, career as a sports person.

JP: Okay. And, uh, what kinds of things did you do for fun, do you remember? Say, as a teenager?

RV: Yes. I, I, uh, I roller-skated, and I played baseball, and, of course, I went to Girl Guides. And I did, uh, I did a lot of volunteer work. When you belong to these organizations that I became president, naturally you do so—a lot of volunteer work. Like, I volunteered in the hospital. I volunteered, uh, in, uh—wherever I was doing, where I was. I belonged to the, um, CWL, for instance.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: And they do a lot of work. And, uh, of course I became involved in those things.

JP: The CWL, uh, organized activities for, say, teenagers? For dances, for example? And—

RV: Yeah, the, the Catholic Women's League.

JP: Right.

RV: And, uh, they were—they've be—they're very active today.

JP: Yes.

RV: Yes, they do a lot of very good work. I don't go as much, and I still belong, but I don't do—I'm not that active anymore, 'cause I'm not able.

JP: Sure. Okay, Rita, let's, uh, move on to your family life now.

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: Um, when did you marry?

RV: Ooh. [Laughs]

JP: Approximately.

RV: Um, well, I was 19 when I got married.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: And I was born in 1924.

JP: So, so in 1943, then? Just right about [unclear; 0:19:09.7]

RV: Yes, that's probably—around that time, I guess.

JP: Okay. And how did you meet your husband?

RV: Well, we had mutual friends, we—uh, I had just come back from a vacation out We—from out West, and, uh, there—when I got home, my parents, uh, had visitors from the States. And, so—a lot of these people had been friends of my family, and they were getting together. And we—they used to call themselves the Macker ga— Macker Avenue (?) gang. And, uh, so we—they started, we started partying together. But I got waylaid, because, uh, before I got too involved, because I had got a—when I had come back from a vacation in Vancouver, my mother was very upset, because she saw a lot of people there that had had smallpox. So, and they were badly scarred. And she was very upset about this, so I was 16 when I got my first vac—uh, vaccination. Which I found extremely painful.

JP: And you told me, uh, in our pre-interview, that your husband was, uh, not Italian. He was of, uh—

RV: No, no.

JP: —German background, was he?

RV: He's—his mother's Irish, right from Ireland. And, uh, his father was, uh, American-Dutch.

JP: Mm-hm. And then you also told me that he served in World War Two as a pilot?

RV: Yeah, he, uh, he was not a pilot. He w—he was a wireless air gunner.

JP: Oh, I see.

RV: Yes. Yes, he did—he, uh—and he was, uh, stationed at, uh, Dorval Airport, which, uh, transported aeroplanes across the ocean, which was usually new. Even the guns were wrapped. Uh, to, uh England, and from there of course, they were used from there.

JP: Okay. Uh, can you tell me a little bit—uh, a little bit about your children, how many and you—uh, something about their life, just a little bit about their lives?

RV: Yeah, I have six children. I have four boys and two girls. And, uh, the four boys are electrical engineers. The two girls, one is really self-educated, and she is a secretary for the Catholic school. Um, one of the Catholic schools, St. Pat's. And my other daughter has become a Doctor of Psychology in the University of Windsor.

JP: Thank you. Uh, moving on to politics. I'm not sure if this is applicable to you, but I'll ask the questions anyway.

RV: Okay.

JP: Were you involved in any political organizations or groups throughout your life?

RV: Yes, I was a, a member of the Liberal Party—

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: —most of my life.

JP: Okay.

RV: Yeah.

JP: Uh, an active member? Were you involved in, in, uh, campaigning for example, for, for candidates, or—

RV: Well, I wasn't as involved as my mother wou—and dad were. Um, they were—my mother particularly was president of the Ladies Liberals. And so, she was very involved. But I, more or less, was involved because she was.

JP: Okay.

RV: But we used to have, um...uh, parties of sorts for the Liberal Party in our house.

