

**NAME OF PROJECT:** *Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens: Memories of WWII*

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**LOCATION OF INTERVIEW:** Hamilton, ON

**NAME OF INTERVIEWEE:** Vincenza Travale

**NAME OF INTERVIEWER:** Nadia Mior

**NAME OF VIDEOGRAPHER:** Vikki Cecchetto

**TRANSCRIBED BY:** Melinda Richter

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This is the first interview with Vincenza Travale talking about her family's experiences living in Hamilton and her father's internment during the Second World War. Vincenza was born in Hamilton to Giovanni (John) and Carmela (née Vallo) Travale. She grew up in the city's North end, East end, and Hamilton Mountain areas. Giovanni came to Canada in 1924 from Racalmuto, Sicily. In 1940, he was interned at Petawawa and released in summer of 1941. At the time of Giovanni's internment, Carmela was pregnant with their son, Jack, and Vincenza was just two years old. Giovanni was arrested at his place of business — a shoe repair shop on Barton Street East. Carmela ran the shop while he was away with the help of her father and an employee. Vincenza says that her father was never bitter towards

the Canadian government or the authorities for interning him. He loved Canada and the opportunities that the country brought him and his family. He was always bitter, however, about the members of the Italian community who acted as informants. Vincenza became a teacher, a vice-principal, and a principal, before finally attaining the position of superintendent for the Hamilton Wentworth Roman Catholic School Board. Vincenza feels that her father encouraged the family to participate fully in Canadian society and attributes her success as the realization of his dreams.

## **INTERVIEW**

**VT: Vincenza Travale, interviewee**

**NM: Nadia Mior, interviewer**

**VC: Vikki Cecchetto , videographer**

[Title screen]

[Fades in at 00:00:10]

[Text: Vincenza Travale. Daughter of internee Giovanni Travale]

VC: —make sure the mic is on her, please. You can hear my voice—

VT: Hello. My name is Vincenza Travale.

VC: Okay. We're good.

NM: Alright. We're good.



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VC: Do you want me to stop it? And, or can you edit out that little bit?

NM: We'll edit.

VC: Okay, fine. Go ahead!

NM: Okay. So, I'm Nadia and here we are in Hamilton. And we'll start off by, uh, having you give us your full name, please.

VT: My name is Vincenza Travale. [camera zooms in]

NM: And you were born here in Hamilton?

VT: Yes, I was born in Hamilton. Um, my parents are, um, John, Giovanni, and Carmela Travale.

NM: In what part of Hamilton did you grow up?

VT: Um, I grew up in, I guess, what is called the North end of Hamilton, on Barton Street West, just across the street from All Souls Church. Lived there until I was, um, 13 years old. And then moved to the East end of Hamilton and then to Hamilton Mountain. And now I've come full circle [NM laughs] back downtown. [smiles]

NM: [laughs] So can you tell us a little about yourself?

VT: [thinking]



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NM: Before we get into your father.

VT: Okay. I was educated here in Hamilton at St. Mary's Elementary School and then at Loretto Academy and then off to the University of Toronto, St. Michael's College, uh, where I studied, uh, modern languages, did a B.A. and an M.A. there. Then came back to Hamilton and became a teacher, uh, teaching first at Bishop Ryan High School in Hamilton. Then I was Vice-Principal at, uh, Cathedral Girls' High School. [camera zooms in] And then Principal at St. Thomas Moore High School. Then Superintendent and Associate Director of Education with the Hamilton Wentworth Roman Catholic School Board.

NM: Wow. Good for you! [laughs]

VT: And now am retired [NM and VC laugh] from all of that. [smiles]

NM: [laughs] Okay. I understand that a family member was interned. So could you give us—

VT: [inhales]

NM: —his name and—

VT: Yes, it was my father, um, Giovanni, John Travale. He was interned, uh, from November 19, uh, 40 until July of 1941 at Petawawa, here in Ontario. He was taken from his business. He had a shoe repair shop at, on Barton Street East. And he was taken from there and, uh, taken to the Barton Street Jail and then on to Petawawa. The next morning my mother went down to Barton Street Jail. My mother had come here from Italy when she was seven years old so she spoke English very well. And so, unlike some of the other, uh, wives who did not, and confronted the authorities there at Barton Street Jail.

