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A Secret Story

Wartime Restrictions on Italian-Americans

During the early months of World War II, the Federal Government restricted the freedom of Italian American immigrants across the United States. The Italians were the largest immigrant group in California and in the United States when World War broke out in 1941. The number of Italian born immigrants who were legal residents but had not yet gained citizenship exceeded 600,000 nationwide. They had resided here for many years and their children and grandchildren were citizens.

Across the nation, in community after community, these Italian Americans were required to carry special identification cards. They were restricted from living or traveling within certain coastal zones and subjected to curfews, travel restrictions, and seizure of their personal property, even businesses. Violation of any of the restrictions could lead to arrest and internment. California had one of the largest concentrations of Italian immigrants, especially in the coastal communities of the State. California's 100,000 plus Italian born immigrants and their families were hit the hardest by the wartime restrictions with some 52,000 being restricted. In California, thousands of Italian American immigrants were arrested and interrogated, hundreds of Italian Americans, especially the community leaders, teachers and journalists were interned for the duration of the war in federal camps. Some Italians from



Sacramento were also interned.

An estimated 10,000 California Italians were ordered to leave their homes and relocate from their coastal communities and restricted from returning. Cities like Pittsburg and Monterey were predominately Italian prior to the war. Over 3,000 were forced to leave Monterey and more than 1500 had to leave Pittsburg where virtually every family was affected. Other fishing communities in San Francisco, Santa Cruz, San Diego, Eureka, and Los Angeles were also heavily affected. Even the parents of baseball star Joe Di Maggio were barred from visiting their son's San Francisco Fishermen's Wharf restaurant.

Despite the restrictions on the home front, The Italian Americans continued to prove their loyalty to the United States through their sacrifice on the front lines. It is estimated that more than 1 million Italian Americans served in the United States military during the war and that they constituted a large percentage of the total military fighting force. At the same time, their families on the home front were being stripped of their livelihoods and uprooted from their homes, families and communities. In one California town, nine mothers were given special honors because each had four sons in the US armed forces. All nine were of

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Italian birth. Seven were not citizens. All of these seven mothers were restricted by the government and could not even visit their boys in military camp. One can only imagine the anguish felt by these mothers. These events occurred when two of America's largest cities were governed by Italian American Mayors. Angelo Rossi was Mayor of San Francisco and Fiorello La Guardia was Mayor of New York during the wartime years. Both were sons of Italian immigrants. The restrictions were lifted on Columbus Day, 1942. Documents of the time admit ***"they are a mistake."***

The impact of the wartime experience on the Italian communities in California and their culture has had a lasting effect. During the war, Italian language schools and newspapers were closed down never to reopen. Some 50 after school Italian language programs for California children were shut down. The government also actively suppressed the speaking of Italian during the war. Many Italians

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