

Una Storia Segreta

By Lawrence DiStasi, Adele Negro and Rose Scherini

UNA STORIA SEGRETA (the words in Italian mean both a secret story and a secret history), was developed by the American Italian Historical Association's Western Regional Chapter. It is dedicated to those who endured the confusions and losses of the wartime largely in silence. By giving them voice now, we hope that others will be encouraged to fill out this story—one we believe is not only worth telling, but crucial to understanding what has shaped us all.

Preface

"Why Not Do An Exhibit?" In March of 1993, at a conference sponsored by the American Italian Historical Association's Western Regional Chapter, *Una Storia Segreta* had its inception. During that half day, a panel of speakers for the first time bore public witness to the ways in which the wartime restrictions had marked their lives. No one could hear what had happened to Italian Americans in those dark days without realizing that far more remained to be told. The question was, how? At the close of the conference, Maria Gloria, one of the participants and a longtime columnist for *L'Italo Americano*, passed on a thought: "Why not do an exhibit?" Had any of us suspected what this would entail, or where it might lead, *Una Storia Segreta* might have been stillborn. As it was, innocence prevailed, and we set out to try.

Initial attempts to raise funds met with little success. The California Council for the Humanities considered the project's appeal "limited" and its premises questionable. Many in the community remained distant, cautious. Yet with the encouragement of a handful of supporters, the dedication of several members, and the help of a few individual donations, the exhibit opened at the Museo Italo Americano in San Francisco on February 24, 1994—the anniversary of the fateful day in 1942 when thousands of Italian Americans in California had to evacuate homes and lives suddenly off limits to them. The press responded to the exhibit in an unprecedented way: cover stories appeared in the San Francisco Examiner and in several Gannett newspapers, and a report on CNN was broadcast worldwide. Crowds at the Museo were among the largest ever recorded there, culminating on March 27 with an Open Forum that played to a standing-room-only crowd.

Due to prior commitments by the Museo, the exhibit closed in San Francisco on March 28, but its second life was about to begin. The Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento managed to secure the Rotunda of the State Capitol in Sacramento as the first traveling site. Thousands saw it there, the Governor signed a Proclamation attesting to its importance, and the Legislature passed a Resolution to the same effect.

Since then, *Una Storia Segreta* has grown in a way no one could have predicted. Donations to allow it to travel have come from each sponsoring organization on its 1993 tour: Sacramento, Santa Rosa, Pittsburg, San Jose, Monterey and Oakland. In Monterey, it received its most significant improvement to date: The Italian Heritage Society of Monterey Bay donated funds so that each of the 18 foamcore panels (which were never designed to take the rigors of travel) could be trimmed and framed in black metal, and a wooden crate built for shipping. This has readied the exhibit to open in Los

Angeles in 1995 and then to proceed to the East Coast for appearances in New York and other major cities eager to host it.

Most importantly, the secret history whose outlines *Una Storia Segreta* helped uncover has continued to flesh itself out. This story has remained hidden for 50 years because of the silence—first imposed by the government, then adopted as protective cover by those affected—that has always surrounded it. Not only has the story been suppressed from historical accounts, but the Italian American community itself has remained largely unaware of its existence. With the exhibit, memories have been jogged, eyes have been opened, voices have been found. New stories—always specific to each place, always imbuing the exhibit with the particular flavor of local experience—have emerged in a steady, and steadily expanding flow.

We have learned details of the hardship borne by those who were targeted: in Pittsburg, evacuated families were so hard pressed to find housing that Bettina Troia, now 102 years old, had to live in a chicken coop; those named 'alien' were so suspect that Nancy Billeci's father, trying to visit her mother giving birth in the County Hospital, was taken in handcuffs to visit his newborn child; those who tried to keep their jobs were given humiliating choices, such as that offered to Angela Ardent's father-in-law at Mare Island Shipyards: "just drop the 'e' from Ardente," he was told; thus did the Italian 'Ardente' become the Americanized 'Ardent' ever after.

