

## ITALIAN AMERICAN WARTIME EXHIBIT OPENS IN SACRAMENTO

APRIL 16 - MAY 8, 1994  
CALIFORNIA STATE  
CAPITOL ROTUNDA

*Opening Reception: Sunday,  
April 17 - 5:30 to 7:30 pm  
ICS members only*

*Please call (916) 962-6655  
for reception reservations*



arriving at the Missoula, Montana, internment camp, ca. 1942.

*On Sunday, May 1 at 2:00 pm, there will be a public forum at the Capitol in which a panel of scholars and community members will discuss the meaning of these experiences for Italian Americans today.*

During the early months of World War II, the Federal Government arrested thousands of Italian American immigrants in California, interned hundreds for the duration of the war in military camps and forced thousands more to evacuate the coastal zones of California. Across the nation, the freedom of more than half a million Italian immigrants was restricted by government measures which included carrying identification cards, curfews, travel restrictions and seizure of their personal property.

At the time, the Italians were the largest immigrant group in the United States and in California. California's 100,000 plus Italian born immigrants and their families were hit the hardest by these government measures.

The exhibit was created to enable Italian Americans to tell the story of this painful episode in the Italian American experience and enter their experience in the history of this nation. This is an untold chapter in American history. The exhibit is appropriately titled "*Una Storia Segreta - A Secret Story.*" The need for this exhibit and for this story to be included in our nation's history books is reflected in the tale of one San Mateo woman who had vivid childhood recollections of these events. When she tried to tell her children about them they told her she was crazy and that it never happened because it wasn't in their history books.

Among the items included in the exhibit are internal government documents revealing that the highest government officials knew the wartime suppression of the Italian immigrants **"was a mistake"** and could not be justified on any legal or factual grounds. **Even so, top political and military leaders intended to arrest and intern all the Italian immigrants and their children, both citizen and non-citizen alike; whether Italian born or American born.**

Fortunately, Italian American resistance and the fact that Italian Americans were an integral part of American society and the war effort prevented the mass imprisonment of the Italian American population. Over 500,000 Italian Americans served in the armed forces.

Still, the impact of the wartime experience was devastating to the Italian communities in California and its effects are still being felt. The bonds which tied the Italian people in the United States to one another and their communities were damaged for generations to come. Exhibit sponsors hope the exhibit will help repair the damage and assist Italian Americans in rescuing their cultural heritage and rebuilding their sense of community as a people by remembering where they came from.

According to exhibit organizer Larry DiStasi, "The culture was silenced. A powerful message was sent and received: Italian language and culture, and those who promoted either or both, represented a danger to America." "After the war, people were afraid to be too Italian," says exhibit curator Rose Scherini.

An Italian American Redress Committee has been formed to seek recognition of these events from the Congress. **In the words of a Japanese American woman who viewed the exhibit, "Italian Americans should be angry about what was done to them and they too should be compensated."**

The exhibit has drawn large crowds and a great deal of media attention since it opened in San Francisco in February. CNN covered the story on its national news on March 20. The exhibit is sponsored by the Western Regional Chapter of the American Italian Historical Association. Exhibit organizers plan to send the exhibit across the nation and find a permanent home for it. Funding is needed to assist in putting the exhibit on the road and making it into a permanent chronicle of these events. Persons wishing to be financial sponsors should send checks payable to the AIHA-WRC, 517 Stannage Avenue, Apt. B, Albany, CA. 94706 or contact Larry DiStasi at [510] 658-2976.