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50 years ago tomorrow, the lives of hundreds of Italian Canadians were torn apart when those suspected of being fascists were rounded up, interrogated and interned far from their homes

The day freedom ended



BY MARY SCIANNA
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JUNE 10, 1940, is a day many Italians in Canada would like to forget. On that day 50 years ago being Italian meant arrest and internment for hundreds across the country.

It was the day Justice Minister Ernest Lapointe declared in the House of Commons: "An honourable member asked what the Minister of Justice was going to do about the Italian population of Canada now that Italy had declared war... The very minute that news was received that Italy had declared war on Great Britain and France, he signed an order for the internment of many hundreds of men whose names were on the list of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as suspects. I cannot give the House the number, I have been asked by the head of the mounted police not to do this because it might hamper his work."

Across Canada, RCMP officers and civilian police forces of major cities raided the homes of thousands of Italians suspected of being fascists. There were 150,000 Italians living in Canada in 1940. The war had made the government highly sensitive to the threat of enemy aliens. The Dominion Bureau of Statistics estimated more than 9,000 Italians in Canada still owed allegiance to their mother country early in 1940. According to the bureau, these Italians were potential enemy aliens — if Italy were to join forces with Germany.

Eighty per cent of the 150,000 Italians resided in Ontario and Quebec where the largest raids were conducted. In Montreal, more than 300 men were arrested. The same thing happened to close to 300 men in Toronto. They were arrested in their homes, on streets, in restaurants and in bars.

Italians in many cities quickly became the target of racist slurs and in some cases violence. A headline in The Globe and Mail on June 11, 1940, read "Down With the Jackals," Toronto Residents Cry As Windows of Italians' Stores Are Smashed."

Kay Pavia was 18 when the RCMP came to her Ottawa home to arrest her father, Joseph Costantini.

"It was June 10, 1 p.m. I was home, my father was at the bank. All of a sudden I heard a knock at the front and back doors. They went simultaneously to all the houses so no one could warn anyone. These big, tall, burly guys came in, real Gestapo types. They said they wanted to search the house. I never even asked for a search warrant, I was so stupid. They cornered me and asked where my father was."

The RCMP search was thorough. They confiscated all Mr. Costantini's documents — letters, receipts, bills.

"They searched upstairs, downstairs. We had this closet in the kitchen and they looked in there and they saw these wires. They asked if the wires were a direct line to Italy. I said, 'No, it's the front door bell.' They said they didn't believe me. I went with one of them and I rang the front door bell. 'There you go,' I said."

At about 3 p.m. her father came home.

"They took him away and I said, 'Okay Pa, I'll see you later.' I was crying, he was crying and he said, 'You take care of the kids. I'll see you in a couple of hours.'"

Ms Pavia did not see her father for nine months. He was taken to the Carleton County Gaol, detained for a few days and then put on a train headed for Camp Petawawa.

Gino Tiezzi, a worker at Ottawa Electric (now Ottawa Hydro), was also arrested June 10, 1940. He was released Feb. 17, 1941. On Aug. 21, 1941, he was re-interned on the basis of a letter with his signature that stated he was part of the "Opere Volontarie Repressione Anti-Fasciato" (National Organization for the Repression of Anti-Fascism). Mr. Tiezzi's family suspects his name was forged by someone who had a grudge against him.

Italo Tiezzi was 6 at the time of the first arrest. Though June 10 is a sad memory, his more vivid recollection is the day his father was arrested a second time.

"The second time they came to get him, no one expected that. It was a very sad moment. I remember I was in bed and I heard my mother yell 'AGAIN!' I was just a kid and I said if they ever come back again I'm going to get the broom and hit them. In fact, I went downstairs to the shed and got the broom. My mother was saying, 'Not now dear, you can't sweep now.'"

Luigi Pennacchio, former research assistant at the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario, says few of the arrests were peaceful.

"When war came, the RCMP moved into the communities and arrested people they believed to be fascist leaders and fascist sympathizers. They derived this information from secret agents, people who were quite willing to tell on their neighbors. There were certainly some members (of Italian communities) who were actual fascists. Others were fascists simply out of expediency; they saw it as a means of facilitating their business interests."

Most of those interned were men, but some women were also kept at the Kingston Penitentiary in Kingston, Ont. Between June 20 and Sept. 19, 1940, RCMP records indicate 13 women were interned.

The majority of Italians were arrested under the War Measures Act. Homes and properties were not confiscated but some bank accounts were frozen.

In Toronto, Italian-Canadian men were taken first to the downtown Don Jail. About 300 were then shipped off to the Automotive Building at the CNE grounds and the Stanley Barracks. They joined the other Italian men who had been sent down from Northern Ontario cities such as Timmins, Sault Ste. Marie, Fort William and Port Arthur.



From COMPTON/STAFF THE GLOBE AND MAIL
Antonio DiSippio, left, of Ottawa is one of the Italian Canadians questioned by police. Antonino Mazza is translating a book written by one of the internees.

Their stay at the jails varied from a few hours to a few weeks. The men's fate lay in the hands of the Interdepartmental Committee of the Department of National Defence. The committee had a list of names and evidence of all the men who had been arrested. Upon review of the information, the committee released the men "conditionally" — having to report weekly or monthly at RCMP headquarters — or "unconditionally." The majority were released conditionally.

The lucky ones, like hotel owner Antonio DiSippio, now 91, were released after a few hours of interrogation. He recalls that during the eight hours he spent at the RCMP complex, six RCMP came in at different times and asked him the same questions.

Mr. DiSippio was part owner with Mr. Costantini of the Prescott Hotel in Ottawa. Mr. DiSippio, who was a naturalized citizen as well as a member of the Canadian Legion (he had fought in the First World War), was not interned, but his liquor licence was taken away.

