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“NO LONGER A SECRET”

On November 10th, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the “*Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act*” to address the mass violation of the civil rights of Italian immigrants in the United States during World War II. The Act calls upon the Justice Department to conduct an investigation into the abuses that occurred.

At the outbreak of World War II, the Italians were the largest immigrant group in the United States. More than 600,000 of these Italian Americans were subjected to nationwide restrictions by the federal government that included: arrests and interrogation, internment in camps, the mass relocation of Italian communities from the coastal areas of California, travel restrictions and curfews that made them prisoners in their own homes, carrying special ID cards, and the seizure of their personal property and businesses.

Italian community leaders, especially the leaders of the Italian American organizations, were among the first to be detained and interned for the duration of the war. Italian language schools, newspapers and radio shows were closed down by the government, their editors, radio broadcasters and language teachers arrested and interned. The federal government actively suppressed the speaking of Italian in public. Many Italians of the time, fearful of the consequences of being Italian, changed their names to avoid the loss of jobs and the hostility toward Italians.

Until now, the federal government had ignored requests by the Italian American community to acknowledge that these injustices had occurred. While Japanese Americans were compensated for similar conduct by the Federal government, federal officials had denied that Italian Americans were affected. As late as 1992, the Justice Department was still denying these events happened.

Worse still, school textbooks in America also denied that Italians had been affected by such treatment and still do. Italian American students who raise the topic in class are routinely told these events did not happen. When Italian American students write about these events for class papers they are given lower grades because their teachers, even at the college level, do not know about *our* history. Teachers who become aware of the truth often feel betrayed that they have been teaching a false history. This is the situation that the Italian American community has faced for over 50 years. The federal legislation is a step toward correcting this history and telling our story.

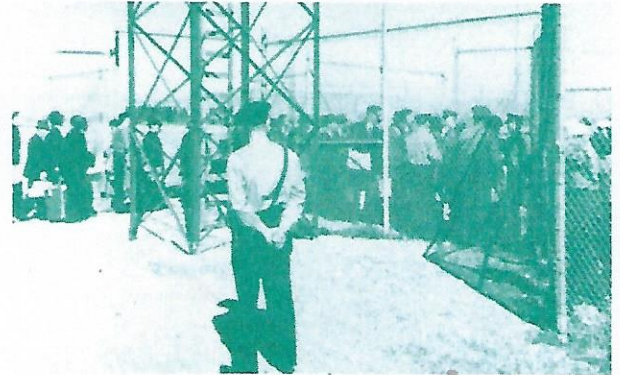
Beginning in 1994, Italian Americans launched an exhibit about these events which has been on a national tour of the United States. The Italian Cultural Society provided part of the initial funding for the exhibit. This exhibit, entitled “*Una Storia Segreta - The Secret Story*” helped bring this painful chapter in the Italian American experience to light and now, five years later, to national attention. The exhibit also helped galvanize the Italian American community in its quest for redress of this grievance. The Society has sponsored the exhibit in Sacramento three times.

At the same time that over half a million Italians were serving in the armed forces, their families on the homefront were being stripped of their livelihoods and uprooted from their homes, families and communities. The Italians affected by these wartime abuses were legal residents of the United States. They had resided here for many years and their children and grandchildren were American citizens. These people were an integral part of their Italian communities and the restrictions placed on them and on the Italian communities resulted in enormous cultural loss and damaged the future of the Italian communities in the United States.

In California, more than 50,000 Italians were restricted. The coastal areas of California were hit the hardest by these events, especially the coastal fishing communities. Some 10,000 California Italians were forced to leave their homes in the coastal areas of the state, often leaving spouses and children behind. Some 1,500 were forced to leave Pittsburg, California and more than 2,000 had to leave Monterey. Both cities were predominately Italian at the time. Fishermen from San Francisco to Boston had their boats seized.

These people were treated this way because they were Italian, not because of anything they did. It's hard to imagine all the hardships they faced. Italian American scholars have documented many of their stories but there is more to be told and Justice Department records may tell more of the story if and when they are released. In California, state officials recently released sealed transcripts of interrogations of Italian Americans during the war by the State Legislature.

The Civil Liberties Act still needs to pass the Senate and be signed by the President to become law.



Italians arriving at Missoula, Montana internment camp 1941