

Male Notte: The Untold Story of Italian Relocation During World War II

By Geoffrey Dunn

On a quiet evening in February of 1942, fifty years ago this coming month, Celestina Batistina Loero, my great grandmother, was greeted at the doorstep of her clapboard home on Laguna Street by two agents of the Department of Justice. A native of northern Italy and 78 years of age at the time, she spoke no English, while the federal agents spoke no Italian, much less the regional Genoese dialect that was the common tongue of the Santa Cruz–Italian fishing colony. A granddaughter who lived next door was summoned to serve as a translator.

As an "enemy alien" living in what had recently been declared "a restricted area" by the Western Defense Command of the United States Army, my great grandmother was told that she was in violation of recently passed federal law. The agents informed her that she had 48 hours to move herself and her belongings inland of Highway 1 (Mission Street) or that she would be subject to immediate arrest.

Barely weighing 100 pounds, the mother of two sons and two grandsons currently serving in the U.S. Navy, my great grandmother could hardly have been a threat to the U.S. war effort against the Axis powers. She had lived on the same plot of land for nearly a half-century and rarely ventured more than a few blocks away. But move she did, to a room on High Street, where she was to live for the remainder of the year.

My great grandmother was in her nineties when I was a small child, but I have vivid memories of her strong, busy hands, always seeming to be at work in her vegetable garden or in her kitchen. She had an ever-present smile, she enjoyed her afternoon beer and red wine, and she loved to hold me and my young cousins in her lap and play games with our hands. Occasionally she would break out into tears, and when she did, she would mumble something about "la male notte" (the bad night), about which we children knew nothing—and would know nothing for years and years to come.

It was nearly a quarter century later, long after she had died, that I stumbled across news of my great grandmother's forced relocation while researching some World War II history in the pages of the Santa Cruz Sentinel. For the first time, I understood the meaning of "la male notte," the sad night she had been forced to move from the safety and comfort of her home. I also discovered that she had not been alone. Scores of other Santa Cruz–Italians were also relocated in the first months of the war, as were thousands of other Italian immigrants along the West Coast. Many others were arrested on dubious charges and sent to prison or to inland internment centers run by the Immigration Service.

It has long been an historical misconception that Executive Order 9066, issued by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on February 19 of 1942, applied only to Japanese (and Japanese–Americans) living in the western states. Such was not the case—at least not at first.

As Humboldt State University historian Stephen Fox has pointed out in his fascinating book, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans During World War II*, in the early months of the war, Lieutenant General John L. De Witt, commanding general of the Fourth Army and Western Defense Command in San Francisco, interpreted the order to include all so-called "enemy aliens"—Italians and Germans, along with the Japanese. Indeed, DeWitt, paranoid about so-called "fifth column" activities (spying by enemy nationals) pushed for the forced relocation of all "enemy aliens." It was only in the ensuing months, for reasons that are far more complex than simple racism, that the treatment of the Japanese would become more heinous than their Italian and German counterparts. Nevertheless, of the 25,655 "enemy aliens" arrested during the war, 14,426 (or 55 percent) were Italians and Germans.

In recent years, the Japanese relocation during World War II has become so widely publicized in the media that it has overshadowed the lesser, albeit terrible, plight of Italian and German immigrants during the War—so much so that the latter has been forgotten by history and, in many cases, denied. A recent article on the Japanese internment in the *San Francisco Examiner* declared, "The United States was also at war with Hitler and Mussolini, but no Italians or Germans were sent to concentration camps." Not true.

The Japanese bombs that destroyed Pearl Harbor and President Franklin Roosevelt's subsequent declaration of war in December of 1941 rocked communities along the west coast out of their political slumber. Until then, the gloomy events in Europe and Asia had appeared vague and distant, particularly to those engaged in agricultural and commercial fishing activities throughout the largely rural west. Santa Cruz was no exception.

The events of December 7, 1941, changed all that. Almost immediately, local residents of Japanese descent, previously ambivalent about the Asian-Pacific conflict, declared their allegiance to the U.S. war effort. At a dinner given at the St. George Hotel on December 8 by the Japanese Association of Santa Cruz, association president Tommy Kadotani told local officials in attendance, "We are yours to command in this emergency."

Across the country in Washington that same evening, President Roosevelt ordered the arrest of all Italian, Japanese and German aliens who the FBI and other federal agencies deemed "dangerous to American security." Within 72 hours, 3,846 aliens were arrested—most of them, Italian. Less than two weeks later, General DeWitt was recommending that all enemy aliens 14 years of age and older be removed to the interior. He was supported by the FBI's resident xenophobe, J. Edgar Hoover.

