

UNA STORIA SEGRETA AN EXHIBIT ABOUT WORLD WAR II MEASURES AGAINST ITALIAN AMERICANS



I. THE UNTOLD STORY

Una Storia Segreta - is a special exhibit which tells the largely unknown story of government measures taken against Italian Americans in California during World War II.

Recording the most painful episode in the Italian American experience, this moving exhibit portrays the extent of government efforts to restrict the activity of the Italian immigrants on the West Coast of the United States during World War II.

This is the first time this material has been brought together to tell the story of how the lives of tens of thousands of Italian Americans were disrupted by government violations of their civil liberties.

Most Americans know about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, but few are aware that the federal government also limited the freedom of 600,000 Italian

born immigrants. These immigrants were legal US residents who had been living in the United States for decades, many of whom were also American citizens.

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Since more than half a million Italians throughout the United States were affected by the wartime restrictions, many of which violated their civil rights, it might be imagined that knowledge of these events would be widespread. Yet, just the opposite is the case. Few Americans, even Italian Americans on the West Coast where restrictions were the most severe, seem to be fully aware about what happened.

Appropriately, the exhibit is entitled "*Una Storia Segreta -- The Secret Story.*"

The exhibit opened in San Francisco, California at the Museo Italo Americano on February 24, the Day in 1942 when thousands of California Italians had to move away from coastal areas deemed "sensitive" by the War Department. On a national tour, It was displayed in the Rotunda of the California State Capitol from April 16 to May 8, 1994 in Sacramento, California.

II. THE ITALIANS IN CALIFORNIA.

The Italians were the last large European group to arrive in the United States before World War II. The mass immigration of the Italians to the Americas was the largest migration of a people from one continent to another in history.

More than six million Italians settled in the United States alone and most of that settlement occurred in this century. As a result, Italian Americans are one of the largest ancestry groups in the United States. According to the 1990 census, Italian Americans number over 15 million people and are the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States.

Italian immigration to the West Coast of the United States, which began even before the gold Rush, reached full force in the early decades of the twentieth century. By the 1930's, the Italian population was at its peak. Today, more than 1.5 million Italian Americans live in California.

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III. AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

During the early months of World War II, the federal government arrested more than a thousand 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.

These measures affected the lives of thousands of Italian immigrants and disrupted their family life and ability to earn a living in the coastal zones.

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IV. FORCED EVACUATION FROM COASTAL AREAS

California's 100,000 plus Italian born immigrants and their families were hit the hardest by these government measures.

The anti-Italian campaign came as a shock to the Italian immigrants, many of whom had lived in the state for decades, raised families and had sons in the American military forces.

Hardest hit by the evacuation orders were the Italian fishermen who dominated the fishing industry along the California coast. Thousands of Italian fishermen in Monterey, Santa Cruz, Eureka, San Pedro, San Francisco and other seaside communities were forced to give up their boats and livelihoods and move inland.

In all, an estimated 10,000 Italians were taken from their homes along the California coast.

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In Pittsburg, California, many of whose earliest settlers immigrated from the tiny village of Isola Delle Femmine in Sicily, virtually every family was affected. More than

1,400 Italian Americans, nearly all of them women and children were forced to leave town as security risks. Another 3000 had to leave Monterey. The evacuation idled 75 percent of Monterey's fishing fleet. In San Francisco, 80 percent of the fishing fleet was Italian.

In many cases, whole families relocated rather than be separated from a parent that was Italian born. The oldest resident forced out of Pittsburg was a 97-year-old man, removed in his bed. All pleas for clemency failed.

"People became so frightened that they were afraid of a knock on the door", says Neno Aiello of Pittsburg who was 13, " You never knew who it might be and who might be taken away."

VII. LIBERATION

V. WARTIME RESTRICTIONS

The wartime restrictions on the Italian population were applied nationwide. Across the United States, in community after community, Italian immigrants were required to register with the government and carry identification cards.

The measures taken against the Italian population included restrictions against living, working or traveling within designated coastal zones of the West Coast. For many, travel was limited to no more than five miles from home or work. The parents of baseball hero Joe DiMaggio were forbidden to travel more than five miles without a permit.

