



**Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens:
Memories of World War II**
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AC: Antonio Capobianco, internee

AMC: Annamaria Castrilli, National Congress of Italian Canadians

BR: Bruno Ramirez, Historian

GM: Giulio (Julius) Molinaro, internee

MM: Captain Mike Minor, Canadian Forces Base Petawawa

RE: Raphael Esposito, son of an internee Gennaro Esposito

RV: Roberto Vairo, Reporter; son and nephew of Eugenio Vairo and Giovanni Vairo

SS: Shirley Serafini, Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Multiculturalism

PART 1

RV (narrating): The story that's about to be told cannot be found in Canadian history books. It happened in 1940 when Italy declared war against the Allies. Some 700 Canadians of Italian origin were interned in prison camps. Wracked with fear and shame many refused to talk about it (Music) — until now.

(Music)

RV (narrating): The government of the day was headed by Mackenzie King and thought by some to be mired in errors of judgment which led it to an overreaction when the RCMP began arrests — arrests based on suspicion and hearsay. To some it was a witch hunt.

RV (narrating): Letters have begun arriving at the National Congress of Italian Canadians in Toronto of family members of those interned, telling their own grief-stricken stories.

AMC: Hmmm. (Reads a letter) "After about a year of internment he was returned to us — a man whose spirit had been completely broken and who was embarrassed about facing life

again in our own small community.”

RV (narrating): Built in 1904, Petawawa is a Canadian Armed Forces base nestled in the central Ontario forest north of Ottawa. During both World Wars, it also served as a prison camp.

(Music) The close to 700 men imprisoned in 1940, for up to three years were surrounded by barbed wire fences. And paintings of the day show their uniforms had a red circle painted on their backs. That’s where they’d be shot if they ever try to escape. Records show no Italian Canadians ever attempted.

MM: We’re here. You can see this [unclear] feature which seems to run straight up this way. It’s in a straight line and it may have been the, sort of inner boundary where all of the barbed wire would have been laid.

RV (narrating): Some cement foundations from the watch towers remain from 50 years ago, but otherwise it’s just bush — with no memories of the barracks built to house those interned.

(Music)

RV (narrating): The meals the men ate were reportedly well prepared since a number of Italian Canadian cooks were interned. And since most Italian Canadian doctors of the day were imprisoned, the camp was well-equipped for detection and treatment of illnesses.

While the men at Camp Petawawa were not mistreated by the Canadian Armed Forces, they were consumed with fear and anxiety. Not knowing if their family knew where they were following their surprise arrest, not knowing how their family was making out without the main breadwinner at home, and not knowing what they had done to deserve this.

The answers would normally be found in the Canadian Justice Ministry or National Defence where this originated, but the Ministry of State for Multiculturalism has been made responsible for commenting.

SS: It was the fact that they were Italian Canadians and that was the basis for uh, for singling them out, uh for, for treatment. Uh, the, the concerns were because we were at war with Italy.

(Music)

RV (narrating): Six hundred and thirty two men, and six women, most of them Canadians, were interned. They were doctors, tailors, bakers, shoe makers, carpenters, priests, and ordinary labourers. For the most part they were members of the Italian social clubs. Some belonged to the Canadian chapters of the fascist party.

The public impression was that Nazi Germany and Italy’s fascism were one and the same when historians in fact say it just was not so. The Mackenzie King government assumed just because Canadians belonged to Italian social clubs, language schools, and cultural clubs, they were

“enemy aliens” when in fact Italian fascism for Canadians was but a rallying cry — an expression of pride in their heritage.

Historians say that the RCMP was at first reluctant to round up these so called “enemy aliens” without some form of documented evidence. But the Force was soon supplied with a list of names — names provided by individuals based on hearsay, we’re told in a lot of cases, and names provided by informers — paid informers. It wasn’t long afterwards that over a 1000 agents were unleashed in Italian communities across Canada.