JP: Oh, I see. Interesting, okay. Now, do you remember whether the Italian government was active in your neighbourhood at all, in the—especially during the war years, or even before that?

RV: Oh, always, very active people.

JP: What kinds of things were—

RV: Oh, well, they would—they were build—they—Italians are builders.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: And, uh—

JP: But I'm referring to the Italian government, or the Italian—

RV: Oh, the gover—Italian government—

JP: [unclear; 0:23:22.3]

RV: No, I don't remember. I only remember the organizations. I don't remember the Italian—in fact, I would love to go to Italy someday, I still have never got there.

JP: Never did have an opportunity, okay.

RV: Never had an opportunity, no.

JP: So, they, uh, as you grew up as a young woman, you didn't hear about any Fascist organizations or—

RV: No.

JP: No, okay.

RV: No.

JP: That's good. Now, in your opinion, uh, how did the Italians get along with non-Italians in your neighbourhood? Or actually, the city, your neighbourhood and the city?

RV: Oh, very good, yeah.

JP: Uh, prior to the war, and then during the war and after the war?

RV: It was the same, it was—people seemed to be very understanding of it. Uh, of all different nationalities. Only—the only time we were really aware was in school, when we had to stand up, “Are you Irish, are you Italian, your parents Italian? Are your parents Irish, are they—” you know, “Are your parents Scotch?” Things like that, that's the only time that we were aware of it.

JP: So, you ac—in the, in the schools, you were actually asked your nationality by your teachers?

RV: Yes, yes. That was true.

JP: And for what, what purpose would—was that?

RV: I don't know. Um, I don't think any of us really were aware. We just naturally thought that was something they had to know.

JP: At that time, you didn't feel that that was out of the ordinary, like, being asked—

RV: No, no.



JP: Okay. So, European people, then, got along well? Italian people, I'm referring to.

RV: Oh, oh, yes. All, all the young people were very, uh—'cause you're—there was Slovaks, there was all kinds of nationalities, especially in, in St. Stan's school. There, there was every nationality you can imagine. There was Irish, there was English, there—

JP: Right.

RV: And th—they were at, at loggerheads at some times. [Laughs]

JP: Right.

RV: You know, with each other. Uh, even more than the Italians are with them.

JP: So, when, when Mussolini declared war, uh, on the British Empire in 1940, was there any talk in your neighbourhood about, you know, the war, Italy being at war against Britain, and of course, against Canada?

RV: No, um, we out—we thought that they were a separate entity. We di—we weren't, uh—Canada was...we have to realize, too, that years ago, when my grandparents came across, they came by boat. Took them months, a month or so, sometimes to get across. And it—and then by that time, with that—the aeroplanes came in, the aeroplanes were a new thing.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: They weren't, uh—I mean, we were—I can remember seeing the first aeroplane in the air. And we all got excited because there was an aeroplane in the air. I can remember as a very

small child going to New York with my parents, and they took me to an airfield. And as a small child, there was an aeroplane coming in, and of course it was dropping as we're walking along the path. And I tried to run away from that plane, 'cause I was only five years old. And I was running with the plane, when, when it kept coming down. It was something I had never seen.

JP: Sure. Now, how would you describe, uh, your experiences during the Second World War? Do you have any memories at all of, uh, what was happening in your community during the se—during the war?

RV: No—

JP: Or any talk in your family, uh, from your dad or your mother or siblings?

RV: No, uh, no, uh, I understand after I got older, they explained to me that he had been visited by mounted police, and asked some, uh, questions, although he was only eleven years old when he came over from Italy. But, uh, I never ev—realized that that was even going on, though I was a teenager. It was hidden from me as a young person. And that's the only—I found that out later on, uh, after the war was over, that, uh, the mounted police had actually visited my dad and asked him a few questions about his past.

JP: Okay. We'll likely get to that point a little further on. Uh, but interesting you say that, uh, you didn't know too much about that, as if your parents didn't talk about it.

RV: That's right.

