

**Kansas City Jewish Chronicle    October 20th, 2006**

[http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=17350716&BRD=1425&PAG=461&dept\\_id=154733&rfi=6](http://www.zwire.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=17350716&BRD=1425&PAG=461&dept_id=154733&rfi=6)

## **Bus exhibit tells of little-known German-American internment**

By: Barbara Bayer, Staff Writer

October 20, 2006

### **It is no secret that the United States detained thousands of Japanese-Americans in stateside internment camps during World War II.**

However, 60 years after the fact, most Americans still do not know that many people of German ancestry, including some German-born Jews, were also detained by the U.S. government during World War II.

According to a new traveling museum exhibit that will be visiting the Kansas City area soon, in addition to Kansas and Missouri, German-Americans were imprisoned in about 100 communities in Minnesota, both Dakotas, Nebraska and Iowa.

A traveling exhibit owned by the TRACES Center for History and Culture in St. Paul, Minn. - a Midwest World War II history museum - will be in Topeka, Kan., Lawrence, Kan., and the Kansas City metropolitan area today, Oct. 20 through Oct. 23. (See box) The exhibit is called "Vanished: German-American Civilian Internment 1941-48," and it travels around in a bus called the BUS-eum 2. (TRACES has another bus that concentrates on the German POW experience in the Midwest.)

Michael Luick-Thrams, TRACES executive director, is traveling with the BUS-eum 2, and he said that during World War II the U.S. government interned 15,000 German-American civilians. Visitors to BUS-eum 2 will see 10 narrative panels explaining the internment, and showing pictures of camps located in Sparta, Wisc., Bismarck, N.D., Crystal City, Texas, and Ellis Island, N.Y. Visitors will also see an "NBC Dateline" documentary and a 1945 U.S. government color film about this little-known story. Luick-Thrams said it takes at least 30 minutes to view the exhibits and watch the videos. Admission is free.

This BUS-eum 2 tour began Sept. 1 and continues through Nov. 1. Luick-Thrams said the bus would visit a total of 100 towns. Since 2004, more than

50,000 people have seen the exhibit.

The TRACES Web site, [www.traces.org](http://www.traces.org), notes that the United States government was able to intern the German-Americans because of the Alien Enemy Act of 1798 (50 U.S. C 21-24), which remains in effect today. According to the act, the United States may apprehend, intern and otherwise restrict the freedom of "alien enemies" upon declaration of war or actual, attempted or threatened invasion by a foreign nation. During World War II, the U.S. government interned 15,000 persons of German ancestry. By law only "enemy aliens" could be interned. However, with government approval, their family members frequently joined them in the camps. Many such "voluntarily" interned spouses and children were American citizens.

"We know that there were some Nazi sympathizers among the internees, but we also know that there were anti-Nazis and there were communists and there were Jews," Luick-Thrams said.

Out of the 15,000 interned in these German-American camps, Luick-Thrams said 4,056 were Latin American Germans.

"They were kidnapped by the State Department and brought here - women, children and men - including about 80 Jews who fled the Nazis and had gotten to Latin America and thought, 'Oh, I'm safe now,' " he said.

"We brought them here and during the war there were six voyages that took 6,300 people to Europe and we got them to the Swiss-German border and we swapped them for German-held U.S. nationals. So the irony is some of these people were Jews that we were sending back to Germany," he said.

## **Heartbreaking stories**

Luick-Thrams, a historian, writer and lecturer, feels compelled to draw contemporary comparisons with past evils and to "speak out in a world where democracy is increasingly threatened."

"Part of my problem with the whole story," Luick-Thrams said, "is that none of these 15,000 people had a lawyer. There were no charges or trials or convictions of war-related criminal activity. If there had been legal representation, somebody would have said, 'My client, this German Jew who was in Sachsenhausen, is not a security threat and he should not be in a camp.' But because we didn't afford these people any lawyers ..."

While the Japanese were generally released in 1945, many German-Americans were held until 1948.

The stories of these internments are often heartbreaking. A letter written by Edgar Friede to Eleanor Roosevelt can be found on the TRACES Web site. Friede was a German-Jewish lawyer who had been imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. With the help of influential friends he

was released, and he and his wife found refuge in San Francisco. Since he could not practice law in the United States, he became a door-to-door salesman. After Pearl Harbor, he was arrested and interned at Fort Lincoln, N.D. He frequently wrote the first lady, asking for her help in gaining his release from the internment camp.

Stephen Feinstein, director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Minnesota and a member of the TRACES board of directors, confirmed that some German-born Jews were indeed imprisoned in the United States. Among them were some refugees from Germany who arrived in the United States in 1939 and "who were thrown into American camps as unreliable Germans."

"The exhibit doesn't dispute the issue of spying, Nazi sympathies and so forth, but does bring out the paradoxical situation of some people with pro-Nazi feelings being interned by Americans with German Jews," Feinstein said.

### **Encouraging debate**

Luick-Thrams doesn't know why these stories are still relatively unknown after 60 years.

"I do know that the guards, cooks and administrators were sworn to secrecy when the camps were disbanded," Luick-Thrams said. "We also know that the German-Americans had to sign affidavits so that they would never talk about it. At this point, even the children who were 10 are now 70, and I think they are just saying, 'We're getting to the end of our lives, this has got to be told.' "

One person who has tried to get these stories out and learn more about the entire situation, according to Luick-Thrams, is U.S. Sen. Russell Feingold, a Jewish Democrat from Wisconsin. He has tried to get a bill passed to investigate the internment of these German-Americans as well as the government's treatment of Italian-Americans, certain Latin Americans and refugees of Nazi Germany.

"Every time they debate it, someone blocks it," Luick-Thrams said.

In Feingold's statement regarding the bill in 2001, he noted that in 1988 the act of interning people of Japanese ancestry was officially condemned. No such thing has taken place regarding the internment of those with German ancestry. TRACES Board Member Feinstein thinks the concept of the BUS-eum 2 has been well executed for this exhibit.

"I think it's had a really good impact," Feinstein said. "The bus has a lot of visitors and it encourages a debate."

The interesting thing, according to Feinstein, is that the Secret Service was unable to differentiate between Jews and Germans.

"It's sort of reflective of the general problem of internment without due process. There was some suspension of Habeas Corpus and stuff like that going on," Feinstein said.

As for a comparison between what happened in World War II and what's happening now in the war against terrorism, where people suspected of being enemy combatants are being detained by the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Feinstein said "at that point, that's where I tell people to make their own analogies from their own knowledge base."

"I don't like to go out preaching about Guantanamo, except to say that it's a human-rights violation. Here at the University of Minnesota, where we have a very big human rights center and a human rights program, we're quite concerned about that," Feinstein said.

Luick-Thrams said there's always a problem determining whether you intern people because of what they think or "because they are sending Morse Code messages ..."

"If you want to intern people because of who they are, then we can intern Irish-Catholic police, we can intern left-handed Nebraska wheat farmers, we can intern gay people or Jews or anyone that we deem is a threat. So that's the problem with this for me."