

Lost story is told: Detention of German-Americans

By [Angie Leventis](#)

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Art Jacobs' father never came home.

Pops went to his job at a diaper laundering service on a Friday in November 1944, but didn't return for dinner.

Mom paced in front of the window of their Brooklyn, N.Y., flat all weekend, until she got the call: Lambert Jacobs — a German immigrant in the United States on a visa — had been arrested and detained because he was deemed a potential national security threat.

"I had no idea what was going on," said Art Jacobs, who was 12 at the time. "Our family as we knew it was destroyed after that moment. It was never the same again."

He and the rest of his family voluntarily joined Lambert Jacobs in captivity a few months later, and spent almost a year in camps at Ellis Island, N.Y., and Crystal City, Texas.

Art Jacobs, now 74 and living in Arizona, was among an estimated 11,000 people of German ancestry interned in the United States from 1941 to 1948, out of fear they might have allegiances with their mother country.

The internment of an estimated 120,000 Japanese-Americans is well-known and often the subject of school social studies classes. But the plight of German-Americans, as well as Italian-Americans, during World War II seems to have been largely lost in the annals of history.

The story of the Jacobs family and others will be on display locally this weekend in a traveling exhibit on German-American internment, hosted by the TRACES Museum Center for History and Culture in St. Paul, Minn.

The mobile museum — a retrofitted school bus — is touring eight Midwestern states to tell this largely unknown slice of American history. Photos and narratives will decorate the interior and exterior of the bus, and the back will serve as a makeshift movie theater for a Dateline NBC documentary and 1945 government propaganda film on internment.

Like Art Jacobs, some of the detainees were American-born children, and many were held after the war concluded. The TRACES center believes that 85 people of German ancestry from Missouri and 318 from Illinois were caught up in the internment. U.S. Department of Justice documents about the internments supplied by Jacobs say a man from Affton was arrested on March 16, 1942. An Italian man from St. Louis was taken away on March 27, 1942. A kitchen steward at the Jefferson Hotel in St. Louis was arrested on the same day.

The only crime listed in each case is "alien enemy."

After their internment, the Jacobs family returned to Germany under duress and even there were detained after the war's end in the Hohenasperg prison near Stuttgart.

Art Jacobs returned to the United States with the aid of Americans abroad in 1947 and attended high school at School of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, in southern Missouri.

His parents never immigrated back.

Art Jacobs went on to serve as a major in the Air Force and wrote a book about his World War II experiences titled "A Prison Called Hohenasperg."

He said he holds no anger against his country, but does seek acknowledgment that he and others sent to internment camps were detained without cause.

National recognition might be coming from Congress. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., is sponsoring a bill to study the treatment of German-Americans, Italian-Americans and Jewish refugees by federal authorities during World War II.

The bill passed out of committee last week and awaits consideration before the full Senate; this is the fourth time it has been introduced.

"Americans are rightly proud of our victory in World War II, but few people know about our government's failure then to protect the basic rights of German- and Italian-Americans," Feingold said in a written statement. "Americans must learn from these tragedies now, while the people who survived these injustices are still with us."

John Christgau, author of the book "Enemies: World War II Alien Internment," surmises that the scale of Japanese internment was so large that it eclipsed the detention of other ethnicities. The number of Germans held was about one-tenth of those of Japanese ancestry; he said tens of thousands of Italians were forced to move.

It's critical the nation remember injustice done to all people, or else history

lessons are incomplete, he said.

"These are our people," he said. "There is no excuse for what they suffered. It was pure hysteria, pure racism."

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