JP: Can you—do you sense why they didn't talk about this issue, which would have been, uh, uh, a major issue for a lot of Italians at that time?

RV: Yeah. Well, it was such a shocking thing, actually, for my mother, who was French-Canadian.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: Even to her, uh, to have the mounted police come and start asking, uh, questions. It, it was a shock to my mother and my dad. But, um—'cause they—we never thought about ourselves as Italian, except that we had an Italian background, I had an—Italian grandparents that were beautiful grandparents. And we never thought about, uh—and my—I also visited my French grandparents. We just never th—thought anything about it.

JP: Okay. Now, ca—can you tell me anything about the experiences of, of your relatives during the war years? Do you know anything about that?

RV: Uh—

JP: Uncles, aunts, or grandparents?

RV: No, I—it was strange that, uh, they interviewed my dad, but I don't think they even interviewed my grandparents. I never heard anything about them being interviewed. So, it was kind of a, a surprise when I was, uh, actually when the war was over, my grand—my parents told me about it.

[0:30:00.0]

JP: What, what is surprising to you, if I may interpret your, uh, feelings about this? Now, your father was only eleven years old when he came.

RV: That's right.

JP: And yet he was declared an alien, an enemy alien—

RV: Yes.

JP: —by the authorities, but your parents—grandparents, sorry, who had been here before, they were not.

RV: No, not that I know of.

JP: Not that you know of.

RV: If they, if they were, they, they, they hadn't mentioned it to me, but I—they—my parents did tell me after I was grown up and married, that that had happened.

JP: That that happened, yes.

RV: Yeah.

JP: And how do you feel about that now, about the fact that your father was declared an enemy alien? Do you have any thoughts about that?

RV: No, I—well, I, of course, I was, uh, shocked, actually, when I found out that he had been interviewed, 'cause he was eleven years old—

JP: Right.

RV: —when he'd come over. My goodness, uh, what can a child of eleven years of age tell you anything about their past, yeah, in an—in another country?

JP: Certainly.

RV: Each—only thing—he did tell me some wonderful stories, in fact, he wrote his autobiography, which, uh, I found extremely, uh, interesting, because it told me all of the s—surprise things that happened to him, and some of the things that happened to him before he was eleven, yeah.

JP: Now, your father was the first president of the Italian society of Port Arthur. Um, did that bring him into contact with, um, um, the authorities? Did, did they question him about that, uh, do you have any recollections of that?

RV: No, I don't ever remember that.

JP: Okay. Now, um, the Italian community faced a lot of challenges during the war years, obviously, they were the enemy.

RV: They're probably things I never realized.

JP: Yeah.

RV: In, fact I was extremely, uh, surprised when I found out about my dad being interviewed. [Laughs] I always thought the only people that were interviewed would—were the Japanese people from Vancouver—

JP: yes.

RV: —that were shipped from the West to Scriber (?).

JP: Yes.

RV: Uh, which were—

JP: You're referring to the internment camps, that were [unclear, 0:32:23.6]?

RV: Yeah, there were internment camps for the Japanese people.

JP: Right.

RV: Which I was quite shocked at, because they were strangers to us.

JP: So, you, you were not aware at the time of how the Italian community attempted to meet these challenges? You didn't think about that at the time?

RV: No.

JP: It's only afterwards that you realized what—

RV: Realized that it had happened.

JP: Okay. Do you have any sense as to whether the Italian community was united or divided over the war issues? Do you have any reading about—understanding of that?

RV: No, I, I don't—I did, I did realize that people, uh, of Italian descent, some of them—and that they had come over and they hadn't been na—naturalized, and I understand that they—their interviews were a little bit more involved than what my dad's was.

JP: Okay.

[Fades out at 0:33:25]

[Fades in at 0:33:26]

JP: Now, Rita, um, you mentioned earlier that your father was, uh, declared an enemy alien and had to report to the authorities. Um, do you know whether they provided, um, any evidence, was it—how did they justify that to him, do you know anything about that?

