

## " THEIR CRIME? BEING OF ITALIAN ANCESTRY "

Thousands of people had the opportunity to see the Italian American Wartime Exhibit , "*UNA STORIA SEGRETA*," which was on display in the California State Capitol Rotunda from April 16 to May 8, 1994.

The exhibit recalled the traumatic time only 50 years ago when more than 600,000 Italian immigrants and their families faced internment, relocation and government restrictions on their freedom.

For most people , seeing the exhibit at the Capitol made them aware for the first time that these events actually occurred. Some expressed shock at learning how Italian immigrants had been treated by the government during the war. A frequent refrain heard at the exhibit was "I didn't realize!" Most agreed with exhibit organizers that this was a story that needed to be told.

It is a story that is still unfolding and one that has been suppressed for too long. A number of Italian American schoolteachers have commented that they feel betrayed by the fact that for years they had been teaching that only the Japanese had been affected and had no idea that Italian Americans had received the same treatment. History books have ignored this painful episode in the Italian American experience.

At an appearance in Sacramento before the Italian Lawyers Association on April 19, retired California Supreme Court Justice Edward Panelli spoke of the humiliation felt by his parents during the war because of the restrictions placed upon them by the government.

One of the compelling stories that surfaced during the exhibits display in Sacramento was that of Sacramento resident Nina Palermo Cook. In an interview by Walt Yost of the Sacramento Bee, Cook remembered most the fear of being Italian during the war. She remembered the fear that caused her mother to smash all her Italian phonograph records and her friends to change their Italian last names. She remembered the fear that her San Francisco North Beach relatives would all be deported back to Italy.

According to Cook, her mother was especially fearful because she wasn't a citizen. "the rumors were if you weren't a citizen, your children would be sent to Italy." Cooks comments about the effects of these events on the Italians said it all: "We were degraded so much during the war years. It didn't make sense."

Others expressed they now understood why their parents had stopped speaking Italian or why they were told not to speak Italian outside the house.

The impact of the restrictions was widespread and the effect on the personal lives of the Italians who were directly affected can only be imagined.

Many -- including the parents of Joe DiMaggio -- were forbidden to travel more than five miles without a permit. Because of the travel restrictions, mothers could not visit their children in hospitals, families could not attend a relatives funeral, and parents could not even visit their own sons in uniform at military installations.

At a public forum held at the State Capitol on May 1, a discussion about the impact of the wartime treatment of the Italian population and its lasting effects on the Italian communities was held. Panel participants were exhibit organizer Larry DiStasi, exhibit curator Rose Scherini, Costanza Ilacqua Foran whose father was interned and Society Director Bill Cerruti.

Leaders of the Japanese American Citizens League also attended and related their experiences. According to Japanese participants, "none of this ever needed to happen ." Mary Tsukamoto, a leader of the Japanese American Redress movement told of how painful it was to gather the "courage to point the finger at the US government."

There was widespread resistance to these measures by the Italians. Many Italian Americans left the Democratic Party in protest over the application of the harsh measures against the Italians. Groups like the Young Democratic Club of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Council of California Women's Clubs had called for the internment of all Italian immigrants and the evacuation from the West coast of all Italian Americans born in the United States.

These views were echoed in resolutions passed by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, The Orange County Board of Supervisors, the Native Sons of the Golden West and the American Legion.

One local Sacramento woman related the story of how her father became a Republican in protest over the policies imposed by the Roosevelt Administration. In fact, Italian American resistance in the voting booth and pressure upon the government helped prevent the mass internment of the Italian immigrant population and their children and also helped bring about the lifting of most of the restrictions against the Italians early in the war.

There were a number of lessons to be learned from this episode in American history according to the forum participants. Italian American community leader Bill Cerruti summed up the lesson for Italian Americans: "**The United States is inhabited by many different peoples including large numbers of people of Italian ancestry. It should be alright to be different- to be Italian in America. What is not alright is for the government, whatever its intention, to treat us as different.**"



Maureen Di Marco, Secretary of Child Development and Education, presents Proclamation from Governor to Exhibit Organizers Bill Cerruti (center) and Larry DiStasi at exhibit Opening.