In Monterey, we heard similar stories. Joe Sollecito told of Rosina Trovato, who learned one day that both her son and her nephew had gone down with the "Arizona" at Pearl Harbor, and the next day that she had to leave her home. Vitina Spadaro remembered how her evacuated family, relieved to have found a rental at last, was thrown into new despair when the landlord learned they were Italian, and chased them away. John Mercurio related how naval officers appeared at his door two days after Pearl Harbor, ordered him and his father to sail their commandeered boat to San Francisco, and then ordered them to make their way home however they could. Other boat owners told the same story: U.S. citizens all, all were told flatly that their boats were confiscated for the duration, and were left to make do—first with rented boats, then with their own boats returned in unusable condition.

As such tales accumulated, we began to see the underlying significance of these events. Though 600,000 Italian Americans were branded 'enemy aliens' because they lacked citizenship, it was not just they who were scarred. Lelio Sbrazza, an American citizen, was living in Berkeley at the time; because of his name, his hunting rifles were confiscated and never returned. Frank Brogno lived in Gary, Indiana during the war: his father, an American citizen, was visited by local firemen, who seized the Brogno's prized Philco radio—and the 'contraband' of others in Gary whose Italian names made them suspect.

Most poignant of all may be the plight of the women. Nino Aiello first told us about the Cable Act of 1916. According to its terms, his mother, American-born, lost her citizenship when she married an Italian man. Though she managed to get naturalized before the war, others were not so lucky: Elaine Null, a postal employee, had to fingerprint her own mother as an alien—and only at the Pittsburg Open Forum found out why. Having married an Italian immigrant, her American mother thereby lost her citizenship, and had to register as an 'enemy alien.' Hope Cardinalli of Monterey found herself in the same boat: an American-born citizen married to an Italian, she was ordered to evacuate from Monterey as an enemy alien. She refused, hired a lawyer, and was able to stay, but the insult remained.

The sum total of this becomes plain: the prejudice that, in America, had long attached to Italian-ness concentrated its venom during the war. Many immigrants felt it as never before; their children felt it too. Their language had become the 'enemy's language,' their heritage one that was not only alien, but inimical to the American way. It seemed best to abandon both, and thousands did just that. The results are with us still.

Now, fifty years later, we who put together *Una Storia Segreta* are encouraged by the responses we have received, both locally and nationally. Apprehensive at first that people might be disturbed by what we had assembled, we have come to realize that the opposite is the case. Though some may quarrel with our perspective, and still others prefer that the past remain undisturbed, most Italian Americans who see the exhibit are released by it, uplifted. It is as if now, with the

larger story in place at last, and with the knowledge that others have spoken out, they too have the right to be heard, for their experiences have been publicly validated. Even thus late, even absent the voices of those who suffered most, is this so.

Our hope is that the process will continue. Our intention is that it will, that what has begun here will complete itself, and that these long-buried events will take their rightful place in the true history of the homefront.

[Signed:]

Lawrence DiStasi
Berkeley, CA

Introduction

Italian immigration to the West Coast, which began as early as the Gold Rush, reached full force around the turn of the century. By the 1930s the Italian population was at its peak: Italian Americans comprised the largest ethnic group not only in San Francisco, but in the entire United States. The thirties were not easy for these immigrants, either politically or economically. The Depression caused financial hardship for most. In addition, Italy under Mussolini was split between those who favored Il Duce's totalitarian policies, and those who opposed them. Fascists battled anti-fascists both under- and above-ground. The battle crossed the ocean with the many anti-fascists who fled to exile in America.

Italian communities like those in North Beach engaged in these disputes, not least in their newspapers. For the most part, however, the immigrant generation supported Mussolini. He seemed to have gained the world's respect for Italy by turning the old country into a disciplined modern nation. Much of the world press, including the major organs in the United States, portrayed him as a hero—the first modern leader to lift his nation out of post–World War I chaos and Depression.

