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## LOSS OF RIGHTS

By Ken McLaughlin

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The story of Starr Pait Gurcke sounds like the plot of some conspiracy-laden wartime TV movie.

Born in 1911 into a pioneer San Jose family of British heritage, she graduated from San Jose State and received a master's in Germanic languages from Stanford before falling in love with Werner Gurcke while on a fellowship in Germany.

They married in 1936 in Santa Cruz before leaving for San José, Costa Rica, where Gurcke had previously immigrated, and soon had two daughters. But because Gurcke was a German citizen, the San Jose woman and her family ended up spending World War II behind barbed wire in a Texas internment camp for "enemy aliens."

Her story is part of an exhibit now in the main Santa Cruz library detailing the round-up of Germans, Italians and Japanese in the United States and Latin America, some of whom were exchanged for American prisoners in Europe and Asia. The exhibit, titled "Enemy Alien Files: Hidden Stories of World War II," is the first in which groups of Japanese, German and Italian heritage have collaborated to show how the civil rights of more than 31,000 "enemy aliens" were violated during the war, said Grace Shimizu, the project's director.

"This is a ground-breaking and unique multicultural collaboration," Shimizu said.

Although the internment of 110,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II has been publicized extensively, the exhibit aims at showing the sweeping nature of other internments. Specifically, it focuses on the dozens of U.S. Department of Justice camps where "enemy aliens" were interned, as opposed to the camps set up by the War Relocation Authority for people of Japanese descent. One of the least known parts of that history involves the round-up of more than 4,000 people of German descent throughout Latin America.

Civil libertarians are delighted to see the exhibit to call attention to what they see as abusive targeting of Muslims and people of Arab descent. Its timing was fortuitous: The long-planned traveling exhibit first opened in San

Francisco, shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, and has been in Boston, Berkeley and Washington, D.C.

When Heidi Donald, one of the Gurcke daughters, heard the exhibit was going to Santa Cruz, she decided it was time to "completely come out of the closet" about her family's internment. Donald, a retired nurse, had squeezed the story out of her mother in her last years and then set about finding out what she could in recently declassified documents.

She was almost 3 when her family was taken by boat from Costa Rica, put on a U.S. Army ship and taken to a prison camp in Crystal City, Texas, south of San Antonio. Donald's memories of the camp are fuzzy, but she recalls seeing her first icicle during the frigid winter and her younger sister, Ingrid, being caught in a dust storm.

When she became a teenager, by that time living in Santa Cruz, she thought more about the camp and periodically prodded her parents to tell their story. But neither wanted to talk about it. They were more interested in making their children's lives "safe and normal," said Donald, 62, whose sister, Ingrid Cutler, also still lives in Santa Cruz.

Her father died of cancer in 1970 at age 61. But three years before her mother's death at age 86 in 1997, Donald was finally able to capture her mother's story on a tape recorder.

Her mom, who in her spare time translated California pre-statehood documents for historians, was unable to tell her own family's history without breaking down in tears.

She spoke about her husband, who had developed a thriving import-export business in Costa Rica, dealing in buttons, umbrellas and Hamilton watches. Heidi was born in 1940; her sister 15 months later. Life was hectic but wonderful.

But because he was still a German citizen, Werner Gurcke's business was one of 340 blacklisted by the Costa Rican government, under pressure from the United States.

He and his brother were arrested without explanation in July 1942. First, they were locked up and forced to sleep on the concrete floor of a local jail before being sent to a concentration camp.

Six months later, the whole family was put on the U.S. Army transport ship *Puebla*. Werner Gurcke spent all three weeks in the hold of the ship, while Starr Pait Gurcke -- described in a Department of Justice document as "sort of (an) American citizen" -- and two diapered kids slept in a cramped cabin with other families.

About 40 passengers developed whooping cough. An epidemic of impetigo, an acute skin disease, broke out.

When the *Puebla* landed in San Pedro, Calif., immigration officials told Werner Gurcke their reason for holding him: He had entered the United States illegally.

He was not allowed legal counsel, and he and his family were taken by train to Crystal City, a former camp for farm workers, where summer temperatures routinely reached 120 degrees.

Starr Pait Gurcke said the prisoners were treated humanely, although they could never understand the barbed-wire fences between them and freedom – or the confiscation of their homes and property.

Because Werner Gurcke was married to a U.S. citizen, he was granted “internment at large” 18 months later at his first hearing. The family moved to the Seabright area of Santa Cruz, where the Pait family had a beach bungalow.

Gurcke began supplying Mexican labor camps with goods and eventually imported wine corks from Spain and Portugal. He was required to report monthly to a Salinas immigration office and had to seek permission to leave the Monterey Bay region.

On Feb. 25, 1946, Gurcke got a letter from immigration authorities saying that he was no longer considered an enemy alien.

It was the same day an immigration officer knocked on his door to ask him to sign a document admitting he was in the United States illegally. His boss and 18 neighbors petitioned the government, saying that deportation would result in extreme hardship for his wife and children and deprive the country of “an intelligent, cultured, responsible resident.”

After a three-year legal battle, he was exonerated of having entered the country illegally. In 1952, he became a U.S. citizen, pledging to fight all enemies, foreign and domestic.

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