The—it was the RCMP. And, uh, asked where he was and why they had taken him. And, uh, she was told, and this is something that, uh, has been, was re—my mother repeated often times, um, in the family. She was told, “Madam,” she said the, the officer was very polite and gentle and he said to her, “Madam, in time of war, we act first and ask questions later.”

NM: [laughs]

VT: [nods] And, uh, so that was the only explanation she got, uh, as to why he had been, uh, taken away.

NM: So he was taken away from work. Were you at school at the time?

VT: No, I was only two years old—

NM: Oh, you were two years old.

VT: —at the time.

NM: Oh okay. So you were at home.

VT: Um, yes, um, my, uh, I have two brothers, uh, my older brother was, um, uh, 11, uh, going to be 12. And my younger brother was born while my father was away—

NM: Oh.

VT: —at camp. My mother, uh, was pregnant when my father was, was taken. And, uh, he, he was

born—My brother Jack was born June of 1941. And then my father came home in, uh, July. And there's a, a, a story about my father's return home that, uh, I actually remember. I was three years old at the time. But I, I guess as a three year old, this really, uh, uh, tickled me. So I do remember this [NM laughs] as a first hand memory that, uh, I guess, uh, family and friends gathered at the house for his return. They must have known that he was coming home that day. And a good friend of the family was holding my brother, who at that point was barely a month old, and, uh, when he came in the door, uh, my father said to her, "Oh! Connie," was her name, "I didn't know that you had a baby." And she said, "No, I didn't. You did." and handed my [NM laughs] infant brother into my father's [NM laughs] arms. I, I think he knew that my mother had had the baby but he hadn't seen him, of course, and, uh, so this was—And as I say, I actually remember that uh, as a, as a three year old. I don't have many memories, uh, first-hand memories. What I have are the conversations that took place later in the family.

NM: Now, did your family ever go up to see him in Petawawa? Did your mom—

VT: No, not that I'm aware of. I understand that there were letters exchanged and my older brother, Charles, remembers the letters that came back because they were censored. I guess there were parts that were, uh, blotted out. And he said he remembers, as a youngster, thinking, 'What could his father [NM laughs] be writing that would be censored?' So, um, unfortunately we don't have any of those letters. I'm not sure what happened to them. But, um, we, we figure it must have been, he must have mentioned names of, uh, of people that were there and maybe that's—But he says he re, he remembers that. He remembers, uh, seeing these letters with parts blotted out and couldn't understand what his father would be saying that was censorable. [laughs]

NM: [laughs] Was your father ac, active in the community, in organizations?

VT: Um, yeah, he was but in social clubs. You know, there was a, um, a Societa Racalmutase[?], that I

think he was the Vice President or the Treasurer. But he wasn't active in, um, to my knowledge, in any political organizations. Uh, he was a close friend of a, a gentleman who was active. And, um, he, um, you know, that, that may have been, uh, why he was considered, um, to be quote dangerous.

NM: [laughs]

VT: Um, because he was a friend of, uh, of this, this gentleman. They were, they were very close friends. But, no, my father wasn't active. He wasn't political. Um, if anything, you know, having been, um, nat—He came to this country in 1924 as a 22 year old. By 1929 he was already a naturalized Canadian citizen. And throughout his life, he loved Canada. He knew that Canada had given him opportunities, would give opportunities to his family, um, and so he never, ever, um, had any, uh, difficulty with Canada or with the, the Canadian government despite this internment. I think more than anything he, and the other men who were taken, were hurt, uh, thinking that, you know, the Canadian government that they were supportive of and the way of life in Canada, uh, that, that it would be thought that they might want to do something against, uh, the government. And of course, um, they were deprived of their freedom for, um, varying lengths of time; my dad for about eight months. And, um, that was the difficulty. But, you know, he always said other than being deprived of their freedom they were never mistreated or maltreated in any way. Life at the camp was, um, okay. They had exercise. They had food. I'm, I'm sure the food [laughs] wasn't necessarily to their liking but, um, you know, they were fed well. They had exercise. They were able to, uh, socialize and have social activities. So, what he told us about the camp, uh, was that it, it wasn't a harsh life. Not at all.

