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A wider view of internees' experience

By L.A. Chung

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When North Carolina congressman Howard Coble made his incendiary remarks last week supporting the World War II internment of Japanese-Americans, reaction from San Jose and the Bay Area was swift and angry.

That wasn't so surprising. The South Bay has elected two congressmen who were interned as children, and the decades-long campaign for redress galvanized the Japanese-American community and taught others on the West Coast about the abrogation of civil liberties for an entire ethnic group.

But what is surprising now are the aging voices of German-American internees, almost overlooked nationally, who have begun to weigh in.

"I reminded him that Germans were interned . . . and including Italians and others, that was about 15,000 people," said 77-year-old Eberhard Fuhr, a Chicago-area retiree who e-mailed Coble's chief of staff over the weekend.

As a parting thought, Fuhr urged Coble to support Rep. Mike Honda's new resolution, introduced last week, recognizing Feb. 19 as a ``Day of Remembrance." Feb. 19, 1942, was the day President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the wartime internments.

Remembering for a purpose

The resolution tells how the freedoms of Japanese-Americans, German-Americans, Italian-Americans and legal resident aliens were constricted by limits on travel, seizure of property and internment. It supports the goals of the three communities to recognize the day as a way to increase awareness of this chapter of history and its lessons.

German-American internees, in fact, are newly regarding Honda as a banner-carrier in their fight for recognition of the nearly 11,000 Germans and German-Americans who were interned in camps throughout America during World War II.

Not only did Honda level criticism at Coble for condoning the internment, but he also included groups that had been overlooked in history.

"Everyone is excited for it to be introduced," Karen Ebel, a New Hampshire woman whose father was interned in North Dakota, said of Honda's bill.

"What's great is it's the first time there's been federal legislation that has included all the affected ethnic groups."

And it's about time.

During these anxious times, when it seems the possibility of detentions, roundups and internments of Arabs or Muslims is raised, it would help to have some authentic voices of Germans, Italians and other Europeans interned during World War II.

Testing our foundation

"The more people who understand what happened, the more people understand that this is an American lesson," Honda said. "Our Constitution is never tested in times of tranquility; it's tested during times of trauma and tragedy."

So it would help if these groups' internment was better-known. The camps were spread all over the country, and the total number of internees was a little more than one-tenth of the number of Japanese and Japanese-Americans interned. Even in major newspapers, the internment of Germans and Italians is not mentioned when historical reference to World War II internment is made.

Fuhr was 17 when he was hauled out of his Cincinnati high school class and imprisoned in Crystal City, Texas, in March 1943. His parents -- German nationals -- and younger brother had been taken six months earlier. He and his older brother were sent to join them in camp until September 1947 -- 2 1/2 years after the war in Europe was over, he wrote Coble. They lost their house and up to five years of their lives.

Now, nearly 60 years later, Fuhr was moved to write to Coble -- chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security -- not just to be counted as a casualty in history, but for the internment's lessons for the future. "The real danger is that it could be applied to anybody."

To anybody. Sixty years ago or today.

Contact L.A. Chung at Ichung@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5280.