

“You can’t change history. But you can change the consequences.”

Professor Geoffrey Palmer

Immediately following the declaration of war against Italy, June 10, 1940, the Canadian Government directed the RCMP to round up certain members of Canada’s Italian communities who were deemed to be Enemy Aliens. Invoking the terms of Canada’s War Measurers Act and armed with lists of Italians, some of whom were Canadian citizens, RCMP officers apprehended many of these suspects at their homes or places of employment. As a result, approximately three dozen men living in Vancouver underwent an initial interrogation by RCMP personnel. With the odd exception, all were subsequently placed in cells at the Immigration Building located near the Marine Building at the north end of Burrard Street. Once accommodations had been completed in Alberta, the Enemy Aliens, in two waves, were chained to pullman seats and transferred by train to the Kananaskis POW Internment Camp.

Many families of the internees were not notified as to the disposition of their loved ones or given definitive reasons as to why or when they had been taken from them. In this regard, no communication between those incarcerated and their families existed for approximately two weeks.

Not a single Vancouver internee was ever charged with a crime against Canada. Not initially nor at any time during incarceration at Kananaskis, AB and Petawawa, ON, which averaged a total of fifteen and a half months in duration.

Internees were not extended the right to engage or consult with private counsel. Moreover, the families of the internees were not permitted to visit or contact them by telephone. However, each internee was entitled to send or receive one or two censored letters per month.

A majority of family members whose breadwinner had been interned experienced major emotional trauma and/or financial hardship. One family’s business failed, requiring the wife of an internee to declare bankruptcy. The two daughters of another internee had to quit school in order to seek employment in order to meet the family’s financial obligations. These are but two examples of the tragic and traumatic consequences of the arbitrary and wrongful internment.

Moreover, the RCMP, with the cooperation of the City of Vancouver Police Department, instructed upwards to 1,800 Italians to register with the RCMP. They were required to report on a monthly basis to RCMP Headquarters, some for the duration of the war with Italy. Those required to register were Italians who had arrived in Canada from Italy following October 22, 1922 the date Benito Mussolini formed government in Italy. During their brief monthly reporting sessions, they were required to confirm place of work, home address and general activities.

A majority of the Enemy Aliens who trekked up to the RCMP Headquarters on a monthly basis felt mortified, indignant and sickened by having been labelled Enemy Aliens.

Acknowledgement of Injustice

In the years following World War II, formerly interned Italo-Canadians and their families tried to put this episode behind them. Their feelings of shame for being arrested and interned outweighed their sense of justice for the wrong inflicted upon them. Despite the humiliation and injustice, Italo-Canadians picked up the pieces and carried on with their lives. In so doing, they worked tirelessly to show fellow Canadians that they were good citizens contributing to their communities. Many lived in silence, burdened with the stigma of arrest and detention, while others suffered the indignity of having to report monthly to the RCMP as Enemy Aliens.

The postwar wave of immigration brought hundreds of thousands of Italians to Canada. They too, like those that preceded them, were imbued with the motivation to carve out better futures for their families, working hard and ensuring their children were educated to take their place in Canadian society. The wartime Italian internment in Canada was unknown to many of them and for those who heard of it, it was spoken of quietly with a sense of shame and resignation by those that endured it. It affected the way Italian immigrants were regarded. The consequences of internment radiated beyond the internees and the event itself.

In 1990, the National Congress of Italian Canadian and Canadian Business & Professional Inc. initiated a campaign to have unjust internment acknowledged by the Canadian government with an apology and educational recognition of the wrong.

Public meetings were held across Canada to hear from the internees and their families about the shame, indignity and pain suffered by them because of the wrongful internment. A good number of the internees were still alive then and able to recount their experiences firsthand. Their testimonials were augmented by their children who had grown with the stigma of interned parents. Their stories were moving and heart wrenching. Some of the internees broke down in tears recalling the indignity of arrest and humiliation without cause. Almost all the internees have since died and their children are now senior citizens, also aging rapidly. Soon that generation too, will not be with us.

Although then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney acknowledged the wrongs in 1990, no apology was made until 2021 when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized in the House of Commons for the unjust internment of Italo-Canadians during World War II.

Few, if any of the former internees lived to hear the apology. Fortunately, many of their children and grandchildren heard the apology.

Vancouver City Council, therefore, extends a heartfelt apology to all members of the Italian community in Vancouver for City Council's reference to Italian Canadians as "enemy aliens" in the 1942 Motion and the subsequent harms as outlined above. We do so in the belief that an injustice inflicted upon one citizen is an injustice inflicted upon all.