NM: Okay. So he did communicate information about the camp?

VT: Yes.

NM: Afterwards.

[00:09:52]

VT: Yes. Um, mainly, you know, good things. He talked about people who were there from Montreal, um, you know, from Toronto, people that, uh, that he met there. Um, but that, that was about it. I mean, actually, over the years he didn't, he didn't talk a lot about it. Uh, I have to tell you that, uh, my father's bitterness if, if there was any, was not directed at the camp, the authorities, the Canadian government. It was directed at local people in Hamilton, from the Italian community who were believed to have informed, um, had, uh, assisted the RCMP in designating who should be picked up. I mean, that is well believed, uh, in the community. And my father certainly believed that. As a matter of fact, my mother would not allow him to name names, so when he referred, and over the years he referred to this part of the interment a lot, he referred to them as *icarrone*[?]. And many years later, 40 years later, we were out at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery so that my mother and he could select, um, their burial plot. And we're walking around in an older part of the cemetery and, uh, my mother is looking at the trees and the proximity to the water and all. And my father is examining all the existing tombstones that were in the area. I said to him, "What are you doing?" And he said, "I'm looking around to make sure that none of those *carrone*[?] [NM laughs] are buried nearby. Because if they are, I will never rest in peace."

NM: [laughing] In peace. That's funny.

VT: And I think that tells you, uh, what his bitterness or negative feelings were. As I say, this was 40 years later. It was in the, uh, early '80s. And, uh, that's where he channelled all those negative feelings right to that time. Well, happily none of the *carrone*[?] [NM laughs] or those he believed to be the *carrone*[?] were, were, were buried nearby.



NM: That's good.

VT: Yeah. [NM laughs] So he, they, we purchased the plot. [laughs] [NM laughs] And you know, every time I go out there I think about that because the, the little maple tree that my mother thought was great at the time, is now a huge maple tree. And, uh, but I think about that. And I say, and I've told the story too in other settings related to the internment because I, I, I think it does—

NM: Yeah.

VT: —um, sum up how, um, he felt about, um, the whole experience.

NM: When, uh, when your father was interned how did your mother cope—

VT: [inhales] Well—

NM: —with the situation? How did she manage?

VT: She managed because he already had a business, a shoe repair shop. And, um, they hired a man to work in the shop to keep the business going. So unlike some of the families who had worked, the men had worked in factories and were deprived of, of any source of income. My mother did have that. It was reduced, obviously, because she had to pay an employee and my father, uh, prior to that, was the only employee. So whatever was earned came into the family. So, they always felt that, you know, that was, for them it was an advantage. And, uh, I do re—Another memory that I have as a, as a child is on the Saturday night, my grandfather, my maternal grandfather who I guess, uh, was the supervisor of the business [NM laughs] um, went down to the store and, I guess, paid the employee and then took

whatever money had been made that week and brought it home to my mother. And I remember he had it in this little black pouch.

NM: [laughs]

VT: And that's what I remember. Grandpa coming into the house with his [telephone rings] little black pouch.

[fades out at 00:14:23]

[fades in at 00:14:24]

VC: There you are. Back on. Okay. We're back on.

NM: Did your father bring home any other artifacts from the camp?

VT: Yes he did, as a matter of fact. Um, I, I don't think he made these himself, um, but he brought home, uh, two, um, book ends that made from bone that had been carved. And, uh, he also brought home, um, uh, birds on a, on a twig, [sneeze in background] again, that had been, uh, been carved. And I have them here, um, and, um, quite prepared to show them to you. The other, um, object that he brought was, um, a ship in a bottle. You know, the little, tiny, miniature done in a bottle. Um, I don't have that. I gave that to my brother who, um, was the one, the one that was born while my dad was away.

