

## *Una Storia Segreta*

### *The Story of the Internment and Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II*

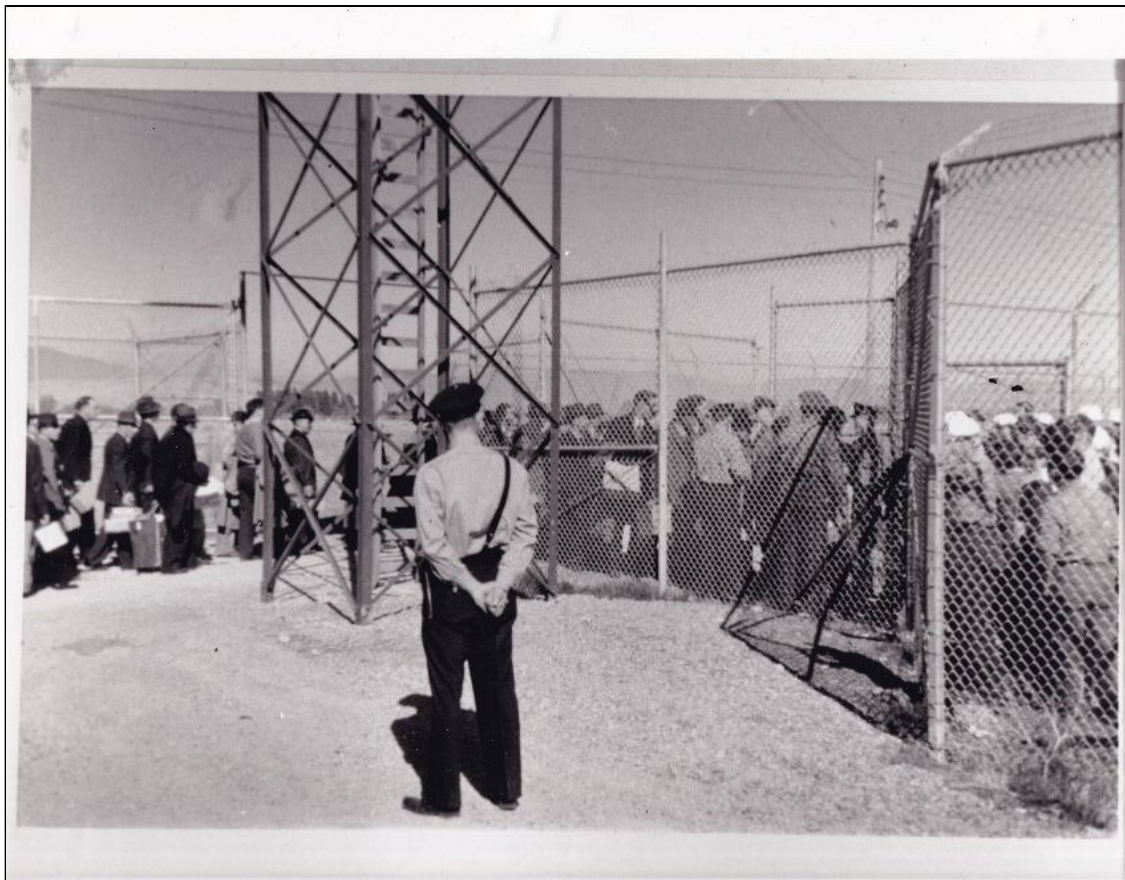


PHOTO ABOVE: *Italian internees arriving at Camp Bella Vista in Missoula, Montana. The Italian internment occurred before that of the Japanese.*

#### **UNA STORIA SEGRETA**

The Italian American experience is full of painful episodes of bigotry against them. The assault on Columbus, Columbus Day and the Columbus statues and monuments erected to honor Italian Americans is another chapter in that history of racially motivated prejudice.

**During World War II, it was in California that Italian American immigrants were mistreated and restricted the most.** It was a time when their loyalty was questioned. An estimated million Italian Americans served in the Armed services during World War II, some 10% of the American fighting force. They had proven their loyalty in World War I and then had to prove it again.

Thousands were arrested at the beginning of the war in 1941 in California as the FBI knocked on their doors at midnight and raided their homes and held them for questioning. Over 50,000 Italians born in Italy were affected in California and over 600,000 nationwide. At the outbreak of the War, Italian Americans were the largest immigrant group in California and in the United States.

