

German injustice

Congress considers the government's treatment of immigrants during World War II

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Eberhard Fuhr was 17 years old in 1943, a star athlete at Cincinnati's Woodward High School who dreamed of playing for the Cincinnati Reds, when armed FBI agents snatched him out of a high school classroom, the beginning of a four-year imprisonment.

Frances Ott Allen of Delhi Township was a 9-year-old living in a Victorian home overlooking Lake Michigan, when she, too, became a prisoner of the United States government.

There was only one "crime" the little girl and the teenaged boy shared.

It was the crime of being German in World War II America.

"There was a lot of fear, a lot of suspicion, especially in places like Cincinnati," said the 81-year-old Fuhr, now living in retirement in Palatine, Ill., near Chicago. "Our family got caught up in it. So did many others.

"And, to this day, the government has not told us why."

A bill now pending in Congress may finally answer that question, by setting up a federal commission to study the treatment of German-Americans and Italian-Americans by the U.S. government during World War II.

Fuhr and Allen were among an estimated 11,000 German-Americans - immigrants who had not become citizens and their children - who were rounded up during World War II on the suspicion of being sympathetic to the Nazi regime in their homeland.

They were sent to government-run internment camps around the country, to live as prisoners side-by-side with Japanese-Americans until the war was over.

It was done under one of the oldest laws on the books, the Alien Enemy Act of 1798, which allowed the internment of aliens of "enemy ancestry."

Cincinnati, a city where nearly six of every 10 residents was of German heritage when the war began, had one of the largest contingents of recent German

immigrants in the country. By the end of 1940, after the Alien Registration Act was adopted, 10,200 alien immigrants - most of them German - had registered at the Federal Building downtown.

After the U.S. entered the war in December 1941, hundreds of them ended up being rounded up by federal authorities and sent to internment camps in the West and the Plains states.

More than 60 years later, German-Americans like Fuhr and Allen - both held prisoner with their families at Crystal City, Texas - want to know why it happened.

"I'm not saying I should never have been interned; that's for someone else to say," said Fuhr. "I understand that the nation has to protect itself in a time of war. But what I really want is for the government to say, 'Yes, we interned Germans and we did it illegally.' I don't want money. I want them to say it."

He may soon be getting his wish.

'LEARN FROM THESE TRAGEDIES'

Since 1980, the federal government has acknowledged injustices done to Japanese-Americans, Aleuts, Italian-Americans and others - but not to German-Americans.

Sen. Russell Feingold, D-Wisconsin, has spent years trying to change that, and may be on the verge of succeeding.

Feingold, whose state includes Milwaukee and its large German-American population, has tried several times to pass a Wartime Treatment Study Act. It would do two things - set up a federal commission to study the treatment of German-Americans, Italian-Americans and European Latin Americans during World War II; and create a second commission to study the government's treatment of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

In May, the Senate agreed to his bill as an attachment to the immigration reform bill, but it died with the immigration bill.

Feingold will try again, possibly as an amendment to the current defense authorization bill.

In a floor speech in the Senate in May, Feingold emphasized that his amendment would not grant reparations to victims. But, he said, it is important that the issue be studied.

"Americans must learn from these tragedies now, before there is no one left," Feingold said.

The German-American Internee Coalition, an organization made up of hundreds of former internees and their children, is trying to heighten public awareness of what happened to German aliens during World War II so that the legislation will have a better chance of passing, said president Karen Ebel, a New Hampshire woman whose late father, Max Ebel, was an internee.

"We want the story to come out because it is a cautionary tale for today," Ebel said. "If we are to learn from our mistakes, we have to first acknowledge them."

One reason that Japanese-Americans have been much more successful in forcing the government to acknowledge its mistakes is that many German-American families have been reluctant to speak publicly about their families' ordeals, for fear of being labeled as Nazi sympathizers.

"But the vast majority of these people had no political connections; they were just ordinary working people caught up in the times," Ebel said. "There are German-American people to this day who do not want to talk about it."