In 1935, with his invasion of Ethiopia, the portrait began to change. The League of Nations imposed economic sanctions on Italy. Many Italian Americans, following the lead of their Italian language press, saw this as a betrayal and continued to support the country where so many had relatives in the service. Some donated to the Italian Red Cross, while thousands of others sent gold wedding rings and copper postcards to support the Italian war effort. When Italy allied with Germany and joined in the attack on France in 1940, however, the immigrants' worst fears were realized. Their American sons might soon have to make war on their Italian relatives.

With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the U.S. declaration of war on all three Axis powers, Italian Americans and the formerly pro-fascist newspapers hastened to affirm their loyalty to their adopted country. It made little difference. The measures to come made many immigrants feel that they were being blamed for where they had been born.

Una Storia Segreta documents some of what happened in the days following Pearl Harbor: the internment of "dangerous" aliens beginning on the night of December 7; the re-registration of all enemy aliens and restrictions on their possessions and movements; the evacuation of thousands of aliens from "prohibited zones" on the West Coast; and the enforcement, again on the West Coast, of a stringent 8PM to 6AM curfew. Failure to comply with any element could, and often did, lead to arrest and detention.

Subsequent months (February through June 1942) were a time of fear and confusion. Rumors and newspaper articles reported that what all Californians were witnessing—the mass internment of Japanese Americans, both citizens and aliens alike—was being considered in some form for Italian and German Americans as well. Executive Order 9066 had made it possible to remove anyone, and General John DeWitt, the head of the Western Defense Command, seemed eager to use it. No one knew what might happen, or when.

By June, political and economic considerations caused all such plans to be abandoned. In October 1942, Italians were formally removed from the enemy alien classification, and allowed to return to prohibited zones. The ordeal was not complete, however. Ironically, this was the very time that a few naturalized citizens whom the Tenney Committee found "dangerous" received exclusion orders: they were ordered to move from Military Zones 1 and 2, which covered the majority of California. Thus, even though most Italian aliens were no longer in the 'enemy alien' category, those interned in December 1941 and the newly excluded citizens remained in that category until the Fall of 1943, when Italy's fascist government surrendered.

Despite the years of research that went into it, *Una Storia Segreta* makes no claim to be complete: some government documents are still classified, and requests for data under the Freedom of Information Act can wait years for a response.

Still, we believe that what is known must be told now, primarily so that similar episodes might be prevented in the future. In addition, no one who has spoken to those affected can fail to be moved by the impact these measures had on them, their families, and their communities. Neither can one avoid the questions that arise. To what degree, for example, did the targeting of those whose first language was Italian hasten the disuse of the Italian language? Aside from much anecdotal evidence, no studies exist to provide figures. We do know, however, that many immigrants, clubs, and stores made a point of not using Italian in public, while others stopped teaching the language to their children. The U.S. Government surely encouraged this trend by its poster proclaiming "DON'T SPEAK THE ENEMY'S LANGUAGE. SPEAK AMERICAN!"

Much more might and surely will be said about these and other long-lasting effects. For now we think it appropriate to give the last words to Frances Cardinalli of Pittsburg, whose aging parents had to evacuate their home in Pittsburg and move to Centerville, near Fremont. Referring to a photo of her mother in her Sunday best, we asked if that was how her mother looked on the day she had to leave.

"Oh God, no. It looked like a funeral. We were all dead. We couldn't part. We never were separated before."

If immigration itself constitutes a little death, then the wartime for many Italian immigrants, and their communities, may come to be seen as yet another.

Prelude to War

Benito Mussolini came to power in 1922 with the now-famous March of his blackshirts on Rome. Although the American left opposed him from the beginning, he was widely touted in the popular press as a "black-shirted Garibaldi." The fascisti were compared to the Old West's vigilantes. Even *Nation* magazine ran an article during the 1932 Presidential campaign entitled, "Wanted: A Mussolini."

This adulation of the "new Columbus" extended through the early thirties. Delegation after delegation went for an audience with the Duce, coming away impressed with his energy, candor, and apparent ability to reshape the Italian character (which Americans were sure needed reshaping). President Roosevelt sent several new cabinet members to learn from Mussolini's social programs, including government support for the arts and social security. To Italian Americans, this added fuel to their already inflamed hopes: Mussolini was helping them gain the respect of America and Americans they had always lacked.