Hundreds were interned for the duration of the war in military camps alongside Japanese internees. Those interned were mostly community leaders, newspaper editors, language teachers, and members of Italian community organizations. Italian language schools were closed as were the Italian newspapers. La Capitale, the Italian newspaper in Sacramento since 1906 was shut down and never published again.

**Across the nation, their cameras, guns and radios were confiscated. They had to carry identity permits and were subjected to a 6:00 curfew. They could not travel more than 5 miles from their home. All without any evidence of wrongdoing or due process. Any violation could result in imprisonment.**



PHOTO ABOVE: *Members of the Buccelatto and Cardinelli families removed from their homes in Pittsburgh, CA, living in migrant housing in Oakley.*

**Possibly the most destructive action by the government was the forced relocation of over 10,000 Italians from the coastal zones of California.** Under the travel restrictions, they were not allowed to go within a mile of the California coast. The Italians were concentrated in the coastal zones. Thousands of Italian fishermen in Monterey, Santa Cruz, Eureka, San Pedro, and San Francisco, who dominated 80% of the west coast fishing industry, were forced to give up their boats to the Navy. Many Italians lost their livelihoods and businesses.

Whole Italian communities along the coast were relocated. Pittsburg and Monterey, California, were primarily Italian

fishing communities at the outbreak of the War. More than 3,000 had to leave Monterey. In Pittsburg, virtually every family was affected. More than 1500 Italian Americans, nearly all of them women and children were forced to leave town as security risks. The oldest resident forced out of Pittsburgh was a 97 -year- old man, removed in his bed. All pleas for clemency failed.

### **“It Was All A Mistake”**

On Columbus Day, Oct 12, 1942, the restrictions were lifted. From the start, the Attorney General of the United States, Francis Biddle, had cautioned that these people were innocent and should have not been restricted. That there was no proof of disloyalty. **Their only crime was being of Italian ancestry.**

Still the government denied these events had taken place until Italian American historians and activists pieced together the story and convinced the Government to acknowledge the wartime measures taken against the Italian Americans. Until then, the government denied they had happened and would not release the documents which they argued were classified.

It was almost 60 years after the events occurred before the Congress and the President formally acknowledged, in the ***Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act of 2,000***, the impact of the World War II restrictions on the Italian American community. There has been no apology.

Canadian government recently apologized for its internment and harsh treatment of its Italian population during the war years.

Los Angeles County and other local government bodies of the time demanded that all Italians in the United States be interned during the war, citizen or not. Now Los Angeles County, in a repeat of their historic bias against Italian Americans, wants to remove the most revered symbols of the Italian American people from the public square.

