

Snow Country Prison Exhibit Opening Brings Internees Back to Internment Camp

(posted here with permission of the author, March 2006)

November 18, 2003

by Martha Nakagawa

Bismarck, N.D.—"Gitterkrankheit—the fence sickness." It is a term coined by three German Americans—Dr. Eddie Friedman, Dr. Arthur Sonnenberg and Wolfgang Thomas.

The three, along with more than 3,850 people of German and Japanese ancestry, had been inmates of a Department of Justice (DOJ) Camp at Fort Lincoln in Bismarck, N.D., during World War II.

Friedman described "the fence sickness" to author John Christgau in this way: "After you've been behind barbed wire for a long time, even if you know you've done nothing wrong, a part of you begins to feel like a criminal. Once you get out, it's not something you want to talk about."

The story of this "fence sickness" is captured in a new exhibit that opened Oct. 4 at the former DOJ camp site titled, "Snow Country Prison: Interned in North Dakota."

Interspersed in the exhibit are translated haiku poems of former Bismarck internee Itaru Ina, whose bitterness and sorrow put into words the "fence sickness" described by Friedman, a German Jew who escaped one of Hitler's death camps only to be incarcerated in a U.S. style concentration camp in America.

Ina's daughter, Dr. Satsuki Ina, felt it was time that the full story of the World War II internment camp experience be told. "This is part of the untold story," said Ina. "I think there's been a single voice describing the Japanese American experience, and really, there are multiple voices and many stories. It's time now for these stories about the renunciants be told and understood with compassion.

"I also think the story being told today is relevant for what's happening in the world regarding other immigrants and citizens who are at risk because the government needs to procure national security and suspend constitutional rights."

Laurel Reuter, curator of the exhibit and director of the North Dakota Museum of Art, said they decided to let Itaru Ina's haiku tell the story of Fort Lincoln rather than have lengthy text throughout the exhibit because "the

personal is the universal; if you can tell one person's story well, you can tell the whole story well."

Reuter also added that because there are so few photographs of Japanese American inmates they decided to enlarge individual photographs on large white banners to represent everyone who had been at Fort Lincoln.

The exhibit was organized by the North Dakota Museum of Art and the United Tribes Technical College with assistance from Christgau, author of "Enemies: World War II Alien Internment," which was published in 1985 and is considered the first book on the government's enemy alien program during WWII; Dr. Satsuki Ina, film producer of "Children of the Camps"; Scott Schaffnit, outreach programs coordinator for the State Historical Society of North Dakota; Etsuko Wakayama, calligrapher; Marilyn Snyder, curator of education for the State Historical Society of North Dakota; and Frank Vyzralek, historian and retired North Dakota State archivist.

The first World War II inmates at Fort Lincoln were German seamen who arrived in May 1941. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, all 1,000,000 German, Japanese and Italian aliens in the US were declared "enemy aliens" pursuant to the Alien Enemies Act and subject to many restrictions, including the possibility of indefinite internment by the Department of Justice. Under that law, the seamen were soon joined by German suspected "enemy aliens" living in America. That was followed by more than 400 Japanese suspected "enemy aliens". When the United States government forcibly removed Germans and Japanese from their homes in Latin America, hundreds wound up at Fort Lincoln. In 1945, Fort Lincoln's population swelled as hundreds of Japanese Americans, who had renounced their citizenship at the Tule Lake War Relocation Authority (WRA) camp, were transferred to the Bismarck camp.

*****German Americans*****

"It was hell," said Max Ebel, 84, of New Hampshire, in describing his WWII experience.

During the war, Ebel had left Germany to escape the Nazis, only to be arrested by the FBI in September 1942. He was first held in a temporary INS detention center in Boston, then at Ellis Island, the very symbol of America's open door policy towards immigrants. From there, Ebel was shipped to Fort Meade in Maryland, Camp Forrest in Tennessee and finally to Fort Lincoln in Bismarck, N.D., where he wound up volunteering to be an internee laborer for the Northern Pacific Railroad in an effort to get out of the camp.

To this day, Ebel is unsure of why he was picked up. He believes he was already under surveillance by the FBI in 1938 when he went to the German consulate in Boston to respond to a letter from the German government to join the German Army.

"I said, 'No,' and I thought it was cut and dry," said Ebel.

Government records obtained by his daughter, Karen, also give little clue as to why Ebel was picked up. It may be that Ebel made comments that he would fight with the Americans in the Pacific but not in Germany because he had family there, or it may be that he made complimentary comments about the road system under Hitler.