When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, respect changed to widespread revulsion. The expansion of fascism's dark side by Nazi Germany accelerated this process, especially when Mussolini allied himself with Hitler in 1936. When Italy joined Germany's invasion of France in June of 1940, President Roosevelt's condemnation of the Duce as a "jackal" for having struck a "dagger" into "the back of his neighbor" evoked few disclaimers.

The days from June 10, 1940 to December 7, 1941 were filled with anxiety for Italian Americans. Though they conveyed their dismay over FDR's choice of words, they sensed that the die had been cast. America would sooner or later side

with Britain and France to defend what remained of Europe against fascist aggression. Mussolini's Italy had become in name, if not yet in fact, America's enemy. Italians and Italian Americans could soon be at war.

It took only a year. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 destroyed the remaining American reservations about entering the battle. When the President a few days later declared war on Italy, Italian aliens (those immigrants who, for whatever reason, had failed to complete the naturalization process) automatically became "enemy" aliens. They were subject to whatever measures the government deemed necessary.

Internment

Beginning on the night of December 7, 1941, Japanese, German and Italian aliens were arrested by the FBI. How could this happen? The U.S. had not declared war by that date.

The story actually begins in September 1939, when Britain and France declared war against the Axis nations of Germany and Italy (later to include Japan). President Roosevelt at that time asked FBI Director Hoover to compile a list of persons to be arrested in case of national emergency. Names placed on this Custodial Detention List eventually included pro-Communists, anti-fascists, pro-fascists, pro-Nazis, and even some Jewish refugees.

The authority for these arrests came from Title 50 of the U.S. Code, based on the 1798 Alien & Sedition Acts, which gives the government power to detain aliens in times of emergency.

Under this authority, hundreds of Italians were arrested in the months immediately after Pearl Harbor. About 250 individuals were interned for up to two years in military camps in Montana, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas. By June of 1942, the total reached 1,521 Italian aliens arrested by the FBI, many for curfew violations alone. Though most of the latter were released after short periods of detention, the effects on them and others in the community are not hard to imagine.

The arrest and internment procedure in San Francisco followed this pattern: FBI officers arrived at night, searched the home, and took the individual to an Immigration Service detention facility at Silver and Yale Avenues. The family was not informed why the arrest was made or what would happen.

Arrestees were sometimes moved to another detention facility at Sharp Park (now in the city of Pacifica) where quonset huts had been hurriedly set up on a golf course. Some were held there for as long as one year. Later, Italian prisoners of war were also held at Sharp Park.

Most of the arrestees were then shipped by train to Fort Missoula, Montana, where over 1,000 Italian nationals had been interned since May, 1941. These Italians were merchant marines whose ships had been impounded at Atlantic ports after the European war began in 1939.

In Montana, the interned aliens were given pro forma hearings before boards consisting of military officers and lay citizens. They were not informed of the charges against them, nor were they represented by legal counsel. The information before the boards consisted entirely of FBI reports. Researchers have often noted, on examining FBI files, the many errors, the misinterpretation of innocent acts, and the lack of rumor verification—all of which are found in these aliens' files.



Italian American internees watching a soccer game at Missoula.

Most of the San Francisco internees were members of the Ex-Combattenti, the Federation of Italian

War Veterans in America. Veterans of World War I (when Italy and America were allies), they were apparently singled out because the group was on the FBI list of "dangerous" organizations. During the thirties, the veterans' main project had been collecting and distributing funds for war widows and orphans in Italy. By 1941 the State Department had decided that the receiving agencies in Italy were too "closely identified" with the Italian Government; continued disbursement of monies to the Associazione Nazionale Famiglie dei Caduti in Guerra (National Association for Families of War Dead) and various Community Welfare Funds was a violation of the 1939 U.S. Neutrality Act. The FBI then began surveillance of individual members. FBI files do not, however, reveal any illegal or "subversive" activities. In fact, some ex-combattenti who were openly anti-fascist or, at most, apolitical, were interned.