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GERMAN-AMERICANS IN CINCINNATI

Census figures in 1940 showed that nearly 60 percent of Cincinnati's residents were of German ancestry. While the city has retained much of its German heritage, that percentage has declined over the years. In the 2000 Census, 65,659 Cincinnati residents described themselves as being of German ancestry - 19.9 percent. The same Census made it clear that many German-American families have moved from the cities into the suburbs of Hamilton County - 30.6 percent of county residents claimed German ancestry. For information about German-American internees, go to www.gaic.info Allen, who came to Cincinnati 20 years ago and is a librarian at the University of Cincinnati's Langsam Library, is one of those who went for decades telling no one about two years of living at Crystal City with her parents. "My parents said to never say anything to anyone about it; and, for 40 years, I did as they

asked," said Allen. "They did not want people to know." The first person she told the story was her own son, when he graduated from college. The story began when Otto Ott came to the U.S. from Germany in 1926. His future wife, Franziska, came three years earlier. Ott had applied for citizenship and was working as the banquet manager at the LaSalle Hotel in downtown Chicago when, after saving up some money, he moved with his wife and 7-year-old daughter to a lakeside home 30 miles north of town. The nightmare began on Feb. 22, 1942 - Washington's Birthday. Frances watched as her father, coming home from work, pulled the family car into the driveway. Another car followed behind him. When he got out of the car, two FBI agents and the local police chief demanded to see his driver's license. Once inside, the agents started searching through the house, taking several items - some family photographs, their passports, her mother's address book. They took Otto Ott, too.

No charges were ever filed, but Otto Ott was imprisoned nonetheless. Even though Ott belonged to no pro-German organizations, there were indications, Allen said, that he had been taken because they lived on a road that went by an electric power plant; and such plants were considered to be potential targets for Nazi saboteurs. Eventually, Otto ended up at Crystal City, a large camp 120 miles southwest of San Antonio. Mrs. Ott struggled for months to care for herself and her daughter, but when federal authorities said she could voluntarily join her husband at Crystal City, she and Frances gave up their freedom to live as a family again. The little girl arrived at the camp on Oct. 21, 1943 - her 9th birthday. They remained there in their one-room home until July 1945 when they were given train tickets, \$50 cash and told to go home. "I was just a kid, so it didn't bother me so much," Allen said. "But my mother, I think, never got over it. I don't think my dad did either, but he just never talked about it." Eberhard Fuhr's family was typical of the immigrant Germans who came to Cincinnati in the 1920s. His parents, Carl and Anna, had sponsors

in Cincinnati - local German businessmen and the Lutheran church - to help them come here in the late 1920s. But, in August 1942, with the U.S. at war with Germany, Carl, a baker, and Anna were taken into custody while young Eberhard was in North Carolina working as a camp counselor. His 12-year-old brother, Gerhard, a sixth-grader, went with his parents to an internment camp. Eberhard came home to the West End to find his parents gone; he and his 18-year-old brother, Julius, were left to fend for themselves. But Julius, too, was soon gone - he took a football scholarship to Wittenberg College.

Eberhard sold newspapers on the streets of the West End to pay for food while he tried to finish his high school education. Then, the FBI came to his classroom at Woodward High School. He was not charged with any crime, but he went before a Civilian Alien Review Board downtown, where a prosecutor peppered him with questions. What would you do, a government lawyer asked, if your German cousin came up the Ohio River in a U-boat? The 17-year-old responded coolly, logically - a U-boat couldn't come up the Ohio; it's too shallow. After several months in detention centers here and in Chicago, he was sent to Crystal City to live with his parents and brother. In the summer of 1945, the Fuhr family left Crystal City for Ellis Island in New York, where they spent two years while the government wrangled over whether or not they would be deported. They were not freed until September 1947 - more than two years after the war ended. "My father was no threat to anyone; he was a baker; there was no reason to hold him," Fuhr said. "My mother was a housewife. There was nothing at all political about her. "They suffered greatly for the crime of being German. Somebody needs to explain why."