Whatever the reason, Ebel, like many other German and Japanese immigrants at that time, were picked up on the flimsiest of reasons.

Ebel recalled that one Japanese man had come under suspicion because he liked to get his shoes shined. "He was an old guy," recalled Ebel. "On his day off he went across town to get his shoes shined. That was all. But they (FBI) watched him because right across from the shoe shining place was General Electric."

Ebel became emotional when he recounted the story of a Japanese inmate who tried to commit suicide. One night Ebel and another German heard the toilet flushing repeatedly. When they went to investigate, the two found the Japanese inmate with his throat slit, flushing his blood down the toilet bowl. Ebel and his friend got help and saved the Japanese man's life. Another Japanese internee gave Ebel a rosary, declaring that he no longer believed in the Christian God because a small opening in the rosary crucifix had led to his arrest by the FBI, Ebel has treasured that rosary all these years. At a public discussion forum, Ebel voiced his wish to return the cross to the Japanese American community in honor of the Japanese men he met while interned and their shared experience.

Ebel's daughter has been active in the legislative arena to have the government acknowledge and apologize for its wartime treatment of Germans and Italians.

"It's my perception that the redress effort in the Japanese American community had such a healing effect," said Karen. "The Germans have never had that experience. That's why I feel the legislative work I've been involved in is so important. Even the history books don't say that Germans and Italians were incarcerated."

Karen was pleased to make the first formal announcement of the October 1 introduction of the Wartime Treatment Study Act in Bismarck where her father was interned. The bill mandates the establishment of two commissions, the first is similar to the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians that studied the circumstances of the Japanese Americans. It would review the treatment of European Americans and European Latin Americans during World War II. A second commission would review the US government's denial of asylum to Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Europe during World War II.

The Wartime Treatment Study Act, S. 1691 was jointly introduced by Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Charles Grassley (R-IA) in the House. A companion bill, HR 3226, was simultaneously introduced by Rep. Robert Wexler (D-FL) in the House.

In describing how the German American community was affected, Karen said, "In the German community, they picked up fewer people so as a starting point, there were fewer people that even know much about it. And the way it was discussed, generally, at the time in the German communities that were affected, was that a lot of them really thought the people who were being picked up weren't the greatest people on earth so there wasn't really a warm, fuzzy feeling for the internee for quite some time. So not only were the internees feeling some shame because of what the government had done to them, even though none of them had been convicted of a crime, you compound that with what had happened during World War II in Germany, and a lot of them had guilt and wanted to just push it all away."

Robert Nebel, 83, was among the first Germans to be incarcerated at Fort Lincoln. He was a German merchant marine, working with an all-German crew, for Standard Oil, an American company with offices in Germany.

When Nebel's oil tanker landed in New York in 1938, Germany had just attacked Poland, and the entire German crew was held for the next two years in New York. The group was then shipped to Ellis Island and on to Fort Lincoln in May 1941, months before the United States entered WWII.

At Fort Lincoln, Nebel was among the first Germans to unsuccessfully try to dig an underground escape tunnel. The men were caught after a truck parked above the tunnel and caved a portion of the parking lot in.

"We weren't trying to escape," said Nebel. "We just wanted to go to Bismarck, have a few beers and look at the girls. When you're 20-years-old, that's the only thing on your mind, nothing else."

For his participation in the tunnel, Nebel was held in solitary confinement for two weeks.

Since the nearby city of Bismarck had a large population of German descendants going back to the 1800s, the German seamen were highly motivated to meet the local women, said Nebel. As a result, there was a second attempt to tunnel out of Fort Lincoln to meet women. That too was foiled.

Nebel had other stories of escape attempts. He recalled one guy, who they nicknamed Marlene Dietrich because he had droopy eyes like the actress, had run off after he applied to visit the hospital which was outside Fort

Lincoln. But as luck would have it, the first car he tried to hitch a ride on turned out to be Fort Lincoln guards.

After Germany surrendered, Nebel, despite his treatment in America, wanted to remain and even volunteered for the U.S. Army. But instead Nebel was one of 300 German seamen shipped back to Germany in 1945.

Over the years, Nebel tried to legally immigrate to the United States but was repeatedly turned down with the explanation that he was barred from entering the country for having entered illegally. Nebel was in the same situation as the Japanese Latin Americans, who had been forcibly taken from their country, brought to the United States and then deemed as illegal aliens after the end of World War II. To get around this, Nebel immigrated to Canada, became a Canadian citizen and, through the help of friends in the United States, entered the country legally. He now lives in Florida.