RV: Now, apparently they interviewed all of them, there was like a Mr. Vanderway (?), and my dad, and there was, um...some other people that they interviewed. They interviewed all the different Italian—and I think Mr. Vanderway was actually Dutch, and he was interviewed.

JP: Okay.

RV: Yeah, they—the pen—apparently the mounted police did this interviewing. But I wasn't even aware that it was happening.

JP: Okay.

RV: And it was strange, too, because my dad ended up making the parts for the aeroplanes and [Laughs] —and you know, uh, strangely, they really trusted him, you know, in spite of the fact that they did these interviews.

JP: Yeah, there was a bit of an irony.

RV: Yeah.

JP: Here's an individual who's helping the war effort—

RV: Yeah, yeah.

JP: —and yet he's, he's—

RV: He was making the aeroplane parts, yeah.

JP: Yeah, and he's declared an enemy alien.

RV: Yeah.

JP: Now, do you know to whom, uh, your dad ha—was—uh, had to report, was it the RCMP, was it—

RV: It was the mounted police.



JP: Mounted.

RV: They came to the house, apparently, according to my parents. They didn't tell me anything until after it was all over. But I know it ca—it upset them quite a bit.

JP: So, you, you wouldn't know what kinds of questions he was asked, then?

RV: No.

JP: Okay.

RV: I think they were more or less asking, um, about other people that were immigrants.

JP: Oh, I see. Okay, like, like if he knew other immigrants who, uh—what do you mean by that?

RV: Well, people like, uh...there were some people that were not naturalized.

JP: Oh, okay

RV: And, uh, they seemed to be extremely concerned about those kind of people, that were not naturalized. So, naturally, they asked questions about those people.

JP: Okay. Do you know whether there were any restrictions placed on your father, like, travel restrictions or anything like that?

RV: No, but the—there was—the only thing was, there was—the only time we ran into any bigotry was with my dad working at the CPR. He became the teacher of all the machinists that were, uh, working for the CPR, but they were the only ones that got the promotions, and my dad never did. Even though he was their teacher.

JP: And you felt that that happened because, because he was an Italian?

RV: That, uh—that's what I understand.

JP: Mm-hm. Now, uh, for how long did your dad ha—have to report to the police, do you remember?

RV: No, I think it was just a—an interview at the beginning of time. I don't think there was anything involved after the interview. 'Cause and—'cause he was making aeroplane parts for them, and kept on working a—at the CPR. There was nothing—

JP: Yeah.

RV: —that seemed to interfere with our lifestyle, although I think it worried my parents.

JP: I—it—wh—how do you mean by that? Worried about what, that he might lose his job?

RV: Well, how far are the—they going to do their interviewing now? That's the only thing. But why, you know, they have to ask themselves, why is this happening?

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: It never was important before.

JP: So, that must have worried them—

RV: A bit, yeah.

JP: —the fact that he was—yeah. Okay...now, do you—uh, you would have no recollection of how the authorities, the mounted police, treated your dad, whether they were polite or rude or—

RV: They were very polite.

JP: They were very polite, and this is—

RV: They were very polite, yes.

JP: And how do you know this, your father told you?

RV: Yes.

JP: Okay.

RV: My father and my mother both told me.

JP: I'm wondering whether the fact that he was the president of the—and very involved in an Italian organization, whether that had some—anything to do with the way he was treated?

RV: Oh, probably, probably. And they also needed him.

JP: Mmm.

RV: They needed him to make the aeroplane parts. He had five men that he had working for him, uh, to make aeroplane parts. That was important to them, too.

JP: Right.

RV: They needed him.

JP: You also mentioned to me during the pre-interview that your uncle was, uh, working in, in the same plant, was he not? Your sister, as well?

RV: Yes, my sister worked in the same plant. I did. And, uh, I had an uncle that worked there, yes.

JP: And do you know how they were treated in, uh—

RV: Yes.

JP: —in the plant?