NM: Oh. [laughs]

VT: And he has that and we don't really, uh, transport that around 'cause it's very delicate and we'd

hate for it to be, uh—

NM: Mmmhmm.

VT: —lost or broken. Uh, the other artifacts are, are quite durable and, and would survive, uh, any kind of transport, [NM laughs] I think.

NM: So you don't know who actually made them.

VT: No. [NM laughs] No. And, um, but I, I know he didn't make them. My father was great. He built a cottage on his own, uh, with help from family. But he was, he was brilliant in that regard, with big building and construction and, and home repairs. But he didn't have the attention for detail.

VC: [laughs]

VT: So, I, I, I know he didn't, he didn't do them. I'm not sure what he did. He talked about, you know, um, chopping wood and walking out in the woods. And so I think he did those more active things, uh, rather than the—

VC: At the camp?

VT: Yeah. At the camp. —rather than the fine detail of, um, these, uh, crafts. [smiles]

VC: Mmmhmm. But he did have a, um, a lasting, uh, change brought about...[Unknown]

VT: [laughs] Well, I'm not sure it was lasting, but it was [cough in background] for a period of time.

Um, when he came home, uh, everyone noticed how after dinner he got up and took his plate and cutlery to the sink, had never done that [NM laughs] before because my mother, being a woman of that era, did all of the house and—

NM: Right.

VT: —and home work. The other thing was he was very neat, we understand, about hanging up towels in the bathroom and keeping everything neat and tidy. Um, and so, uh, my two brothers and I, we all remember hearing, uh, about that. Now whether that—It lasted for a while but, uh, I'm not sure that, uh, it was, uh, totally life changing. I think what was life changing for him was that sense that, uh, um, this was a terrible thing that happened, however, uh, there was hope for the rest of his family, [points to herself] his daughter, for example, who, um—And I think I'm the realization of his dream to be successful in, um, mainstream life in Canada, to be totally in, integrated into life in Canada. So that, um, that kind of deprivation of rights and freedom would never happen again to Canadians of Italian heritage and hopefully Canadians of, of any, uh, heritage. So, um, I, although I don't remember him, you know, preaching this, the message that I picked up was we needed to be full out Canadians.

NM: Yeah.

VT: Um, rather than having him think, you know, we needed to shrink back into some kind of ghetto mentality, um, no, the message I got and, and, uh, I don't remember him saying this exactly in words but I know subtly that I got, uh, from both him and my mother, was we need to be, uh, full Canadians, participating fully in Canadian, uh, life. Uh, my father was so convinced that Canada was the greatest country in the world, um, and a country that had given him and his family life and opportunity, um, that actually he never, ever wanted to return to, uh, to Italy until I went to Italy as a tourist—

NM: [laughs]

VT: —and then convinced him and my mother that, uh, they needed to go and, and see Italy. And which they did and really, really enjoyed it. But my father never harked back to life in Italy. As a matter of fact, with some of the, um, immigrants in the '50s who, uh, would, uh, make statements about how Italy was much more beautiful and artistic and cultural than Canada, my father would always speak up very vehemently, almost arguing with them and saying, “No, no, no. Canada. There may be all of that beauty and culture and it's wonderful to have that in our heritage but Canada is the country—

NM: Mmmhmm.

VT: —that gave us life.”

[00:20:31]

NM: Wow.

VC: Did they, uh, ever talk about, uh, what, uh, what it was like for the Italians during the internment? Was there discrimination? Did your mother ever indicate that there was backlash from, uh, from other members of the community.

NM: Or your brothers at school.

VC: Or your brothers at school.

VT: No. They never talked about that. I suspect that there was, but, you know, at that point they lived

in the Italian community, so. We lived on, uh, on Barton Street, uh, West, as I mentioned earlier. And up and down that street they were all Italian families. Uh, my father had his business actually in the non-Italian, uh, community, at Barton Street East near Ottawa Street was pretty far away from—

NM: Yeah.