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The impact on personal lives can only be suggested. Because of the travel restrictions, mothers could not visit their children in hospitals, families could not attend a relative's funeral, and parents could not even visit their own sons in uniform at military installations.

Others had firearms, cameras, flashlights and radios confiscated because of a government ban on their ownership by the Italian immigrants.

Curfews made the Italian immigrants prisoners in their own homes. Changes in residence and employment were to be reported.

Violation of any of the restrictions could result in internment.

VI. INTERNMENT

An estimated 1,600 Italian immigrants were arrested during the first six months after Pearl harbor, among them, grandmothers, fishermen, waiters, newspaper editors and journalists, language teachers and members of the Italian community organizations

Those interned were primarily the community leaders.

Some 264 Italian Americans, citizen and non-citizen alike, were interned for the duration of the war in a military camp at Missoula, Montana.

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VII. LIBERATION

It was on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, when the United States declared that resident Italian immigrants would no longer be considered internal "enemies" and the wartime restrictions were removed.

Although several hundred Italian Americans remained in internment camps until the end of the war, on Columbus Day, Italian Americans share with their children the history of these

Italians with whom they share a common heritage and celebrate for those who were liberated.

"I believe myself to be good, but I find myself deceived."

Still, this was a painful experience in the Italian American experience. How painful is dramatized by the tragedy of the five elderly Italians who committed suicide when ordered to relocate.

One, Stefano Terranova, jumped off a three story building in San Francisco, leaving a note that read, in part, "I believe myself to be good, but I find myself deceived."

When authorities told Giuseppe Mecheli that he could not live in his Vallejo home after February 24, the 57-year-old fisherman cut his throat with a butcher knife. Martini Battistessa, age 65, unable to complete his naturalization before his adopted country classified him as an enemy alien and expelled him from his home of twenty years, threw himself in front of a passenger train as it passed through Richmond, California. And near Stockton, Giovanni Sanguenetti, aged 62 and unable to live with the stigma of being an enemy alien, hanged himself.

VIII. IT WAS A MISTAKE

Among the items included in the exhibit are internal government documents revealing that the highest government officials knew that the wartime suppression of the Italian immigrants was a "mistake that should be rectified for the future."

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Even so, top military and government leaders intended to arrest and intern the entire Italian immigrant population and their children.

Italian American resistance and the fact that the 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 US armed forces during the war.

The widespread participation by Italians in American life and in the defense effort during both the First and Second World Wars reflected the underlying loyalty of the Italian immigrants to their adopted land. It is a loyalty that is not questioned today but it was then, only 50 years ago.

IX. SILENCING A CULTURE.

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 to one another and to their communities were damaged for generations to come.

According to exhibit organizer Lawrence DiStasi, "A powerful message was sent, and received: Italian language and Italian culture and those who represented either or both, represented a danger to America"

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The culture was silenced. A part of the exhibit documents the effects on the Italian language when, in late 1941, San Francisco's three Italian language schools were closed by the government. Almost overnight, Italian language and culture became suspect. Signs were posted in all areas of the city including Italian markets and Italian clubs warning: "DO NOT SPEAK THE ENEMY'S LANGUAGE."

The actions taken against Italian immigrants shattered the Italian American community. Italian Americans of the period found it was not popular to be Italian and downplayed their ancestry. Many Italian Americans gave up their language and culture. The trauma of being labeled disloyal led some to reject their ethnicity. In some cases names were changed to avoid being identified as Italian.

"After the war, people were afraid to be too Italian", says exhibit curator Rose Scherini. According to DiStasi, "Large numbers of Italian Americans remain in a kind of ethnic shadow to this day. Most feel stigmatized without knowing why."

It is the premise of this exhibit that the measures taken against Italian born immigrants during World war II, and the fears they generated, capped a prior history of nativist prejudice in a way that effectively silenced Italian Americans for generations.

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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.

The need for this exhibit and for this story to be included in our nations history books is reflected by the sad tale of a San Mateo woman who had vivid childhood memories of these events. When she tried to tell her children about what happened they said she was crazy- that these events did not happen because they were not in their history books.

In the words of a Japanese American woman who viewed the exhibit, " The Italian people should be angry about what was done to them and they too should be compensated." At the least, their story should be included in the story of our nation.