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## **Germans, too, were imprisoned in WWII**

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By SARAH M. EARLE  
Monitor staff

Max Ebel came to the United States to be free, but when war came, he was sent to an internment camp. His was a fate shared by thousands, in a chapter of U.S. history yet to be written in full.

Pushing back the sleeve of his light blue cardigan, 80-year-old Max Ebel showed off the wounds he received as a 17-year-old Boy Scout fighting off a gang of Hitler Youth: two ghost-white puckers in his weathered skin, phantoms of the knife blade that sent him to America.

"They stabbed me in the hand," he said in an accent that, like the scars, faded but never disappeared. "They were trying to force me to join."

The rest of Ebel's story has been slower in revealing itself. There are parts he can't remember and parts that never seemed worth telling. Other parts he'll never understand, much less explain.

For more than 50 years following his release from a U.S. alien enemy internment camp, Ebel, who lives in Effingham, talked little of his experiences. Now and then he'd tell stories of the months he spent toiling on the railroad, the sick little Indian girl he bought medicine for or the Japanese prisoner he helped save from suicide.

But "there just wasn't that much to say," he said with a shrug.

The rest of the country has shrugged along with him. Or so it seems to Ebel's daughter, Karen. For the past year, she's been searching the Internet, scouring government documents and corresponding with officials in an attempt to piece together the strange, scattered history her father shares with some 30,000 other immigrants and to secure them a paragraph or two in the nation's collective memory.

What she's found is a largely overlooked piece of history, a group of people hardly unique in that they suffered during World War II, but unique in that their suffering has gone unrecognized.

"We feel it's important for people to know that the internment occurred and that it wasn't just the Japanese who were affected," Karen Ebel said.

So, with his daughter's prodding, Max Ebel is finally telling his story in full.

## **German in America**

It is a story that begins where perhaps it should have ended. The stab wounds that marked Ebel's Nazi defiance might have secured him a peaceful life in the United States had anyone cared to ask about them. But this was 1942 America, a country at war on multiple fronts, a nation frightened by every foreign face and accent. And Ebel's scars meant less than his foreign accent, his German name.

In 1937, Ebel was a young cabinetmaker's apprentice in Germany, helping support his family after his parents' divorce, devoting his free time to the German version of the Boy Scouts. At the same time, Hitler was rising to power, and with the decree influence. In the months to follow, the Hitler Youth began infiltrating every part of Ebel's community, and the pressure to join the Nazis became intense.

Ebel isn't sure why he didn't give in. "I think it was because I was being forced. It wasn't my free will," said Ebel, sitting in his daughter's home in New London.

When that force threatened Ebel's life, he decided it was time to get out of Germany. After the attack that ended in a stab wound, Ebel made arrangements to move to America to live with his father, who had emigrated to the United States eight years earlier.

"I remember stepping off the wharf (at Ellis Island), and my first impression was to turn around and go home because it was so filthy," Ebel said. He remembers pointing in bewilderment to the worm-like strands hanging from the fire escapes in downtown New York. They were spaghetti leftovers, his father explained, dumped out the windows in the Italian section of the neighborhood.

Despite those first impressions, Ebel stayed, settling in Cambridge, Mass, where his father had a small woodworking business. A black man named Johnny, one of his father's employees, taught him English, leaving him with a Southern accent that people in Germany still tease him about. He went to school and got a high school degree, enrolled in the Boy Scouts and filed a Declaration of Intention to become a U.S. citizen.

"I was an American right from the beginning, and I always will be," he said. "I think I appreciated my freedom as much as a fish let out of a bowl."

That freedom was short-lived, however. The very influence Ebel had fled Germany to escape had in fact followed him, in the form of a cloud of suspicion. "I left Germany because of the Nazis, and I came over here and I was a Nazi," he said.

## **The FBI comes knocking**

The day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States tightened its cinch of citizenship in an effort to purge and protect itself against foreign enemies within its borders. The results have yet to be fully sorted out. Historical accounts and expert opinions differ widely on the subject of foreign relocation and internment, and only recently has the government made efforts to admit to and apologize for some of the events.

"It's very convoluted," Karen Ebel said. "The lines of authority are so blurred."

What is generally agreed upon is that some 100,000 people of Japanese descent were ordered to evacuate specific West Coast military areas following the Pearl Harbor attack. An additional 16,000 Japanese - non-citizens and those who had renounced their citizenship - were interned in camps around the country.