Italy's surrender on September 8, 1943 brought about the release of most of the Italian American internees by year's end. Some had been paroled months earlier after "exoneration" by a second hearing board appealed for by their families. Nonetheless, most of the men had spent two years as prisoners, moving from camp to camp every three to four months. Neither they nor their families would ever forget it.

Restrictions

In January of 1942, all enemy aliens were required to register at local post offices around the country. Although all resident aliens had already registered in 1940 under the Smith Act, now as 'enemy' aliens they would be required to be fingerprinted, photographed, and carry their photo-bearing "enemy alien registration cards" at all times. To those affected this was alarming; in retrospect, it recalls the authoritarian methods of the very fascists it was meant to combat.

Then came a series of Army proclamations, some directed at all enemy aliens, some only for those on the West Coast:

1. Travel: no travel beyond a five-mile radius of home; longer trips require application for travel permit.
2. Contraband: all firearms, shortwave radios, cameras, and "signaling devices" (including flashlights) prohibited; all to be turned in or confiscated. Many were never returned.
3. Curfew: enemy aliens on the West Coast confined to homes between 8:00 PM and 6:00 AM.

The impact of these restrictions was widespread and apparently unanticipated by the government. In places like Monterey, Santa Cruz, Pittsburg and San Francisco—where the Italians, many of them long-term residents without final citizenship papers, constituted a majority of the fishermen, scavengers, restaurant workers and janitors—the restrictions created serious employment and food-supply problems.

The impact on personal lives can only be suggested. Because of the travel restrictions, mothers could not visit their children in hospitals if they were more than five miles away. Families could not attend a relative's funeral. No alien could make a trip to visit distant friends or relatives, nor even to visit their own sons in uniform at military installations.

For the fishermen, the regulations seemed arbitrary at best, foolish or cruel at worst. In Pittsburg, the inland fishermen were classed as an exempt industry and so were allowed to fish. However, Monterey and San Francisco fishermen (and all those who fished the Pacific Ocean) were restricted: the aliens could not go out on their boats, and scores of citizens who owned large purse seiners had them confiscated by the Coast Guard for patrol duty. Giuseppe Spadaro's "Marettimo" was returned to him in such poor condition that he could not use it; before he could have it repaired, a storm destroyed it altogether.

In the West, the curfew caused fear, suspicion and worse. Those picked up for violations were left to wonder if a neighbor had informed on them. Animosity festered and lingered. The legacy of all this is hard to calculate, but one thing seems evident: arresting a truck farmer unable to complete his delivery run by 8PM probably did little to help security but much to destroy the trust necessary for community life. And whether such a person could ever trust their government is something else again.

Evacuation

For enemy aliens, February was the "cruellest month." Fears of a Japanese invasion of the West Coast ran wild. After a Japanese submarine apparently landed some torpedoes in Santa Barbara, the pressure to move the Japanese population soared. Italians and Germans, feeling the hysteria and reading news reports about the planned removal of all aliens to inland camps, feared the worst.

They were not far off. The order to evacuate "prohibited" zones along the California coast no later than February 24 was directed at all enemy aliens. Italian aliens, along with their Japanese and German counterparts, began the wrenching task of finding a place to live and leaving those they loved.

The total numbers who had to leave their homes is still unknown, but in places like Monterey, Pittsburg, and Santa Cruz, thousands had to move. In some cases, the new house might be only a block away; in others, it might require a trip of ten, fifteen, or fifty miles. Without cars or freeways, such gaps between families seemed unbridgeable. For some it was unbearable. Among the several suicides reported in the newspapers was that of 65-year-old Martini Battistessa of Richmond, who threw himself in front of a train on February 21, 1942.

Even aliens with sons or grandsons in the Armed Forces were not exempt from the move. One San Francisco resident who had to leave his home near Fisherman's Wharf was the father of a serviceman killed at Pearl Harbor. In Santa Cruz, Steve Ghio came home on leave from the Navy to find the houses in his neighborhood boarded up. He could not find his parents or relatives until he learned of their forced move and obtained a new address from the local police.

