



## ITALIAN CULTURAL SOCIETY

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Italian Cultural Society Newsletter

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### ALTRE VOCE

This year I bought my children Columbus Day presents. Wrapping them in red, white and green ribbon, I realized that it is much more than books and paper ships that they need and that I want to give. It is the gift of their ethnic heritage that I want to lay before them. But it cannot be neatly packaged.

There are many voices that my children hear. Voices shouting that Columbus Day should not be celebrated, angry voices denouncing Columbus as a villain. Voices who would re-write history and judge the events of 500 years ago with the yardstick of our present political and social climate.

My children need to celebrate and they need to know their heritage. For us as Italian Americans, Columbus Day is more than the celebration of the Genoese navigator's discovery of America. It is also the celebration of the voyages made by many millions of Italians who set forth from their native Italy to "discover" America. Most of these immigrant people had never seen a map, let alone find America on one. They came, clutching each other, with only their courage and their hope of a better life for themselves and their children. On Columbus Day I will share with my children the history of these Italians with whom they share a common heritage.

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I will tell my children that it was on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, when the United States declared that resident Italian aliens would no longer be considered "internal enemies." Thousands of Italian Americans, living on

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California's coast, who had been arrested, interned in camps, or relocated, and whose lives had been shattered were freed. Although several hundred Italian Americans remained in internment camps until the end of the war, on Columbus Day I will celebrate for those who were liberated.

To the voices who say Italian Americans don't need a holiday, I say we do. Italian Americans are entitled to be visible — to be counted — to tell our own history. We cannot allow it to be rewritten, altered or lost, like the beautiful multi-voweled names of our ancestors that were cut and changed at Ellis Island. Or like Giovanni Caboto who in the history books became John Cabot to the millions of Italian American students who read his name never recognizing him as one of their own.

In fact, Italian American children are exposed to books that either neglect them or when they do include them they do so in overwhelmingly negative stereotypes and in condescending terms. Perhaps this treatment of Italian Americans accounts for the fact that Italian American students in our major cities have among the highest high school drop-out rates.

To those who say that there is no such thing as Italian Americans and that we are all just American, I say look around you. In 1992 Governor Mario Cuomo was slurred as a "mafia" type by Bill Clinton and caricaturized as "Maario" when Vice President Quayle repeatedly referred to him using only his first name. In 1992 the "M" word (Mafia) can destroy politicians, business people and lives by its very utterance. Ask Geraldine Ferraro who had a tremendous lead in the 1992 democratic party nomination for U.S. Senate until some Mafia allegations were made against her husband. Ferraro lost the nomination.

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A 1990 study found that 74 percent of Americans identify Italian Americans with organized crime. Tragically, an even higher percentage of Italian Americans associate their ethnic group with organized crime. Is this surpriz-

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ing? Not considering that almost every film, book, and printed article about Italian Americans has to do with Mafia. In 1992 Sacramento there are restaurants whose advertisements blithely announce "Dago Happy Hour." This nation, including Italian Americans, is terribly misinformed about the Italian American experience. The above study shows how devastating this lack of knowledge can be. Our children deserve better. They deserve the truth.

In this sea of angry voices we need a strong voice. A voice that like the winds that led Columbus to the new world, leads us to a new awareness of our cultural heritage.

So along with the Columbus Day packages I will give my children a voice that tells them that they too have a special place in the history of this continent. A voice that allows for them to have ethnic roots and to feel that there is room enough in this great country for them to celebrate the arrival of their first countryman and to celebrate the many millions of Italian Americans who crossed the ocean with dreams and made them our legacy.

ALFRE VOCE translated from Italian means "Other Voices." This months segment was prepared by Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti, Society President.



## THE UNTOLD STORY

The Italians were the last large European immigrant group to arrive in the United States before World War II. When the United States entered the war in December 1941 there were more than 600,000 foreign-born Italians in the country. By 1940 more than 100,000 foreign-born Italians were living in California. They constituted the largest foreign-born immigrant group in the state when the fighting began, on the part of the United States, against the Axis nations—Germany, Japan and Italy. More than half of these Italian immigrants were classified as aliens. The majority of the non-naturalized Italians were clustered in the coastal cities, especially in the San Francisco Bay area as well as in smaller coastal communities from Eureka to Monterey.

During the early months of American participation in World War II, the federal government began to impose restrictions on Italian activity in coastal areas. Italian aliens were restricted from living or traveling within certain designated coastal zones. Travel was limited to no more than five miles from home or work. Curfews were imposed on Italian aliens as well as a ban on ownership of guns, cameras and short-wave radios. These policies affected thousands of Italian immigrants and disrupted their family life and ability to earn a living in coastal zones.

To imagine the impact of these restrictions on the immigrants, consider the situation of the Italian fisherman Giuseppe Di Maggio, who was forbidden to pursue his trade or even to visit the fisherman's Wharf restaurant owned by his son, baseball star Joe Di Maggio (The Yankee Clipper), a product of San Francisco's Italian district. Even more extreme was the arrest of about 3,500 Italians during the first six months after Pearl Harbor. Two hundred sixty-four were transported and interned in a federal camp at Missoula, Montana. Others were forced to relocate from coastal to inland areas of California. Many of those interned were community leaders. Even naturalized citizens were interned in some cases.

The wartime restrictions were removed on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, when it was declared that resident Italian aliens would no longer be considered internal enemies. Still, this was a painful episode in the Italian-American experience, which was dramatized by the tragedy of the four elderly Italian men who committed suicide when ordered to relocate.

It should be noted that these events occurred at a time when the mayors of two of America's largest cities were Italian-Americans. Angelo Rossi was mayor of San Francisco from 1931 to 1944. In New York the irreplaceable Fiorello La Guardia was mayor through the wartime years, from 1934 to 1945. Both of these men were sons of Italian immigrants.

At the time the wartime restrictions were imposed, it had been less than twenty-five years since Italian-Americans had proven their loyalty to the United States by answering the call for volunteers in large numbers during World War I. It is estimated that some 300,000 Italian-Americans served in the U.S. Army during that war, constituting about twelve percent of the total army.

During World War II, Italian-Americans once again answered the call. More than 500,000 served in the U.S. armed forces. The widespread participation by Italians in American life, and in the defense effort during both world wars, reflected the underlying loyalty of Italian immigrants to their adopted land. It is a loyalty that is not questioned today, but it was then, only fifty years ago.

This article, written by William Cerruti, was reprinted from the book "The Italians of Sacramento," published by the Italian Cultural Society. TO ORDER a book, send a check for \$10.00 plus \$2.00 (postage and handling) payable to: The Italian Cultural Society, P.O. Box 189427, Sacramento, CA 95818.