BR: The government uh could have been, uh, should have been much more careful before launching in an operation uh such as uh, as the one that uh, was launched. Which inevitably created a paranoia within the larger public, a kind of uh, uh, a, a witch hunt suspicion.

RV (narrating): Tomorrow on Part 2, some of the remaining survivors speak out, bitter at a government that has so far refused to acknowledge errors and admit violations of human rights of 50 years ago. Robert Vairo. Pulse probe.

End of Part 1

PART 2

(Music)

RV (narrating): They came to Canada in the early 1900s, from the deprived hills of southern Italy. They came here with a dream, a dream of helping to build a new country, a dream that hard honest work would allow them to have their own house, and their children would enjoy unprecedented freedom in a land of unlimited opportunity. A land called Canada.

(Archival clip of Mussolini speaking in Italian.)

(Music)

RV (narrating): But overnight a dream turned into a nightmare. In Rome, Mussolini declared war against Britain, technically against Canada. (Music) And in Ottawa, Mackenzie King issued the Defence of Canada Regulations, tantamount to the War Measures Act. Of the over 100 000 Italian Canadians in 1940, thousands were forced to report to authorities every month. Others like Dr. Luigi Pancaro was arrested in his office, forced to turn over medical files. Still others were awakened in the middle of the night and taken away. And still others at work, their families unaware of their whereabouts. Italian Canadian workers were told not to perform certain duties. Many were fired. Discrimination against shopkeepers was rampant, particularly those women whose husbands were imprisoned.

AC: These women had no, uh, no uh, ah, ah, social security, social assistance. Everybody was there stranded.

RV: So how did they make, how did they make out?

AC: Well, friends, ah uncles. Uh you know how the Italians were, uh then, uh family affair.

RV (narrating): Six women were interned at the maximum security Kingston Penitentiary.

AMC: We have one case of a woman for instance, who was bathing her child in the back yard and she was taken away without even the opportunity to dry that child. And they didn't see her again for three years. I mean this is the kind of thing that went on.

RV (narrating): It was a strange period. One electrician with an exemplary record with the mining company he worked for was one day told that he couldn't perform certain duties. Asked why, he was told, "Because you're now considered an 'enemy alien.'" Well in disgust, he quit; however, two days later he received a notice in the mail from the Canadian Defence Ministry telling him to report for duty at the Canadian Armed Forces.

RE: I, I used to belong to the Canadian Officers Training Corps.

RV: Yeah, but your father was interned?

RE: Yes.

RV: And considered an 'enemy alien.'

RE: I, I was, I was in the Army.

RV: Were you uh serving in the Canadian Army at the same time that your father was arrested?

RE: Exactly, yes.

RV: You find that a little ironic?

RE: Ha. Very ironic.

RV (narrating): Capobianco says the whole ordeal was a sham.

AC: The RCMP didn't have no records, they didn't know who to arrest. They got hold of three person who became informers.

RV: Paid informers?

AC: Paid informers.

RV (narrating): And historian Bruno Ramirez says the RCMP based at least part of its list on information or hearsay from within the Italian community.

BR: They had several informants which were paid. Uh some of them uh, are known historically because of uh some of the research that has been done in archives, who were Italians who had uh, uh things to settle with their enemies and so inevitably there was some vengeance so that went through that, so that you can get uh—

RV: Settling of accounts.

BR: Uh, settling of accounts. Yeah.

AC: We were the scapegoats because the government was not able—

RV: Prepared.

AC: Not only prepared. Was not able. Prime minister, just imagine we're dealing with Mackenzie King, you must have read something. He used to communicate with the spirits. He used to communicate with his dog; his dog was dead. And he was...And this guy was leading Canada at that time, just imagine.

RV (narrating): Tomorrow on Part 3, Italian Canadians seek justice from a government which so far refuses to acknowledge that bleak part of Canadian history.

RV: Is there a committee set up, do you have a time table set up as to what you're going to discuss, when, with whom, etc.?

