

# Chung: Few know story about the other internments

## EUROPEANS WERE HELD IN U.S. CAMPS IN W.W. II

By L.A. Chung, Mercury News Columnist, San Jose Mercury News

Is the past simply past? What is memory once those who lived it pass on?

Heidi Donald's octogenarian mother wept each time the San Jose woman was coaxed into telling her daughter about what happened during World War II. Their family, like 10,000 other Germans and German-Americans, were held in U.S. internment camps.

Unlike the Japanese-American internment, few know about this. Donald has hoped a congressional commission could take testimony from internees and government officials to acknowledge the little-known wartime program - and learn from it.

After watching their bill to create such a commission languish year after year, a dwindling number of German-Americans and other European-Americans who were interned during World War II may finally get a fighting chance at having the truth come out, before they all die off.

"Do I hope? I swing, back and forth," said Donald, who was a toddler in 1942, when she arrived at the family internment camp in Crystal City, Texas. "Next week is going to be very interesting."

The Wartime Treatment Studies Act, a bipartisan bill that cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee, was presented as an amendment to the massive - and controversial - immigration reform bill last week, in a strategic attempt to capture legislators' attention.

In practice, amendments get tacked onto larger bills in Washington even when there is no relationship. Sometimes it's because they stand a better chance of getting through in a crowded legislative session that can only muster so much attention before the August recess. Advocates are hoping that if it fails to pass with the immigration bill that at least more members of Congress will understand the proposal for next time.

### Uncovering the truth

The story of how 120,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans were put into 10 internment camps in America's interior during World War II has now been widely covered. Few know of separate Department of Justice programs that rounded up 31,280 "enemy aliens" and their American-born children - 11,000 Germans, 3,200 Italians, more than 10,000 Japanese, and scores of Hungarians, Bulgarians and others. One of the programs, which affected Donald's family, worked with Latin American countries to detain and hand over these foreign nationals, often merchants and their families, to the United States.

The amendment would create two fact-finding commissions to take testimony. The first would review the government treatment of Germans, Italians and Europeans in the United States and those shipped from Latin America. They would explore the camps in Crystal City, Kenedy and Segoville, Texas, Missoula, Mont., and Bismarck, N.D. They would ask about whole families who were exchanged for prisoners, dumped in the middle of hostile countries as war raged in the skies. They would hear the impact of being rendered destitute, bank accounts frozen, financial holdings simply taken away. They would hear how some were held three years after the war was over in 1945.

The second commission would review the treatment of Jewish refugees, such as those aboard the infamous S.S. St. Louis. Known as "the Voyage of the Damned" in 1939, the St. Louis went from Cuba to Florida and Canada unable to unload its 937 asylum-seeking passengers.

Neither commission wants reparations. Advocates, however, want to document what happened, why actions were taken, and make findings in the hope that future challenges better balance national security with civil liberties.

"Looking back, I can see why the government should have the ability to do this," said San Josean Brad Houser, whose grandfather was held in Fort Lincoln, Neb. He understands the need for national security. But what is the process and how long does it last?

"Wrongs can be done," he said. "That's the part I'm struggling with. The idea of the study says let's find out what happened. How do we learn from this?"

### **Facing erasure**

In April, a two-day conference in San Mateo brought together people whose families had been affected by the internment program which incarcerated "enemy aliens" by virtue of nationality, and often questionable evidence, such as hearsay and neighbors' mere suspicions.

Houser, who described himself as a Republican, has mixed feelings about their bill being an amendment to an immigration reform proposal whose current form he does not support. But he understands the immigration bill will change with amendments. If it does not pass, Congress will be more familiar with their proposal for the next session. He wonders, however, how long will it take?

"We don't have a lot of time - for the people who were there, who can testify. Many are in their 90s now."

It was the recent death of Max Ebel that apparently galvanized Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., sponsor of the bill, to offer it as an amendment. Ebel, whose daughter Karen, has worked six years on the bill, was only 17 when he fled Germany after being assaulted for refusing to join the Hitler Youth. He was registered for the draft when he was arrested

and interned in Nebraska. He died in May at age 87, a few days after his daughter returned from the San Mateo conference.

"Losing Max Ebel does more than bring me sadness; it also makes me a bit angry," Feingold said when he introduced the amendment. "Americans must learn from these tragedies now, before there is no one left."

Donald has pensively been thinking of Natasha Trethewey, who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry about black Civil War soldiers. She'd said she wrote "The Native Guard" because she did not want them forgotten, to counter "historical erasure."

"I thought of that ... with the German-Americans who went through this being erased from history," Donald said. "We're not in the textbooks, we're not in the social studies classes. We're also going to be erased."

It's time to act. You can tell your senator that this amendment should be accepted next week. The past cannot simply be past.

*See [www.gaic.info](http://www.gaic.info) and click on "Legislative Efforts." Contact L.A. Chung at [lchung@...](mailto:lchung@...) or (408) 920-5280.*

[http://www.mercurynews.com/columns/ci\\_6045325](http://www.mercurynews.com/columns/ci_6045325)