The immediate personal and economic effects of this evacuation were vivid enough. California's fishing fleet was decimated. Ninety-seven-year-old Placido Abono was moved from his Pittsburg home to Oakley, ten miles away, on a stretcher.

By July, when the invasion scare had subsided and the entire Japanese-American population had been interned, the Army rescinded its order of evacuation. But many Italian aliens—some of whom could not read Italian, let alone English—remained in the dark about this change too: the notices that they could go home were simply posted in local post offices.

Additional ironies abound. Italian Americans were not only the largest ethnic group in the nation; they were also the largest group in the Armed Forces. Nevertheless, parents and grandparents were compelled to move from the homes where they had raised those now serving their country.

Another is that at a time when all human and food resources were needed for the war effort, many men and women had to give up their jobs because they were located in prohibited zones. Thus, when large numbers of coastal fishermen could no longer fish, the government poster, "Fish is Fighting Food ...We need more," encouraged Americans to increase consumption of that which its own policies had caused to be scarce.

Such ironies may evoke a smile now. At the time, the smile was likely to be tinged with disbelief: did the left hand know what the right was doing?

Exclusion

The Western Defense Commander, Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt, wanted to remove not only aliens, but also naturalized citizens from the "sensitive" military zones along the coast. He succeeded in removing even American-born Japanese-Americans. However, after much debate and no little confusion for those concerned, Washington, particularly the Attorney General and the President, decided against removing Italians and Germans. The logistics, not to mention the political and economic repercussions, were too formidable. Nonetheless, DeWitt won a small victory when he was allowed to initiate an Individual Exclusion Program for naturalized citizens.



Catherine Buccellato with her son, Nick. Like many others, Nick later came home on leave to find his house empty. While he had been serving his country, his mother had to evacuate her Pittsburg, CA home.

In the Fall of 1942—after the Italians had been removed from the enemy alien classification—254 Italian and German naturalized citizens received exclusion orders. These orders gave them ten days to move out of the designated zones. Most were German immigrants and West Coast residents, but some lived on the eastern and southern coasts of the United States.

In San Francisco, about 20 Italian-Americans, both men and women, were excluded. They were community leaders, Italian-language school instructors, staff of the pro-fascist Italian-language newspaper *L'Italia*, and members of the Italian War Veterans. Most were long-time residents of the city and had been naturalized citizens for many years.

What led to the selection of these specific individuals for exclusion? The community leaders and *L'Italia* staff had been named as pro-fascists by witnesses before the State Legislature's UnAmerican Activities Committee at hearings held in San Francisco in May of 1942. The hearings were held in the Borgia Room of the St. Francis Hotel, the irony of which none of the senators seemed to recognize. The Tenney Committee—named after its chair, state Senator Jack Tenney—concluded, after four days of testimony, that three community leaders, Sylvester Andriano, Ettore Patrizi and Renzo Turco, were "the leaders of the Fascist movement in California." They further concluded that Patrizi's newspaper *L'Italia*, and the Italian-language school, DopoScuola, were centers of Fascist propaganda. Some of these names had previously been brought to the attention of the FBI, but it had made no arrests of any naturalized citizens.

In September the Army acted. It held individual hearings similar to those for the internees—no charges were made, no legal counsel allowed. Then it served exclusion orders, commanding each individual to move out of Military Zones 1 and 2, which covered about two-thirds of California. Ettore Patrizi, 77 years old, a U.S. resident and naturalized citizen since 1899, received his exclusion order while hospitalized. Andriano and Turco, both attorneys, had to vacate their homes and law offices, and were unable to practice law where they relocated. Nino Guttadauro, president of the War Veterans and business manager of the Crab Fishermen's Protective Association, left San Francisco to find work and housing for his family, which he eventually found in Reno, the nearest city with available jobs.

These moves took place in October 1942, just before the Government announced that Italians were no longer "enemy aliens." That did not change the status of the "dangerous" aliens who had been interned earlier, nor of these naturalized citizens who had now been excluded.

