

*Published Saturday, June 2, 2001, in the San Jose Mercury News*

## **Time to ease W.W. II families' suffering**

BY L.A. CHUNG

Mercury News

Sometimes the wrongs of the past are too painful and too great for one generation to set right.

You need the energy and the outrage of the succeeding generation to wage the battle for truth -- people like Brad Houser in San Jose, Karen Ebel in New London, N.H., and Lothar Eiserloh in San Francisco.

They are part of a rising campaign by German-Americans to find out how our government decided to pick up some 31,280 "enemy aliens" and intern them during World War II. And they want the government to acknowledge what it did -- to them, their parents or their grandparents.

By now, many Americans know the story of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans who were forced to leave their homes and bring what they could carry to barren internment camps in America's interior. They might even know that an additional 2,000 were Japanese from Latin America, picked up so the United States would have prisoners to exchange with Japan.

What's less well-known is that it also happened to German and Italian families in this country and in Latin America.

These were the questionable ones, who had leadership positions in groups often social in nature, people whose names had been reported by anyone who had a suspicion -- well-founded or not -- or perhaps an ax to grind. They were interned in camps throughout the Great Plains, the Midwest and Texas.

### **Families torn apart**

The numbers are smaller; the story's virtually the same.

And in terms of human tragedy, just as costly, just as painful.

"It was a terrible injustice," said Belmont historian John Christgau. "People were ripped and torn from their families. . . . The only opportunity they had to declare what their loyalties were was a five-minute hearing in camp that was a kangaroo court."

I'm thinking of Mathias and Johanna Eiserloh, who first came to America brimming with hope and idealism -- and ended up ruined by the 14-year ordeal. I'm thinking of Eddie Friede, a German Jew who miraculously escaped the horrors of a concentration camp only to be picked up in San Francisco and put behind barbed wire in this country. Or Paul Lameyer, whose internment, documents indicate, might have had more to do with his child custody battle with his estranged wife than any Nazi support.

"If the story isn't told soon, pretty soon nobody will know it happened," said Brad Houser, a San Jose electrical engineer whose grandfather, Lameyer, was interned in Fort Lincoln, N.D.

### **Locked away**

In the days after the Dec. 7, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor, some 31,280 "enemy aliens" were swept up -- ostensibly because of possible allegiances to the Axis forces. Among them were about 10,000 Germans and 3,000 Italians, Christgau said. The rest were Japanese and smatterings of other European groups.

Pearl Harbor forever changed the lives of Lothar Eiserloh and his family. He was an American-born Ohio school boy in 1941 when his father, Mathias, was picked up by the FBI and whisked off to an internment camp.

Overnight, neighbors shunned them and customers no longer bought chickens from his mother. Their bank account was frozen. Unable to survive, they lost the house and, by 1943, the desperate family joined Mathias in the Crystal City, Texas, internment camp. Lothar was 8. His sister, Ingrid, 13; Ensi, just 2.

"Just the week before I'd been pledging allegiance to the flag in school, then I get there and I'm looking up at guard towers and men holding machine guns," Eiserloh recalled.

In January 1945, in the middle of the war, the family survived a harrowing deportation to Germany for a prisoner exchange. Eiserloh's brother, Guenther, was born on the train that took them to New York, where they were put on the S.S. Gripsholm. His weakened mother and the sickly infant spent the entire 14-day journey to Marseille, France, in the infirmary, and suffered in winter cold during the hours of their "exchange" in Bregenz, Switzerland. When they finally settled in Johanna's hometown, the Gestapo set upon them, beat up Mathias and imprisoned him, apparently on suspicion of being a spy for the Allies.

"I remember my father saying, 'I never want to have anything to do with Europe anymore -- all they do is fight wars, ancient battles, over and over again,'" said Eiserloh, now 66 and living in the Ingleside Terrace

neighborhood of San Francisco. They had immigrated to America to avoid that.

### **Back in the U.S.**

After the war, as American citizens, 11-year-old Lothar and his sister Ingrid, 17, were repatriated under their aunt's care in 1947. They did not see their parents or younger siblings again until 1956, when the U.S. government finally let them back in. By then, his father was 60. He was a broken man who knew he would never be employed again as a civil engineer, Eiserloh said. He died five years later.

"I am so outraged about it -- it just fuels me," said Karen Ebel, who is now supporting the "Wartime Treatment Study Act," a bill being drafted by Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis. It would establish a commission to investigate and document what happened. And the arcane law that allowed this to happen is still on the books, which means it could still happen to others, she said.

Italian-Americans were able to get a similar bill passed and signed late last year. Now the groundswell is beginning to build for German-Americans to do the same.

There's some unfinished business we need to attend to. I think it's clear what we need to do. Those wronged are dying daily.

---

Contact L.A. Chung at [lchung@mercurynews.com](mailto:lchung@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5280.