RV: Yes, they were ver—they were very respected. They were—respected them for their crafts, eh?

JP: Your sister worked actually making planes, is that what you were telling me?

RV: Yeah, she worked, uh, uh—well, she worked in the office in the plant.

JP: Oh, okay.

RV: Yes.

JP: So, she was not—she's—

RV: There was an office in plant, as well, as the—what they called the main office.

JP: Okay. Now, when your father was declared an enemy alien, do you know whether—how the Italian community reacted to that? Do you have any, any feelings or recollections about that? Did he ever talk about that, how—

RV: No, no, I don't ever remember, um, people talking about it very much. There—everybody's lives went on the same as they had always gone on, and, uh, no, I didn't think there—I guess the people that were, uh, interned, it was very important to them. And there were—some of the people that were interned, I was quite shocked, because I thought they were, uh, naturalized Canadians also.

JP: So, you knew people from the Italian community who were interned?

RV: Yes.

JP: And—

RV: One was a shoemaker.

JP: Yes?

RV: Uh, he lived, uh, just a couple of streets from us. Uh, I didn't know anybody else that was, but I understand there were some that, uh, were interned.

JP: I think the official record indicated there were two from Thunder Bay that were interned, but you knew one of them, a shoemaker. I think I, I know whom you're talking about.

RV: Oh.

JP: Um, so did these, uh—your family talk about the internment issue at all? Uh, or the Italian community?

RV: Well—

JP: About these internees?

RV: Well, they—we were shocked, because, uh, we thought they were Canadian the same as we were, naturalized Canadians. But I think most of the time, if they weren't naturalized, it was more a case of not bothering to do it, not because it was a deliberate act. I think it was just a case of people that neglected to go further with their, uh, immigration.

JP: Right. Okay, um...if I could move on towards this issue of discrimination. A lot of Italians faced discrimination during the war years, not only because they were interned and, uh, declared enemy aliens, but other forms of discrimination—

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: —such as loss of work and, uh, discrimination at the worksites and whatnot. But how did your parents, uh—did they experience any dis—discrimination during the war? Parents, grandparents, uh, [unclear; 0:41:35.6]?

RV: Well, my grandparents, I think, did. Uh...he worked, uh—he, he did get, uh, uh, work from, uh, other Italian people. Uh, he was, uh, he worked for the Dolcettis (?)—

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: —one, at one, uh, point. Uh, 'cause I think my grandmot—grandfather was an experienced machinist, too. But, um, I don't—I'm not too much aware of what happened with my grandparents or my uncles.

JP: So, you, you didn't feel that you yourself or the family experienced any, any, um, obvious form of discrimination—

RV: No.

JP: —during the war years, okay.

RV: No, just childish things, you know. Children tease each other about things like that.

JP: Okay. Do you or—recall how your parents or grandparents, um, uh, how they met the challenge of discrimination or other challenges? Were they—was there any talk about that, by your dad or your family?

RV: Yes. I have—I had an uncle who was very ill. And, uh, he...he happened to be born—he must have been an infant when he came over. And he was born in Germany, and I don't think that particular uncle took out any papers. And so when he got sick, they wanted to send him back to Germany. But I—my grandparents paid quite a bit of money to make sure that he stayed in a hospital in Canada.

JP: And, did this happen during the war years, from—

RV: That was even before the war years.

JP: Before the war.

RV: Yeah.

JP: Okay, we'll move on to the last, uh, section of this questionnaire.

RV: Mm-hm.

JP: And that's the...post-1943 years. Now, after this whole issue of, of, uh—

RV: War.



JP: —this big war, and, and internment, uh...what, what happened in their lives? What did your father do, what did your mother do, what did your grandparents do?

RV: Oh, my, my, uh, parents were extremely, uh, well-off, because, um, my dad had made parts for aeroplanes besides working at the CPR. And he had five men working for him, making aeroplane parts also. And, uh—so, they were fairly well-off. But my dad was a gambler.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: And, uh, he made some bad investments, and so there was problems in the family for, for that. But, um—

JP: So, the, the war, uh, did not disrupt their lives—

RV: No.