SS: No, no. I think we're taking it one step at a time.

RV: Well, what is that....? (Fades out)

RV (narrating): Robert Vairo. Pulse probe.

End of Part 2

PART 3

(Music)

RV (narrating): The camp at Petawawa housed most of the Italian Canadians interned. They were primarily from Ontario and Quebec. There were other internment camps in the Maritimes and one on Ile Ste. Helene. Torn from their families who were left to fend for themselves under a hail of discrimination and abuse, the interned were never charged and by 1943, all had to be

released. Archives indicate the names on the list used by the RCMP to round up suspected enemy aliens was never based on documented evidence.

BR: We do have evidence uh in archives that uh even the uh Canadian authorities, uh ah particularly one high functionary, Robertson, who uh became aware of this problem and he says it in a memorandum, that uh maybe we made a mistake. We relied too much on this because some vengeance are taking place among these people so.

GM: Uh Norman Robertson was a high civil servant in the Department of Justice and he recommended picking uh selecting only the leaders of uh suspected bodies. The Mounted Police became uh, were excessively zealous in their, in their uh, in their job, and picked up more than they should have.

RV (narrating): No appeal was allowed although some prisoners were brought before a judge to answer questions. One of them, Antonio Capobianco, argued —unsuccessfully.

AC: Federal members of parliament were coming into, our community, ah befriended us, every, the house of Italy. They used to be there every week, with me, things (?), and this and that. How come suddenly we became criminals? Because Italy declare war. We're Canadian citizens; we have nothing to do with Italy; even if we're, we're uh proud of our origin.

RV (narrating): Capobianco was secretary of the Quebec Liberal Party at the time of his arrest. He and others including Raphael Esposito, Henry Padulo, and Jean Vacchino have submitted a brief to the Prime Minister.

RE: An acknowledgment that an error was made and that we're sorry. That's what we want and — (fades out).

RV (narrating): But in Ottawa both briefs by the National Congress and Capobianco's group have so far received little if any attention. While the Italian community feels the case should be dealt with by the Justice Ministry, because of alleged human rights violation, the case has been sent off to the Under-Secretary of State for Multiculturalism.

RV: Is there a committee set up, do you have a time table set up as to what you're going to discuss, when, with whom, etc.?

SS: No, no. I think we're taking it one step at a time. And uh—

RV: Well, what is that first step that you've taken? I'm still in the dark.

SS: Well, the first step that we've taken is, is to, is to try to get a better understanding uh of what happened, of the communities uh who—

RV: And how are you doing that?

SS: — felt they were affected. By looking at both the briefs that have been submitted to us, looking at other uh secondary information, in terms of uh work that's been done by historians in this field. The, start pulling together the literature review uh, all that.

RV: Have you done that yet?

SS: We are in the process, it is still not complete.

RV: Uh, huh.

SS: Uh, it's, it's not an area where all, it's all laid out in front of you. You've gotta, you've got to dig.

RV (narrating): It was suggested the job could be made easier by this list of names used by the RCMP to round up so called "enemy aliens."

RV: I don't know if you ever seen it.

SS: No, I have not.

RV: I, I don't know if you have, if you have a list of these uh names.

SS: No, I have not.

RV (narrating): Serafini eventually refused our invitation to accept a copy.

RV: WHO IS SETTING THE PACE FOR LOOKING AT THIS DOSSIER? Are these—?

SS: It's being dealt with jointly. I, I know that's unusual.

RV: But who is, who is in charge here?

SS: It is in interdepartmental. It is working mainly with us and the Department of Justice, working together.

RV (narrating): But shortly after the interview, a spokesperson for the Justice Ministry said no one from their department was looking into it and we were referred back to Serafini.

RE: I feel that an injustice was made and uh it was not repaired.

RV (narrating): Robert Vairo. Pulse probe.

End of Part 3
End of documentary