

U.S. internment camp survivors tell tales

"The Enemy Alien Files" photo exhibit displayed at San Mateo Library

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SAN MATEO — Karen Ebel's father fled to the United States from Germany in 1937, at age 17, after a group of teens stabbed him for refusing to join the Hitler Youth, a group affiliated with the Nazi Party.

But that didn't stop her father, who became an apprentice cabinetmaker in the United States, from being incarcerated five years later inside a remote North Dakota detention camp after he told U.S. Army officers he didn't want to fight for the U.S. military in Germany, where his family still lived. He also made the mistake of commenting that Hitler built good highways. "He got into a knife fight because he wouldn't join the Hitler Youth," said Ebel. "Then, irony of ironies, he says something about the autobahn and he gets put into the slammer."

Her father, now 87, was incarcerated as an "enemy alien" at Fort Lincoln in North Dakota. For most of his life, he refused to discuss his imprisonment.

"He was very hurt by what happened to him," said Ebel, an attorney in New Hampshire who spoke at a conference Saturday in San Mateo that addressed the little-discussed incarceration of Germans and Italians living in America when World War II broke out.

"When he finally started talking about it, it was extremely traumatic for him," she said.

Ebel joined five other panelists at the "Hidden Stories of World War II" conference, held at the city's new main library.

The event was described by its organizers as the largest of its type yet held that addresses the stripping of Constitutional rights of U.S. residents of German and Italian descent during World War II, under presidential proclamation. Also addressed was the incarceration of Japanese Americans. In a gallery at the library, "The Enemy Alien Files" photo exhibit also opened Saturday, where it will remain through May. The roughly 100 photos in the exhibit, along with their accompanying narratives, portray life at the "enemy alien" detention camps.

The event in particular focused on the devastating effect of the presidential policy, declared by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, on the 15,000 Germans and Italians, both U.S. citizens and legal residents, whose assets were frozen and families split up as fathers and, in some cases, mothers were sent to detention camps, usually on remote Indian reservations.

Those not sent to camps had to carry special ID cards, and abide by an 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew. Many were sent to camps for curfew violations.

Their story has been neglected in history books, Ebel said, and time is running out to write it while the survivors are still alive.

"Pretty soon, the witnesses are going to all be gone," she said. And efforts by advocacy groups, as well as a Congressional bill to analyze the treatment of U.S. residents of German and Italians descent during World War II, brings satisfaction to her father, Max Ebel, who is in ill health.

"It's one of the few things that make him smile," Ebel said.

The event wasn't only a chance to redress old injustices, the speakers emphasized, but resounded with warnings relevant today.

"I feel uneasy that it could be repeated," Ebel said. "America has to analyze how it's going to treat people from a country in which we have acrimonious relations."

About 150 people attended the standing-room only event, including more than two dozen people who either lived in the camps or had a family member incarcerated in one.

The mass arrests and detentions of Japanese, Germans and Italians living in the United States began after the Japanese military attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. The 1798 "Alien Enemies Act" allows the U.S. government to label as "enemy aliens" immigrants from countries at war with the United States, at the discretion of the U.S. president. Enemy aliens deemed a threat to public safety can be incarcerated without a trial, legal representation or the testimony of witnesses.

Nearly one million U.S. residents were labeled "enemy aliens." More than 31,000 Japanese, Germans and Italians were interned, many for years, as potential threats to national security.

Under another program, another 120,000 Japanese residents, tens of thousands who were U.S. citizens, were interned at separate camps,

according to conference materials.

Stephen Fox, the event's keynote speaker and a leading authority on the internment of U.S. residents during World War II, said thousands of homes occupied by Germans, Italians and Japanese were searched, as the presence of an "enemy alien" provided justification for a search warrant.

The military also set off limits large areas near the coast to those designated as enemy aliens, to thwart the chance of enemy ships receiving signals.

U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, D-Campbell, one of the sponsors of the Congressional bill, called the "Wartime Treatment Study Act," lived with his family in an internment camp when he was a youth.

He recalled the "white line" along the coast, beyond which those deemed enemy aliens couldn't cross.

Along the coastal highway, Honda said, "you had families where the children were living in homes on one side, and parents living on the other side in tents."

Ebel helped draft the language in the proposed Congressional legislation, which would create a commission to independently review World War II policies toward Germans and Italians living in the United States. It would also examine restrictions on the entry to the United States of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany.

The commission would assess "the underlying rationale" for the policies, along with recommendations for "appropriate remedies, including how civil liberties can be protected during war."

Following their incarceration, Japanese Americans undertook a vigorous effort to seek redress for their World War II detention. In response, the federal government in 1983 released a report called "Personal Justice Denied," which concluded that the incarceration of Japanese citizens and residents was based on "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership."

In 1990, the federal government also sent Japanese internees reparations of \$20,000 each along with a letter of apology.

Honda, who was deeply involved in the legislation providing redress to Japanese American detained during World War II, said the knowledge he gained from the process was invaluable following the terrorist attacks in

New York and Washington D.C. in 2001.

"When 9-11 occurred, I suddenly realized how important it was that I had a handle on our own history," he said. "And translate that into political discourse to say, 'we cannot repeat that.'"

Ebel said post 9-11, the Alien Enemies Act hasn't been used, although she said some of its elements have been written into the Patriot Act.

The "Wartime Treatment Study Act" was re-introduced, for the fourth time since 2001, to Congress on Feb. 16.

Honda was optimistic that with Democratic control of the House and Senate, the bill, which requires a \$600,000 appropriation, would be approved.

Examination of World War II restrictions and detentions of Germans and Italians in America will also deepen understanding of the Constitutional challenges the country faces in times of conflict, he emphasized.

"We can extract a lesson from it to make us a better country in times of stress and trauma," Honda said. "As the Preamble to the Constitution says, 'In order to form a more perfect union.'"

For information on internment of U.S. residents during World War II, visit the following Web sites:

The American Italian Historical Association's Western Regional Chapter at <http://www.segreta.org>.

The German American Internee Coalition at <http://www.gaic.info>.

To learn about the internment of U.S. residents of Japanese decent, visit the The National Japanese American Historical Society Web site at <http://www.njahs.org>.

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