

Exhibit notes that German Americans were interned during WWII

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An unusual museum is rolling around Wisconsin with a little-known story from wartime half a century ago.

Housed in a dark green bus, exhibits tell the tale of thousands of German Americans who were arrested - sometimes separated from spouses and U.S.-born children - and interned in Wisconsin and elsewhere during World War II.

While the internment of Japanese Americans has been widely discussed, and acknowledged by the government, the roundup of about thousands of people of German background is a disturbing and largely untold chapter of history, said Michael Luick-Thrams.

He's the curator of the exhibit, the driver of the bus and the executive director of the St. Paul, Minn., organization that sponsors it, the Traces Center for History and Culture.

"We look at how war, any war, affects people," he said during a Madison stop last week. "We chose a war far enough back that people don't get emotionally entangled," he said, but not so remote they don't care.

A historian, he wants to raise questions, not give answers.

Some of those questions: Is it justifiable to imprison people for who they are instead of what they do? Does society owe due process only to citizens? To what extent, and for how long, is a government accountable for its actions?

Ghosts of interned people haunt the bus, depicted not only by their own letters, including one plaintive plea to Eleanor Roosevelt, but also by everyday items from their lives: a child's German storybook, a man's shaving brush.

Large posters and photographs tell individual stories that began with pounding on the door in the middle of the night.

In Milwaukee, for example, German-born Anna Schafer was arrested on Dec. 9, 1941, with her infant son, Horst, and taken away. Her husband, Karl, a naturalized U.S. citizen, was investigated while she remained detained until April 1942.

Although many people testified to the Schafers' patriotism and loyalty, she was embarrassed by her arrest and rarely discussed internment with her family even after becoming an American citizen in 1952, the exhibit says.

Some German Americans were investigated at the behest of suspicious neighbors. Others lost their property while they were gone. Some were not released until after the war; others were shipped to Germany.

On the outside of the bus, a U.S. map is dotted with detention locations, including Camp McCoy in Sparta, and the text of the 5th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Visitors to the bus can watch two short videos, one an NBC Dateline report on civilian internment and the other a government film. Community discussions follow its visit at some stops.

"None of the German Americans are looking for financial compensation. They do want the issue brought up in the open to be talked about," Luick-Thrams said. The U.S. government has acknowledged detention of Italians and Italian Americans, as well as of Japanese and Japanese Americans, he said, but not that of Germans.

A stream of curious people boarded the bus during its stop at the Villager Mall on South Park Street, hosted by Madison-area Urban Ministry.

"I knew that they took Italian men right out of their homes, because I grew up in the Bush," said Sharon Flinn, 64, of Madison, referring to Greenbush, a former multi-ethnic neighborhood near Park and Regent streets. "It's frightening, isn't it?"

Eldon Youngs, a Gisholt company retiree, volunteered to count visitors because his daughter works for Traces and because he remembers his grandfather's stories about German prisoners of war working at the canning factory in Cambria during the war.

Why is the bus touring now?

"Because we live in a world of war again," Luick-Thrams said.

He cited the famous warning of philosopher George Santayana: Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

"This is what we can do to bring up the past and have a starting point for discussion," Luick-Thrams said.

For information, call the Traces Center for History and Culture, St. Paul, Minn., 651-292-8700, or visit www.traces.org.