

Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of World War

II

Exhibit Now Open

On May 31, Columbus Centre hosted over 300 guests for the opening reception of its permanent exhibit, *Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of WWII*. The project, which is funded by the Community Historical Recognition Program (CHRP) – Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), began in the summer of 2010. In addition to the exhibit, the project also produced an academic publication, *Beyond Barbed Wire* (co-published with the Association of Italian Canadian Writers), and a user-friendly website, www.ItalianCanadianWW2.ca. The commemorative project educates the public about the internment of Italian Canadians during WWII — a little-known event in Canadian history.

The event, which took place in the Joseph D. Carrier Art Gallery, began with welcoming remarks by Pal Di Iulio, President and CEO of Villa Charities, followed by an address by Karen Manarin, Chair of the Columbus Centre Board of Governors, and acknowledgements by Lucy Di Pietro, Project Director. Honoured guests — families of internees/enemy aliens who shared their stories and objects with the project — were presented with framed certificates highlighting their contribution. These individuals who attended the event represent stories of internment from Toronto, Timmins, Sudbury, Hamilton, Ottawa, Montreal, Vancouver, Sydney, and New Waterford.

The unveiling of the commemorative wall (remembering the estimated 600 internees and many others who were detained) was attended by a special few: 12 children of internees. The two eldest from the group, Mary Thornton (née Gioberti) and Aldo Bacci, cut the ribbon together.

Many of the children of internees, now in their 80s and 90s, shared tears and laughter as they were reunited with old friends, their bond tighter now with the launch of this project. The project not only allowed for these individuals to express feelings which had been bottled up for 72 years, but also permitted them to tell their story in their own words.

The permanent exhibit focuses on the story of internment, but additional themes explore immigration and early life in Canada, other internment examples, and Italian Canadians today. The exhibit includes: text panels with large visuals; artwork created by internees; family photographs and letters; government records; and quotes from government officials and internees and their families.

The exhibit is interactive: a touch-screen video monitor invites visitors to watch interview clips pertaining to the events that occurred on June 10, 1940 – the day Italy declared war on Great Britain and her allies. As well, a computer station allows for easy

On March 29, Franco Perlasca, the son of Giorgio Perlasca, was in town for a presentation honouring his father. During the Second World War, Giorgio pretended to be a Spanish diplomat and took actions to try to end anti-Jewish persecutions. In so doing, he was able to save the lives of more than 3,000 Hungarian Jews. While Franco was in Toronto, he visited Columbus Centre and took in Samuel Bak's exhibit *Icons of Loss*, based on the artist's experiences of the Holocaust.

Access to the official website, showcasing all 86 interviews and the more than 800 digitized photos, objects, and documents. Lastly, a feedback wall and three silhouette blackboards urge visitors to leave comments.

The exhibit can be viewed from Monday to Friday (10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) in the former Dante Room on the second floor of the Carrier Gallery.

Complimentary copies of *Beyond Barbed Wire* can be requested by emailing info@italiancanadianww2.ca. (Offer available while quantities last.)

For more information on the project, visit the website (www.ItalianCanadianWW2.ca) or follow us on:

Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of WWII @ItCanWWII
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