For a short time, the Justice Department resisted the pressures mounting from De Witt, Hoover and the War Department, and proposed a more moderate alien policy. By mid-January, however, with the war effort deteriorating in the Pacific, the moderate voices at Justice caved in and the War Department announced that it was constructing internment camps for "all classes of enemy aliens." In late January, DeWitt submitted an extensive lists of "restricted zones" which were prohibited to all enemy aliens—German, Italian and Japanese alike.

With its large populations of farmers and fishermen of Japanese and Italian descent, the Monterey Bay area was of particular concern to DeWitt and the War Department. By January 25 of 1942, all areas west (or oceanside) of Highway 1 in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties were declared "restricted" to all "enemy aliens" (with curfew, travel and residence restrictions enforced). Local German, Italian and Japanese immigrants who had not yet declared American citizenship were forced to move out of the "restricted" areas by February 24, after which time they would also be subjected to a 9 p.m. curfew and permitted to travel only between their homes and place of employment. Signs were placed throughout the county boldly announcing:

"ENEMY ALIENS PROHIBITED AREA NO. 28. The United States Government requires all aliens of German, Italian or Japanese nationality to vacate this area."

It was estimated that 1,500 local residents would be affected by the decree.

The Santa Cruz *Sentinel* quickly jumped on the relocation bandwagon. In an editorial dated February 3, the local daily reasoned: "The United States can take no chances by trying to pick for exclusion only those aliens who are known enemies. All aliens originating from countries with which we are at war [should] be banned from the defined areas."

For Italian fishermen working at the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, restrictions on their activities were enforced immediately after the Pearl Harbor bombing. The day following FDR's declaration of war, a dozen Italian nationals were no longer allowed to take their boats out to sea. The restricted fishermen included Stefano Ghio, Giovanni Olivieri, Marco Carniglia, Batista and Frank Bregante, Serafino Canepa, Niccolo Bassano, Giacomo Stagnaro, Agostino Oliveri, Fortunado Zolezzi, Johnnie Stellato, and Johnnie Cecchini. Their plight became well publicized. In a front-page article with banner headlines, the Santa Cruz *Sentinel* declared: "Fishermen With 23 Sons in Army and Navy Are Bound to Wharf While Boats Lie Idle and Sea Food Is Needed."

The article, more than likely written by the *Sentinel's* legendary waterfront reporter Ernest Otto, was sympathetic towards the fishermen and also noted the confusion and inequities of the government's relocation efforts:

"With its problem of separating fifth columnists from peaceful and worthy residents of foreign birth, the Department of Justice has had no time to work out formulae which will safeguard the nation and at the same time allow such men as Santa Cruz's fishermen to earn a living for their families and add to the country's food supply."

Local Italian activists Mary Carniglia and Malio Stagnaro, along with Santa Cruz judge James J. Scopetone of the Marconi Civic Service club, wrote letters to government officials on behalf of the restricted fishermen, many of whom were their relatives and all of whom lived either in the Italian neighborhoods of lower Bay Street or in the flats east of Neary Lagoon. Monterey Bay area congressman John Anderson responded to these early pleas with typical political aplomb: "I am doing everything I can to bring the [fishermen's] trustworthiness to the attention of proper authorities, and I earnestly hope that a policy will be adopted which will permit your people to return to their normal way of living."

One of the local fishermen prevented from going to sea was Stefano Ghio, father of veteran Santa Cruz fisherman Victor Ghio.

"Here I was in the Navy," Ghio says. "I had another brother in the Navy and another brother in the Army, and they do this to my father? It was a bunch of B.S., a lot of B.S. I talked to my superiors about it, but hell, there was nothing they could do. They told me to do my duty and that was it. It's too bad, that's all. My dad and some of the rest lost some good fishing seasons, I'll tell you that."

Victor's older brother, Stevie ("Ghighi") Ghio, recalls coming home from leave during the spring of 1942 and not being able to find his parents, who had been forced to relocate inland.

"I came home to the Barranca (the Italian neighborhood)," he says, "and I couldn't find my folks or my aunts and uncles. All the houses were boarded up shut. I couldn't find anybody. Finally, I went down to the police station and they told me what had happened. I was still in my Navy uniform. They looked through some records and found out where they were. So one of the officers drives me up to where my folks had been moved. They were all so happy to see me, and my mother says, 'I was worried you wouldn't find us,' and she started to cry. It was pretty upsetting. They'd lived here 30, 40 years, and to have this happen to them—well, it just wasn't right, but there wasn't much we could say."

Italian artichoke and Brussels sprouts farmers on the north coast of the county were also hit hard by the early restrictions. "The growers are definitely facing a labor shortage," declared Luis Poletti, head of the Davenport Producers Association. "It hits pretty hard. I don't know how we're going to replace them in the fields, but we'll have to."