"My partner was at the jail and me, what was I to do? I had no licence, the place was closed. I tried to get the licence back, but I couldn't because I was Italian. I tried to rent the place, but when the guy went to get the licence, he couldn't get it. The government told him as long as the property belonged to an Italian, there would be no liquor licence."

The men to be interned were sent to three camps scattered across Canada. St. Helen's near Montreal and Kananasik in Alberta had about 200 men apiece. Camp Petawawa, about 160 kilometres up-river from Ottawa, had 632 as of October, 1940. Of that number, 209 were naturalized and 20 were Canadian-born Italians. The rest were Italian nationals. Eight were medical doctors, one was a dentist and one was a lawyer. About half were laborers. The rest were hotel and restaurant owners, manufacturers and office workers.

Once interned, the men could appeal for release to the so-called "appeals division" — the federal government's advisory committee in the DND. It took several weeks for the applications to be processed. If the applications were accepted, the internees had to prove their innocence. For the Italians, this meant proving they were not part of the Fascist Party or the Dopo Lavoro (After Work) recreational club. The Dopo Lavoro club recruited for the Fascist Party.

Even if appeals were successful, DND records show the minister often did not accept the recommendations.

Many of the men sent to Petawawa were an important part of the Italian community — men like Dr. Vittorio Sabetta, the only Italian doctor in then isolated Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. Dr. Sabetta was the Italian

community's link to the English-speaking world. When he was arrested, his office was broken into and all medical records of the Italians were confiscated.

Camp Petawawa, about 160 kilometres up-river from Ottawa, was the oldest internment camp in Canada. It had been used to intern Ukrainians in the First World War.

Mario Duliani, a well-known Italian playwright, wrote La Ville Sans Femmes (The City Without Women), a first-hand account of his 40 months in internment.

Antonino Mazza, a Toronto poet and translator, working on an English translation of the book, Mr. Duliani writes that men from "every economic stratum, from millionaire to beggar" were interned.

On arrival, they were given uniforms and their own clothes were taken away and stored, to be given back upon release. On a visit to Camp Petawawa in March 1941, an M. Mahoney with the Canadian Legation in Washington wrote a letter to his office concerning the Italian internees.

"As regards clothing, each internee or prisoner of war is issued with leather boots, gum boots, three pairs of socks, two suits of winter underwear, two suits of summer underwear, one winter cap, one summer cap, and mackinaw overcoat, woolen, military, winter coat and trousers and summer coat and trousers, as well as various necessities such as razors, shaving brushes, etc."

They also received two extra-large shirts with rectangles on the back that could be used as targets by the armed guards if any of the internees tried to escape. Camp staff had roll calls several times a day. The armed guards on the towers and on the camp ground patrolled the wire-fenced area.

In the early months of internment, the men had little to do. That quickly changed. Camp Petawawa was located within a large bush area. Men who were able-bodied were assigned to working parties and sent 1 kilometre outside the camp to cut down trees. The less able-bodied men worked in the kitchen.

Mr. Duliani was the hospital administrator at Camp Petawawa. He writes that many of the men often pretended they were sick in order to get some days of rest. DND records show that the men were paid 1 cent a day for an eight-hour day, six days a week. They worked in the bush, on roads and in draining ditches.

The International Red Cross and the YMCA sent donations of furniture, books, games and special foods. Mr. Duliani writes that the Italian men played poker, bridge, briscola and (for settle (Italian card games) as well as bocce (lawn bowling).

In 1942, the YMCA aided in installing a radio with loud speakers and, while the programming was censored, Mr. Duliani writes the men would crowd around the radio to listen for news of the war.

Families were also allowed to send gifts. Ms Pavia says she sent her father homemade Italian sausage and pasta. "We used to call the internment camp the college, so nobody would know what we were talking about," she recalls.

Almost anything that arrived in the camp for internees was censored. Ms Pavia remembers a scheme her father and some others at the "college" came up with to get liquor without the camp staff knowing about it.

"These men all loved to buy wine or brandy, but of course they weren't allowed. They devised this scheme where they asked the wives to send them cherry preserves filled with brandy."

But Ms Pavia says she never got any, nor did her father, even until his death in 1951, that he was being kept away from his family against his will.

"They had no radios, no newspapers in the beginning to find out how the war was going, to figure out how long they were going to be in for. My father used to have to go to the soldier who would take the order for specialty foods. The soldier took the list and on his desk he had a newspaper. My father stole the newspaper. He put it under his jacket. He figured that could now read something. They were dying to know some news. I know that that was put in solitary for eight days? Well I cried when I heard that. God, my father being in solitary. They put him there to teach him a lesson, to teach everyone a lesson."

Mr. Duliani writes that many of the men could not stop worrying about their families. One man told Mr. Duliani: "The deprivation of my freedom, being to me from my family, being robbed of time, the loss of my money, all this I might still learn to live with with complaint. But what I cannot come to terms with is the idea that my wife, a Canadian, and my Canadian-born children, may suspect that I have betrayed our country."

In 1943, Camp Petawawa closed and the 100 Italian still interned were sent to a camp near Fredericton, N.B. By August, 1945, all the men had been released but 3,868 Italians were still on "parole", registered with the RCMP.

Half a century later, Italians have not forgotten their fear, anger or bitterness of the roundups. The National Congress of Italian Canadians wants recognition unjust treatment during the Second World War and apology from the government.

On May 23 in the House of Commons, Liberal MP Sergio Marchi asked Prime Minister Brian Mulroney what he was prepared to do about redress. Mr. Mulroney said the government would be "initiating conversations and meetings with the Italian community to convey the appropriate apology and redress... that we can put this shame behind us." In November the congress will be holding its biannual meeting. Congress president Annamaria Cistrulli says a group would like to have an answer by then.