

SECOND WORLD WAR

Book, projects recount injustice of internment of Italian-Canadians

B.C. men arrested 'within minutes' of Mussolini joining Nazis

BY EVAN DUGGAN

VANCOUVER SUN

In the summer of 1940 Vancouver was a long way from Europe's bloodshed, but distance did little to prevent divisions among the local Italian-Canadian community, forced to choose sides in a war a world away. Of the 4,500 Italians living in Vancouver at the time, nearly 2,000 were deemed "enemy aliens" by the Canadian government.

Some were Italian nationals or naturalized immigrants, and others were active members of a fascist club known as the Circolo Giulio Giordani.

Forty-four Italian-Canadian men who were considered the most suspicious were rounded up in Vancouver and other parts of B.C. and interned in a camp in Kananaskis, Alta. "Enemy aliens" who weren't interned had to report to the RCMP on a monthly basis.

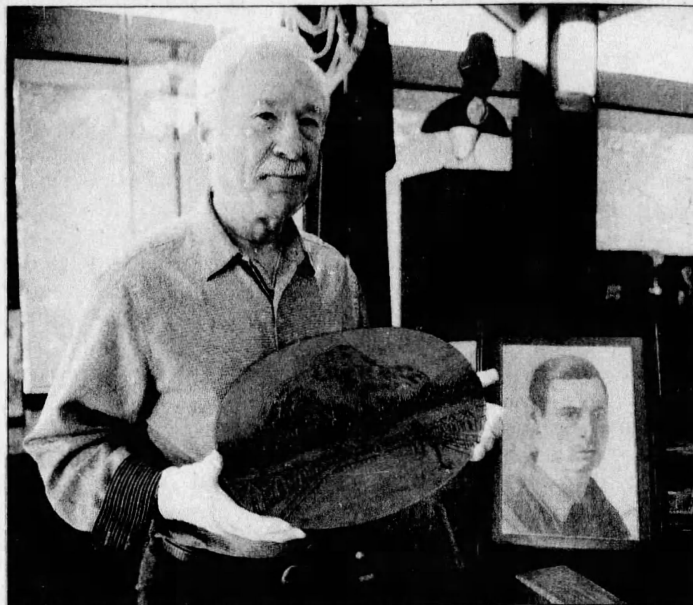
Many others distanced themselves from fascism as much as possible by joining the local Canadian-Italian War Vigilance Association, which publicly affirmed its allegiance to Canada.

Italians in Vancouver became a community divided.

This piece of Vancouver's history will be told this week in a project titled *A Question of Loyalty* at Vancouver's Italian Cultural Centre.

The project explores divided loyalties among Italian-Canadians in Vancouver during the war, and includes a new exhibition at the centre's museum, in addition to a play and the launch of *Injustice Served*, a book by Vancouver author Ray Culos.

It was shortly after June 10,



NICK PROCAYLO/PNG

Ray Culos's book about Italian-Canadians in B.C. who were interned during the Second World War is being released tonight at the Italian Cultural Centre. Culos is holding a carving of the Kananaskis internment camp done by one of the prisoners.

1940. Italy's Benito Mussolini had just joined Nazi Germany and the Canadian government had invoked the War Measures Act, giving the federal government the power to target perceived national threats, Culos said in a recent interview at the museum.

"Within minutes of [Mussolini's declaration] the prime minister issued the order ... to round up Italians, and the RCMP were ready," Culos said. "They had a list."

They were arrested without warrant and never charged.

Police took the men to an immigration centre located next to Burrard Street's Marine Building, where they spent two weeks locked in cells before boarding a train that took them through the Rockies.

"The wives and the children of the internees stayed

home," Culos said, noting that of roughly 4,500 Italian enemy aliens listed across Canada, a total of about 700 were interned in Kananaskis and a second camp at Petawawa, Ont.

One of those internees was 21-year-old Herman Ghislieri.

German-Canadian prisoners already being held in Kananaskis saluted and sang Nazi war songs as Ghislieri arrived inside the barbed-wire fence under the watchful gaze of guards, Culos recounted from his research.

But camp life wasn't so bad for Ghislieri and roughly 350 other prisoners at Kananaskis, who included communists, Germans and Ukrainians, Culos said.

Prisoners lived in comfortable huts. They played sports, ate well, and earned 20 cents a

day working in the forest.

Guards "treated the internees with respect," he said. "There was no such thing as hard labour [or] torture."

Eventually, the government transferred the Italian prisoners to a larger camp in Petawawa, where they sat before a tribunal that questioned their allegiance to Canada.

By December 1941, Ghislieri and most who denounced the Axis powers were released, while those who refused to were transferred to Fredericton, N.B. By 1943, Mussolini had fallen and Italy aligned itself with the Allies. All of the Italians were released except those who continued to express support for Germany's continued campaign.

"There was never an official apology from ... Parliament," Culos said, noting that then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney apologized at a 1990 banquet dinner on behalf of his government for what is now considered a violation of human rights.

While none of B.C.'s 44 Italian internees are alive today, many of their relatives are still pushing for justice for their family members.

The suspected enemy aliens never got a chance to defend themselves, Culos said. For some families, it still "hasn't been dealt with."

Injustice Served will be released today at 7 p.m. during the exhibit opening, which will also include the showing of *Fresco*, a play about the impact of the internment.

eduggan@vancouver.sun.com



SEE VIDEO WITH THIS STORY AT VANCOUVERSUN.COM