The relatively small German community in Santa Cruz also felt the impact of the restrictions and impending relocation. As depicted by John Steinbeck in his novel *East of Eden*, anti-German sentiment was particularly virulent along the Central Coast during World War I, and in Santa Cruz it was downright nasty. On February 13, the body of German national George M. Heckel was found on a beach near Woodrow Avenue. Despondent over his impending relocation

and not wanting to suffer through hostilities like those 20 years earlier, the 73-year-old native of Germany walked out into the surf and committed suicide. At least four other similar suicides, by both Italians and Germans, in the San Francisco Bay area took place in the early weeks of February.

The periodic announcements coming from the Justice and War departments, many of them contradictory, had the effect of putting the local Japanese, Italian and German communities on edge. No one here knew for sure what exactly was going on—and in reality, no one in Washington knew what was going on, either. Various departments and competing bureaucracies established policy one day, only to have it overruled and contradicted by another the next. Looking back on them from the vantage point of 50 years, the daily reporting of those activities reads something like a Kafakaesque novel. Back then, they must have been a pure nightmare.

On February 1, for instance, a *Sentinel* headline declared: "No Zones Barred to Enemy Aliens In This County." A few days later, another headline declared: "New Alien Rules Are Outlined," the accompanying article affirming that "no enemy aliens may live, work or visit" the restricted areas in the county. The following day, headlines reported "No Exceptions for Santa Cruz Aliens: Confusion [Here] After First Order." The article went on to read:

"Italian, Japanese and German aliens in Santa Cruz may have harbored a hope that some disposition would come to exclude them from the evacuation order, had those hopes completely quashed Tuesday in a Justice Department announcement that 'no exceptions' would be made.

"There will be no relaxation of regulations to permit the aged and infirm, or those Axis aliens living with citizen sons and daughters, to remain in the area."

A few weeks later, the entire county was declared "prohibited" to Italian, Japanese and German nationals and vast areas inland extending throughout the Central Valley were deemed "restricted." Headline after headline in between emphasized the urgency of the "enemy alien" issue.

Local Italians did not take the restrictions lightly. Many violated them flagrantly, while others vowed to have them overturned. In an interview with Elizabeth Calciano conducted for UCSC's Regional History Project, Malio Stagnaro, who served as a chief boatswain in the Navy during the war, recalled a trip he took to San Francisco to confront General DeWitt about the hardships his policies were creating. Stagnaro, a longtime spokesman for the Italian community on the wharf, characterized DeWitt as a "damn fool,...a complete nut, in my opinion."

"I went up to DeWitt to try to talk to him," Stagnaro recalled, "and he wouldn't listen to any reason whatsoever, to nothing. Everybody to him was an enemy that wasn't an American citizen. I said, 'General, these are the greatest people in the world.' 'Well!' he says. 'Why didn't they become citizens?' I said, 'General, they never had the opportunity; never had an opportunity to learn; they raised big families, and they stayed at home.'"

DeWitt was unmoved.

Another vocal opponent of the alien restrictions was Mary Carniglia, the matriarch of the local fishing colony, whose husband, Marco, was prohibited from fishing and was facing relocation, while her eldest son, John, was serving in the Navy.

"The kids are asking their parents, 'What are they going to do to you?' The smaller children can't understand," Carniglia declared in a lengthy interview with the *Sentinel*. "The adult Italians have such faith in the government, they say it's all paper talk. But it hurts. My people have lived here in the same houses for three generations, and I'm going into a fourth generation. I'm a citizen, but my husband is not.

"My people are proud to be in America. Their coming here gave them a taste of paradise. They aren't disloyal. If the government can show disloyalty, then they should be punished. I wouldn't fight for them if I thought they weren't loyal. But I know they are."

Carniglia battled to have the local fishermen allowed to return to their livelihoods. She also fought against "racketeering" by local landlords who she felt were taking advantage of the relocation controversy. She charged that in some cases landlords were hiking rents, while others were refusing to rent to families with children. She also charged that deposits were being stolen. "If we're all helping toward the aim of victory," she queried local Realtors, "why should these [landlords] throw the monkey wrench in at this time? Why crush these unfortunate people with further blows?"

Santa Cruz Realtor, Joseph Jacoby, defended his profession against Carniglia's charges. Local landlords, he declared, were merely charging what the "market will bear." He also suggested that

"Italians were taking advantage of the situation...One Italian paid a \$5 deposit, then came back to say he didn't want the house—with renting days having passed—and received his money back. This happened in two instances. In still another, the Italians made an appointment to view the house, then never showed up because the rent was too high."

Carniglia, however, had none of Jacoby's explanation. She called for an emergency rent-control measure to protect the dislocated residents. "People should have more love and wisdom," she declared. "These narrow-minded people are taking advantage of these unfortunates." A rent-control measure was never adopted, but the racketeering crisis eventually passed.