VT: —both, uh, Italian communities, you know, the North End and Sherman Avenue at that point. So I never heard them, uh, talk about that. They, they did talk about it way back, in that my mother's family came in 1917, my father came in 1924. They talked about the prejudice that they encountered at that point as, uh, you know, the men went out to work in, in various places. And, uh, even around, I guess, as they were building those communities 'cause they were early, early immigrants, um, they talked about it there but they never talked about, um, during the war. But I, I suspect it was because we're in that close, um, community at the time and, um, you know, everybody around was suffering through this and with those who didn't have, uh, you know, fathers and husbands, uh, taken away. So they were—It was a tight community and, and very supportive. And, you know, my mother acknowledged she was fortunate because she had her mother and father here and her brothers and sisters. So she had even that close support. Other families, like, my father had no family here. Um, but my mother did and, and that was a blessing. I already told you about my grandfather who kind of supervised to business while, uh, while my father was away.

NM: So overall, what, what is your experience? What would you say is your experience of this internment? What are your thoughts on the whole...?

VT: It was a terrible moment in Canadian history. Um, no question. And, uh, you know, I've heard that expressed by others. Uh, it should not have happened. It did happen. Uh, in my family, I think it got dealt with the best way it could. And I think from other families that I know as well, uh, it didn't, um, it

didn't destroy, um, the, um, the, the, the love of Canada, the, uh, opportunities of Canada. You know, I, I have to tell you, uh, my father and, um, Mr. Zaffiro, who they were life long friends. They were born a month apart in Racalmuto—

NM: Mmm.

VT: —Sicily.

NM: Oh yeah. Mmmhmm.

VT: They came to Canada, I think, the same year. They—My father learned shoe repairing from Mr. Zaffiro. Now, Mr. Zaffiro also went to camp. He was interned, I think, for a longer period than my father. But, you know, I like to tell the story that that happened. They came in the 1920s. They were interned in the 1940s. And by the end of the century, the granddaughter of one and the daughter of the other, Mr. Zaffiro's grandfather, me the daughter of John Travale, had both been named Hamilton's distinguished—

NM: Wow.

VT: —citizens of the year. And I tell that story only to highlight, um, the evolution of the community and the fact that it didn't destroy. Because those were two families and, and there are others. I mean, there are other stories that, that could be told. But that one, you know, has, has such a, a parallel—

NM: Right.

VT: As I say, the granddaughter of one, the, the daughter of another. So it came full circle to their

dreams being realized, their sacrifices, uh, including the internment being, um, they would say, worthwhile.

VC: Yeah.

VT: And we are the, the beneficiaries of that.

NM: That's wonderful. Do you have any, do you have any other stories that you'd like to add?

VC: Thoughts?

VT: I, no, I—

VC: Last—

VT: Um, I don't know, I, I think I've probably said, uh, everything—

NM: You remember.

VT: —either that I remember or was part of our family. Um, in, um, you know, all the talk, 'cause as I say, we were, we don't, don't remember, um, a lot of those. Um, I guess my older brother said something, uh, that, uh, um, and, and I don't remember if this was from the camp or just my father's attitude. Uh, he said, he always, uh, used to say, and that's true, “You gotta keep going.” [nods] “You gotta keep going.” So when he came home from the camp, “You gotta keep going.” And my brother, as a child, even helped my father out in the shoe repair shop and he said, you know, people would say to him, “Oh, John, you know, um, how's it going, or, you know,” even when it came time that maybe he





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would retire, my father's attitude was, "No. [NM laughs] You gotta keep going. You gotta keep going."

NM: [laughs]

VT: And, I, you know, I think that sums up even his attitude after the camp and his whole, uh, way of life and you can't be defeated even by such an experience as the internment. You gotta keep going.

[laughs]

NM: Those are great, great words to live by. Thank you so much.

[fades out at 00:27:15]