The excludees were allowed to return to their homes at the end of 1943, following Italy's surrender in September. Most had spent about 15 months in exile. They had been reporting regularly to the FBI in cities like Reno where they had relocated. Why the exclusion was necessary, and why the FBI could not have kept them under surveillance in their own homes, has never been explained. After all, in October 1942, the invasion fears had greatly lessened...and opportunities for sabotage were just as great in Reno as in San Francisco.

The same questions arise regarding those aliens evacuated from the coast. More than a few—Angelina Bruno of Pittsburg was one—had moved to houses overlooking Army bases, where sabotage could have been a real possibility. It seemed not to matter. Neither did the fact that a large proportion of the Pittsburg evacuees were women and a few men too old to fish. Were such people a threat? Were such lives disrupted to any good purpose?

Aftermath

M We call this exhibit *Una Storia Segreta* for two reasons: one, the country, including the government, has never fully acknowledged these events; two, many of the families involved have never wanted to talk about it. Many were humiliated by the treatment of spouses or relatives, and are still angry about it.

More than fifty years later, we are able to prepare this exhibit because of the persistence of a few researchers in probing government archives, and the forthright responses of the families who do want their stories told.

Aside from these sources, surprisingly little has been written. One of the excludees, Remo Bosia, published a book in 1971 about his experiences. In 1983 the report of the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment included

a chapter on German Americans, mentioning Italians only to say that the Justice Department had interned 264 of them. More of the story was filled out with the publication in 1985 of John Christgau's book *"Enemies": World War II Alien Internment*, about German Americans interned in North Dakota, and again in 1990 with Stephen Fox's *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II*. Yet half a century later, the story remains incomplete. Some of the records remain classified, FBI files are censored, and requests for information can wait years for a response.

Recent attempts to obtain some redress for the wartime treatment do show signs of movement. At the 1992 California convention of the Sons of Italy, their Social Justice Commission passed a resolution requesting "full public disclosure of the injustices suffered by Italo-Americans during World War II, and...that apology be made not only to Americans of Italian ancestry, but to the nation as a whole." One man, S.H. Bianchini of Monterey, was responsible for bringing this matter to the attention of the Sons of Italy.

Unfortunately, the response to this resolution from the U.S. Department of Justice addressed only the fact that "a relatively small number of ethnic Germans and Italians received individual exclusion orders in contrast to the mass detention of Japanese Americans." Could it be that the current Department of Justice does not even know about the Army-initiated internments and evacuations? And, even if they know, do they not think it important to acknowledge the injustice done to thousands of Italians who had to evacuate their homes? In Canada, where Italian aliens were also interned, the government issued a public apology in 1990.

A number of initiatives recently begun by other groups in this country also suggest that the time for an Italian American petition is at hand. Interned German Americans have taken their case to the courts. Also preparing a court case are the Japanese Peruvians who, though unjustly and illegally sent to the U.S. to be interned, were not included in the 1988 Civil Liberties Act granting apologies and reparations to the interned Japanese Americans.

That the authorities of the time suspected an injustice is clear. In the FBI files of some Italian internees, researchers have found copies of a July 1943 memo from Attorney General Francis Biddle, declaring his opinion that the Custodial Detention List was "invalid;" that the evidence used to declare an alien "dangerous" was inadequate because it lacked evidence of illegal actions; and that the episode was "a mistake that should be rectified for the future."

Nevertheless, whenever conflict between the U.S. and another country erupts, the talk of internment of the nationals involved flares once again. During the Cold War, it was the Russians; then it was the Cubans; and as recently as the 1990 Gulf War, Iraqi Americans were threatened with internment.

It is time America realized what is fundamental to its creed: to condemn one of us on the basis of our origins, national or otherwise, is to condemn us all.

Additional Information

- *Una Storia Segreta: the secret history of Italian American evacuation and internment during World War II*, edited and with an introduction by Lawrence DiStasi; foreword by Sandra M. Gilbert.

Sources

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