

The following column appeared in the [Concord Monitor \(NH\)](#) on Sunday January 30, 2000, following the publication of the story about the author's father above.

## **It's time to admit wrongs**

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By KAREN EBEL  
For the Monitor

My father and many others were wrongfully imprisoned. I want him to get an apology. More than that, I want a promise it will never happen again.

A jagged razor and blood. Ellis Island's rooftop exercise cage overlooking the Statue of Liberty. Men shot in a Tennessee camp. Prowling dogs. Howling North Dakota winter winds and a boxcar home. Hungry Sioux selling meager wears from a buckboard wagon.

Vivid images remain with my German immigrant father, 56 years after his release from internment by the United States.

During World War II, the land of hope and freedom harassed and imprisoned many of the immigrants it had beckoned to its shores. Civil rights were trampled, even the rights of a teenager running from Hitler's tyranny, while our soldiers fought for freedom. America still has not faced what it did. It still resists.

Growing up, I sensed that my father was imprisoned for being a German in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shrugging, true to his generation, he said, "Well, that's in the past."

Maybe he had good reason to be silent. Suspicious looks met my telling of his story. Nazi! My high school history teacher reddened. Lies! Neighborhood children taunted: "Kraut!" "Hitler's daughter!" Even in the 1960s and '70s, our German heritage weighed heavy.

America cannot promise perfect justice, but justice is its noble goal. America has stood taller in its admission of guilt for past wrongs. Civil rights legislation is but one example. My goal is illumination of a dark corner of our history and an apology to my father, who was wrongfully imprisoned. But most important, illumination should help to prevent future trampling of your rights and mine.

In 1941, groping back to a bigoted 1798 law passed to handle British sympathizers, FDR colluded with the Department of Justice in branding

persons of Japanese, German and Italian ancestry as enemy aliens. He legalized their mistreatment for domestic security's sake.

For years, the FBI had watched, gathering rumors. War was declared. True, many enemy aliens suffered little discrimination. Others probably deserved what they got. And, in fairness, America had to protect itself. But too frequently, hysterical theories of guilt led to roughshod ransacking, confiscation, imprisonment and evacuation - all authorized by the Department of Justice.

At long delayed hearings, those rumors became evidence with no lawyer's protection. Even when hearing boards recommended release, as in my father's case, Washington knew better. The lords of the Department of Justice locked the doors on the internees and threw away the keys.

Too many husbands and fathers were plucked from their homes without good cause. Desperate families knocked at internment camp doors, unable to survive alone. Homes were lost and lives destroyed in answer to a possible saboteur's threat.

No, I wasn't there, but I can still ask these questions: Was this justified by wartime hysteria? Was this what our soldiers were dying to preserve? Is this your image of America? I think not.

Some have labored far longer than I have for government acknowledgment of wartime internment of Europeans. They have been rebuffed. Their work continues and I have joined them.

Years ago, apologizing for mistreatment of the Japanese, Congress convinced itself that sham hearings had provided European internees with sufficient due process. Our government made no apology for their internment. That it evened happened remains obscure. Without government acknowledgment like that afforded the Japanese, the facts probably will remain hidden.

Recently, I thought I saw light at the end of the tunnel. In October, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee heard testimony on the proposed "Wartime Violations of Italian American Civil Liberties Act," sponsored by Rep. Rick Lazio. His bill identified only Italians, not all European enemy aliens whose civil liberties were violated during World War II. We encouraged amendment to include all similarly treated enemy aliens. He and the Judiciary Committee ignored our pleas. In November, the bill passed. Immediately, Sen. Robert Torricelli introduced an identical Senate bill.

We are pushing again for an all-encompassing bill. How can Congress say no? The bill itself asserts that to discourage the future occurrence of similar injustices and violations of civil liberties, the story of the World War II treatment of Italians must be told. These virtuous words are a cruel joke.

Why tell half the story? Justice requires recognition of all enemy alien mistreatment.

Sadly, although we have right on our side, without an interest group's support, we cannot be confident of success. Perhaps still cowering in the long, dark shadow of Nazi guilt, Germans do not step forward. Most have nothing to hide, but still they fear. Why open a can of worms?

My father knew this fear, but for last week's Sunday Monitor he dared to tell his story to shed more light in that dark corner. All Americans, including the Japanese, should call for a full accounting of the discrimination.

Urge Congress to stand tall by passing the law that will finally put this shame behind us. Only then can we feel more secure that our civil rights won't be cast aside unjustly. Don't do it for my father. Be selfish. Do it for yourself. Next time, it might be your turn.

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