The treatment of these prisoners has been a subject of sore debate in recent years, as has the very fact that thousands of people of other nationalities were also interned. Controversy continues to rage over who was interned and why, and whether the government had a right to corral its own citizens, as well as aliens living peaceably within its borders.

"For the most part, the history of internment has been either quieted or distorted," Joseph Fallon, co-author of the five-volume *German Americans in the World Wars*, writes on his Web site. "The majority of the best-selling collegiate and secondary school history texts in the United States claim that, unlike Japanese Americans, the German and Italian Americans were not arrested and interned; and both the print and electronic media have propagated this myth."

Drawing on 10 years of research obtained primarily from such sources as the National Archives and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Fallon claims that 56 percent of all internees were, in fact, Europeans and European Americans. Other researchers cite similar statistics.

All Max Ebel knows is what happened to him. In September 1942, FBI officers came and searched the Ebels' house. Ebel remembers one officer instructing him to open a little table he'd made with a secret compartment on top. As he unlatched the hook, the man sprang for his gun.

Ebel just chuckles now to think of the officer's fear of his nightstand.

"You were a real threat, huh," Karen Ebel teased her father.

But then, it was no laughing matter. Though the officers found nothing but some German books, a calendar and a radio, they returned a few days later and arrested Ebel.

He still doesn't know why.

## **Back to Ellis Island**

An alien still awaiting citizenship, Ebel was legally internable under both the "Enemy Alien Act of 1798" and international law, which permits a country to intern those aliens residing in its territory who are subjects or nationals of a country with whom they are at war. But why the government would feel the need to exercise that right on a person like Ebel baffles his family.

"If you were part of the German community...you were all of a sudden under suspicion," Karen Ebel said. "A little comment here, a little comment there, and they were all over you."

Karen Ebel has obtained some of the official records related to her father's internment and used them to form a couple of theories.

Apparently, Ebel stated on his draft questionnaire that he was willing to fight with the Americans in the Pacific but didn't want to fight in Germany because he had so much family there. There is also mention of a pacifist remark in one of Ebel's court records and reference to a compliment he made of the road system under Hitler.

One or all of those "crimes" sent Ebel to prison.

And it was a prison, not just according to Ebel's memory, but numerous documents, pictures and personal stories.

"The military viewed these civilians as Prisoners of War," wrote John Heitmann, a professor of history at the University of Dayton. "Internees were housed in four-man tents, several of which routinely flooded after heavy rains. ...Barbed wire, 'off limits' signs, and machine guns surrounding the prisoners completed the scene, along with guards who viewed these men as potentially dangerous, rather than the typical butchers, bakers, mechanics and common folk that most of them were."

Ebel remembers the ever-present barbed wire and armed guards, as he was bounced from camp to camp for the next 18 months.

He was first held in an Immigration and Naturalization Services office for three months while he awaited a hearing. Dozens of people of different nationalities packed in a small room, all awaiting an unknown fate. One night, Ebel heard the toilet flush repeatedly and peeked into the bathroom to see what was going on. A Japanese prisoner had slit his throat and was flushing the blood down the commode.

"We saved his life," Ebel said.

Ebel could certainly understand the man's desperation. "They never told me why I was there," he said. And when he finally stood before a judge, his pleas were futile. "That was such a mess, I can't even remember," he said.

Though the hearing board recommended Ebel be released and kept under watch, according to court documents, he was sent to Washington, D.C., where the Department of Justice decided to intern him anyway. He was sent to Ellis Island, the very symbol of America's open arms to immigrants. There he was kept in bunkers and let out for exercise only periodically in a cage on the roof.

"If you wanted privacy, you had to hang a blanket down from your bunk...and the food was terrible," he said.

From there, Ebel was sent to Fort Meade in Maryland, where he was given a physical and held for several days. "And the food there was great," Ebel remembered.

"Well, you were hungry by then, boy," Ebel's wife, Doris, reminded him.

Fate then shipped Ebel to Camp Forrest in Tennessee, where he spent two or three months. That camp was emptied out and turned into a POW camp, and Ebel was transferred to Fort Lincoln in North Dakota.

He might have been better off staying behind. Fort Lincoln was filthy, crowded and dismal. "I'll tell you, that was hell," he said.

## **Cheap labor**

As the war progressed, the government tapped the internment camps for workers. Ebel volunteered to work on the Northern Pacific Railroad, placing himself once again under Nazi pressure. Legitimate Nazis, who made up a small portion of the camp's population, raged against the volunteers for helping the American war effort.