JP: —a lot, as far as you're concerned.

RV: No, no.

[0:45:00.0]

JP: They continued to—

RV: And I just—we were Canadian in, in every way possible. My husband was in the forces, and, uh...like, all my friends were in the forces.

JP: Okay. So, you considered to—yourself to be more Canadian than Italian.

RV: Oh, definitely.

JP: Okay.

RV: I can't even speak Italian.

JP: Okay.

RV: I did try to. I went to school for a couple of years, but you have to be in—right involved, I think, in that—in a language in order to learn it.

JP: Right.

RV: And my mother was French.

JP: Right. Uh, how did your, uh, father—or your grandparents, for that matter, how did they, uh, feel about their experiences during the war? Did they ever—was there any—

RV: My grandparents?

JP: Let's start with your grandparents, and then your father.

RV: Yeah, and though—they, they were quite comfortable with it. They, uh—in fact, they didn't—I don't think they even had to report that much, um, like some of the others.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: They, they didn't seem to be involved—like, I guess it was my dad's age.

JP: Right.

RV: That made it important. But, uh, they, they weren't interviewed or anything like that either.

JP: Okay. Uh, are you—Rita, are you familiar with the debates, uh, surrounding the internment of Italians in Canada? I'm talking about in—these days, have you heard anything about the issue, internment, and—whether on television or radio or—

RV: No.

JP: —in the newspapers?

RV: No.

JP: So, this is, uh—appears to be new to you, this, uh, this issue now?

RV: [Nodding] That's right.

JP: Okay. And, uh, therefore you have no opinions one way or another about this issue, and how it's been handled by, uh...

RV: No, I think Italian people are always very proud of their background. Um, their history is interesting to, to them, and naturally, it's interesting also to me.

JP: Mm-hm.

RV: But, um, I—I'm quite fascinated by it. And in fact, I wish I could have gone to Italy, often. But I've never made it and...never, uh, had the opportunity.

JP: Yeah. Do you know, uh, Rita, of anyone one else, who, who was affected by the internment or—or the Canadian government policies towards Italians at that time? You mentioned a shoemaker, but was there anybody else that was affected by this issue, internment?

RV: No, I can't remember that. I think the only th—issue, uh, there were people here, um, that were interned because they were captured in the war. I do know people that have come here that were, uh, actually prisoners of war. And they went home, and then they came back here to live. And, uh, they liked the place very much when they became prisoners of it. And so I know that they have come back here, I've met them. And, uh, so I have never heard of any kind of discrimination against, really, anyone anymore.

JP: Okay. Now, we've, uh, Rita, we've reached the end of, uh, of, uh, our questions, but is there anything you'd like to say that I haven't asked? Uh, any—anything in your mind [unclear; 0:48:49.9] should be part of this interview?

RV: Um, well, I, I'm very pleased that you, uh, did interview it—me. Um, you brought many thoughts that I had forgotten. Uh, I'm 87, and those thoughts are starting to fade a little bit. So, it was kind of nice to—that they were brought up, and I've been able to re—read my dad's autobiography, which I just love. It's very interesting.

JP: Yes, I read it, too. I, I don't seem to recall whether there was any mention of these, uh, war years. Do you remember that?

RV: No, uh, he didn't—he just remem—uh, at—started off his autobiography as a child in Italy. And some of his cousins and that, that he left behind when he came over, and, uh, some of their experiences. And I'm very pleased that he did, because it gives a different, uh, view to my dad for me, too. And he—it's a well-written, um, manuscript. And, uh...I've, uh—my, my son has tried to put it together as best he could. And, uh, he s—it made a kind of a, a book out of it for himself.

JP: Thank you for your thoughts, Rita.

RV: Thank you.

[Fades out at 00:50:25.6]

**[End of interview]**