For Japanese residents, both citizens and non-citizens alike, their crisis was just beginning. As the February 24 relocation deadline neared, it was becoming more and more apparent that the Japanese were starting to be singled out by government activities, both in Washington and on the West Coast. Beginning February 9, *Sentinel* headlines read: "FBI Arrests 20 Japs in Monterey Bay Territory." Most of those arrests took place in Monterey and Salinas, but federal agents also swept Watsonville, where Ben Torigoe, owner of a sporting goods store was picked up for being in possession of a dozen shotguns, a camera, an alleged "illegal radio," and so-called "subversive literature" that had been published in Japan. Three Buddhist priests were also arrested in the raids.

On February 21, two days following the signing of Executive Order 9066, hundreds of aliens—119 Japanese, 54 Italians and 9 Germans—were arrested throughout California, though in Santa Cruz County, arrests were limited to two Japanese residents, Tommy Kadotani and T. Kai, both active members of the Santa Cruz Japanese association. Kadotani, a native of Santa Cruz who, ironically, had grown up on the fringes of the Italian fishing colony on Bay Street, was a widely respected local florist and gardener. Both he and Kai were charged with raising monies that "eventually found their way to the Japanese Imperial army," charges that were never substantiated and which Kadotani denied. (Years later, when Kadotani and I were fishing on his boat Sake one afternoon, I gently tried to broach the topic of his arrest. Kadotani politely, though sternly, informed me that there was nothing to talk about, save fishing.) Kadotani and Kai were shipped to San Francisco for questioning by the FBI and didn't return to Santa Cruz until the end of the war.

That weekend, FBI agents arrested ten more Japanese residents in Watsonville, including grocer Keijuro Sugiyama, apple driers Charles and Frank Huirra, and farmer Saikichi Yamamoto. At the same time, 16 Italians were arrested in Salinas.

The following Monday, an event that helped codify anti-Japanese feelings took place in Goleta, near Santa Barbara, where a Japanese submarine fired 25 shells at an oil refinery just off the coast. Damage was minimal, but the boldness of the attack created a panic along the west coast. That shelling, combined with lingering animosity from the Pearl Harbor bombing and longstanding anti-Asian prejudices dating back to the 19th Century, led to stepped up calls for the removal of all Japanese from the western halves of California, Oregon and Washington. The local chapter of the Native Sons of the Golden West, headed by president Tom Kelley, passed a resolution calling for the ouster of all residents of Japanese descent, while in Washington, D.C., Congressman Anderson demanded "immediate evacuation of all persons of Japanese lineage."

Then California Attorney General Earl Warren, later to become both governor and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, was a vociferous proponent of Japanese relocation. "When we are dealing with the Caucasian race we have

methods that will test the loyalty of them," Warren opined. "But when we deal with the Japanese, we are on an entirely different field."

In addition to such overtly racist sentiments, there were also political factors preventing Italian (and German) relocation. Mounting pressures from Democratic politicians in East Coast cities, particularly New York, Philadelphia and Boston—all with large Italian populations—had a powerful effect in swaying the president and his staff against mass Italian internment on the West Coast. There were no such Japanese strongholds in the east; in Hawaii, however, where there were 140,000 Japanese nationals (constituting 37 percent of the population), the Japanese were neither relocated nor interned. Even though such actions would have appeared even more congruent with strategic concerns, the political and economic implications of such a move would have been overwhelming. The Japanese were only vulnerable on the mainland.

Thus, by late March, the idea of evacuating Italian and German residents out of the state was losing support, while the movement to relocate all Japanese residents gained momentum. In the ensuing five months, more than 100,000 Japanese—70 percent of them U.S. citizens—were forcibly removed to inland concentration camps, beginning one of the greatest tragedies in American history. (At the same time, the all-Japanese 442nd Regimental Combat team, drafted out of the internment camps and Hawaii, became the most decorated unit of World War II.)

As the spring of 1942 turned into summer, General DeWitt's promise to follow the Japanese evacuation with those of the estimated 114,000 Italian and 97,000 German aliens in the western states never materialized. Slowly and gradually, life returned to normal for the Italian fishing colony in Santa Cruz—although certain travel, work, and residency restrictions in the coastal zones continued through the duration of the war.

On Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, in a move designed purely to generate political support, FDR had his Attorney General, Francis Biddle, announce that Italian nationals in the U.S. would no longer be classified as "enemies." Back in California, General DeWitt reluctantly lifted all military restrictions on Italians. (He lifted them for Germans the following January.)

In Santa Cruz, the majority of Italian nationals forced to move from their Italian neighborhoods in the coastal zone were allowed to return to their homes. My great grandmother was among them. Her "male notte" was over.

Little of what the Italians suffered through compares to, nor in any way diminishes, what their Japanese neighbors were forced to endure, but suffer, still, they did. For the most part, the Italians went back to their daily routines as they had been before the war—though as they soon learned, their lives, like the world they lived in, would never be the same.

Sources

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