Certainly, Ebel didn't align himself with the Nazis. But at that point, he wasn't exactly concerning himself with national loyalties. "I just wanted to get the hell out of there," he said.

For the next eight or nine months, Ebel worked on the railroads on the great windswept plains of North Dakota. All through the winter, he and his team pulled up the old rails and laid new, sturdier ones, weighing up to 250 pounds apiece. Working their way across half the state, they slept in boxcars and chipped through inches of ice to get water.

For food, "we would get rotten liver, which was frozen," Ebel recalled. "Once in a while, we got a chicken."

And though they were now getting paid a couple of cents an hour for their toils, they were still kept under close guard. Occasionally, the guards let them go into town for an evening, but they could tell they were being followed by the tracks in the snow.

For Christmas that year, the crew rode one of the train cars down to a field full of pheasants and harvested their own dinner.

"We got ourselves a beautiful meal...and it was no thanks to the government," Ebel said.

Among his musings of his months on the railroad, the memory that imbues Ebel's vivid blue eyes with the most emotion is the Indian community the crew befriended.

The whole team attended a church near an Indian reservation, where an Indian pastor lambasted them for his people's plight. "He would give us hell because we were white," Ebel said. Then he would turn around and ask for money for the rent.

The crew obliged and pooled their pennies to bring the little church up to date on their rent. In return, the Indians held a party for them at their reservation.

"The poverty there was beyond belief," said Ebel, who has been involved with various Native American organizations ever since the war.

As the bond between the two forgotten communities grew, the Indians would come to the railroad to barter with the workers. And when a little girl in the village became sick, they called on the crew once again for help. "We pooled our money to get her medicine," Ebel recalled. "The government would have let her die."

His sympathy for the Indians' plight aside, Ebel harbored little bitterness against his country throughout the ordeal. In April 1944, after incessant petitioning by the leader of Ebel's crew, a U.S. citizen, the government granted Ebel a new hearing.

On the basis of his good behavior and lack of evidence against him, the board determined that he was not a threat to the government. But before he could board a train for home, Ebel was drafted and sent to Fort Snelling in Minnesota. In another odd twist, he failed to pass his physical and was sent home at last.

There, he remained under restrictions for several more months. "Here I was, I'd worked for all these months on a railroad, and back in Boston, I wasn't allowed to walk under a railroad track," said Ebel, who married and settled in New Hampshire shortly after the war, opening a woodworking business and organizing a Boy Scout troop.

"Well, you know, you could have planted a bomb or something," Karen Ebel teased.

"It just shows you the stupidity of it," Ebel said.

### **'Never any mention'**

The government has owned up to that "stupidity," in part. In the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, the government offered an apology and granted compensation to 75,000 Japanese Americans who were interned or relocated against their will during the war.

Recently, efforts have been made to address the internment of other nationalities. In November, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Wartime Violations of the Italian American Civil Liberties Act, acknowledging the wrongful treatment of Italian Americans who were classified as "enemy aliens" during the war. A companion Senate bill has been referred to the Judiciary Committee for review.

But the Germans have once again been overlooked. Karen Ebel has written letters to New Hampshire's senators, Bob Smith and Judd Gregg, and to the bill's sponsor, Sen. Robert Torricelli of New Jersey, proposing an amendment to include German internees as well as those of other nationalities. Her efforts have been paralleled by other activists, as well as officials like U.S. Rep. Matt Salmon of Arizona, who urged the House to pursue "a full historical accounting of the experiences of all Americans who suffered discrimination during the Second World War," shortly after the original bill was passed.

In addition, America seems to be experiencing a renewed interest in the internment period thanks to books such as David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, which tells the experiences of a young Japanese internee and has been made into a movie.

Former German internee Arthur Jacobs has told his own story in *The Prison Called Hohenasperg*, drawing national interest to people who shared Ebel's plight. The American Library Association's Booklist offers the following review:

"There has been very little written about the terrible punishment that was meted out to thousands of German Americans during World War II. That's why Jacobs's book is an important one. This modest tome opens up a hidden and disgraceful chapter in our history for all to see."

Karen Ebel thinks it's about time. "If the government continually singles out one group to recognize while excluding others identically treated, the injustice is perpetrated yet again," she said.

Whatever else comes of it, Max Ebel seems to have enjoyed dusting off his box of mementos - a railroad spike, a photo of the little Indian girl, the German penny he carried in his pocket - and finally telling his story.

"Life brings along a lot of different things in 80 years," he said. "I have absolutely no malice...but it's just history, and there was never any mention of it. And that's what got me going."