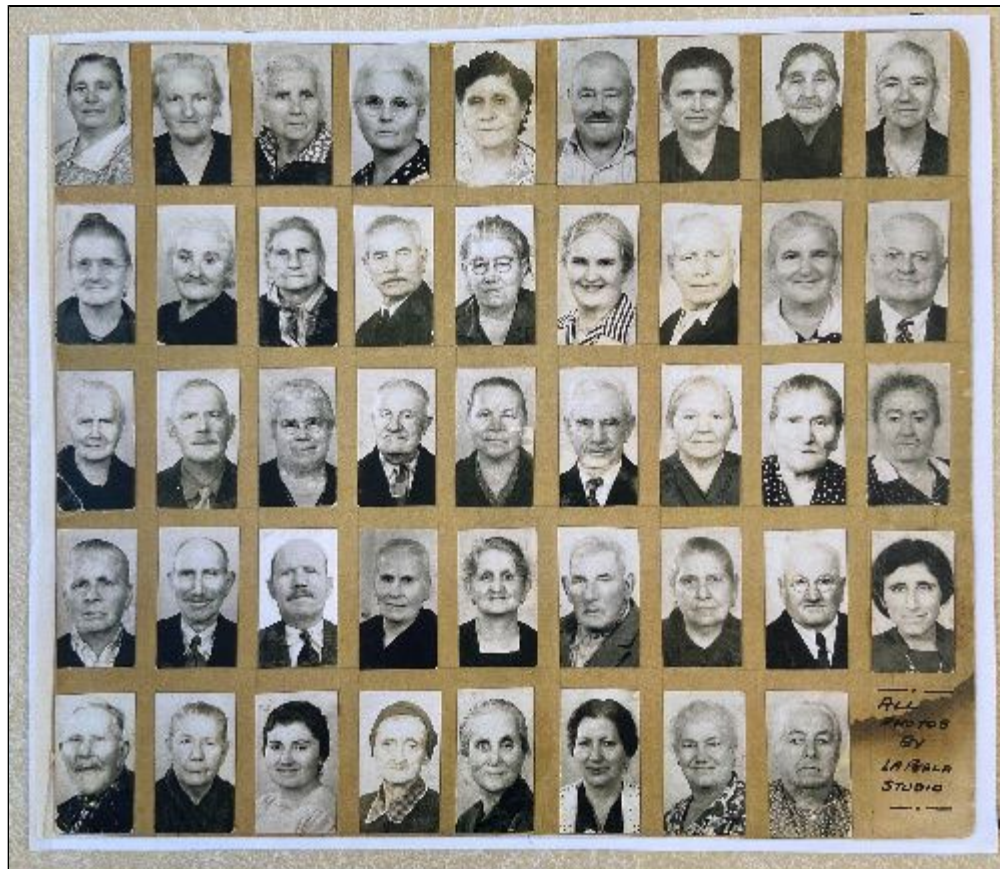


PHOTO ABOVE: *The mugshots of elderly interned Italians forced to evacuate from their homes along the coast.*

## A Knock at Midnight

For decades, historians had denied that the World War II events happened. US history books denied that Italian Americans were affected by wartime restrictions. Parents who mentioned the events to their children were not believed because this history was not included in their history books. Italian students who wrote papers about the topic in college were given lower grades as the professors did not know the story. Italian American students who raised the story in class were told it never happened. Teachers had been teaching for decades that Italians were not interned, relocated or restricted, that only the Japanese were, only to find out they had been teaching a false history.

The impact of the restrictions was widespread and the effect on the personal lives of those who were directly affected can only be imagined. Imagine the pain of these Italians who were prohibited from speaking Italian, “the enemy’s language,” in public. Imagine the fear of those who believed they and their children were going to be deported. According to one of the affected children, **“People became so frightened that they were afraid of a knock on the door. You never knew who was going to be taken away.”**

committed suicide when their loyalty to the country they loved was questioned. One elderly Italian man who took his life when he received notice he would be restricted left a note; **“I thought of myself as a good person, but I find myself deceived.”** He jumped off an 8-story building in San Francisco. Another, a fisherman in Vallejo, California, cut his throat with a butcher knife. Another threw himself in front of a train in Richmond, California. In Stockton, California, an elderly man, who could not live with the stigma of being an enemy alien hanged himself.

Many changed their Italian names. Others stopped speaking Italian. **They felt “degraded so much during the War.”** Families were separated. In one small California town, 7 Italian American mothers each had four sons in the US Army but 6 were restricted from being able to visit them on their bases. Mothers could not visit their children in a hospital and families could not attend a relative’s funeral.

PHOTO BELOW LEFT: *Photo of Caterina Cardinelli, who was evacuated from her Pittsburg home. She needed a travel permit, even on the day she left.*

PHOTO BELOW RIGHT: *Catherine Buccellato and her son, Nick. Like so many others, Nick came home on leave from serving his country only to find his home empty. His mother was forced to evacuate her Pittsburgh, CA home.*



### **Silencing A Culture**

The impact of the wartime restrictions was devastating to the Italian communities in California. After the war, it was not ok to be too Italian. Many downplayed their ancestry. The Italian American community never fully recovered from the active repression of their culture during the war

Today’s Italian Americans are claiming their heritage and culture and rebuilding their sense of community by remembering where they came from. Their ancestors would be proud that today’s Italian Americans are fighting to maintain and protect their legacy. The need for this story to be included in the nation’s history books is important to the memory of those affected and to help repair the damage.

For Italian Americans, Columbus Day and the Columbus statues and monuments, are important symbols of their

acceptance in American Society. They are a celebrated part of the Italian American cultural heritage. That quest for acceptance remains unfinished considering the rising discrimination against the symbols of their identity and their American lives. Their story should be told, their cultural heritage and symbols of that heritage should be respected, protected, and accepted.

**They have earned it!**

PHOTO BELOW: *Photo of the Missoula Internment Camp*