Eberhard Fuhr, 78, was not incarcerated at Fort Lincoln but at the Crystal City DOJ camp in Texas. Fuhr said he came to Fort Lincoln to pay tribute to then-U.S. Sen. William Langer, R-N.D., who had convened a hearing on Ellis Island after the end of WWII and introduced a bill that released all enemy aliens still being held. Fuhr was among those released in September 1947.

Fuhr, like Ebel, has no idea why he was arrested at his high school in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1943. The German-born naturalized citizen notes that in his 180-page FBI files, there is mention that he is suspected of being favorably disposed towards Germany.

"I think everyone is favorably predisposed towards their native country or homeland or heritage," said Fuhr. "But that doesn't mean you're going to be disloyal to the country where you're living in."

A year earlier, Fuhr's parents had been picked up and held at the DOJ camp at Seagoville, Texas. After Fuhr was given a hearing where he was declared a "dangerous alien enemy," he was sent to Chicago and then reunited with his parents at the Crystal City DOJ camp.

"I'm not so angry at being interned during the war because I was a German," said Fuhr. "I wasn't an American. I was born in Germany. But yeah, I'm angry about the time after the war, when I was kept for two and a half years after the end of the war."

For Mike Wilcken, son of former Bismarck internee Egon Wilcken, the visit to Fort Lincoln was a moving one. "It's emotional because...just because my father was here," said Wilcken, choking back tears.

Wilcken recalled that his late father frequently talked about Fort Lincoln and has hundreds of photographs from his stay since cameras were not confiscated from the German detainees.

"The way my father told me is that the government told him he could join the American Army and become a citizen," recalled Wilcken. "My father said, 'No, I'm not going to do that.' I always thought that that would be like if I went over to Germany as an American tourist and the war broke out and I'm asked to join the German Army to fight the Americans. My father thought the same way. He thought, 'Why should I fight my countrymen?' That's why they put him here."

Armin Vogt and Ursula Vogt Potter distinctly remember the day the FBI visited their Spokane, Wash., farm and arrested their father, Karl Vogt, and shipped him off to Fort Lincoln.

"I can tell you in vivid color that day," said Armin Vogt, who had been four-years-old at the time. "I'm 66-years-old but I can tell you exactly what the weather was like and everything about it. It's like a photograph that's been slapped into your brain. If I saw those men (FBI) again, I'd probably recognize them."

Karl Vogt was arrested on Dec. 9, 1941, two days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Three FBI agents in black suits and hats, got out of a black car. One of them handcuffed the father, and the agents went from room to room, looking through all the family's photo albums. When Karl's wife, Elsie, asked the FBI agents where they were taking her husband, she was told that it was "none of your business."

The Vogt family have recounted their story in their newly published book titled, "The Misplaced American," by Ursula Vogt Potter.

*****Japanese Americans*****

The two Nikkei former Bismarck inmates to attend the opening event were among the second wave of Japanese Americans to be held at Fort Lincoln.

"It's a nostalgic revisit to Fort Lincoln as a free person," said Hank Naito, 77, who flew in from Hawaii.

Tad Yamakido, 77, of California, said he had mixed emotions. "Some of it is anger, some of it is sadness, and some of it is happiness," he said.

In describing his emotions, Yamakido said he was angry that WWII had started and the government had put Japanese Americans into camps, which eventually led to the renunciation of his citizenship and his incarceration at Fort Lincoln.

Yamakido said he was sad because the anger that led to his renunciation sent him to Japan where he watched three of his close Nisei friends die due to post-war Japan's lack of food, sanitation and medicine. Yamakido himself had contracted dysentery from drinking contaminated water and could barely

move for a while. His older brother contracted tuberculosis at the time and was hospitalized to have a part of his lung and ribs removed. During the operation, he was given a blood transfusion with tainted blood, which would haunt him 30 years later when he would develop cirrhosis of the liver.

But Yamakido said he is happy that his citizenship was restored, thanks to the efforts of Wayne Collins, and that the United States government had apologized for its wartime actions.

After his restoration of his citizenship, Yamakido joined the United States Air Force in 1952 and served in some branch of the U.S. military until his retirement in 1988.

"I guess I can close the book now," said Yamakido. "It's a big relief."

Dr. Isao Fujimoto, son of a former Missoula, Mont. DOJ camp internee Taiichi Fujimoto, was only eight when his father was picked up by the FBI. As the oldest of the children, his Japanese-speaking mother, Ayako, had Isao write a letter to the President of the United States, pleading for his father's release. Although young Isao received no response, he continued to write letters to various officials. He finally received a response when he wrote to Edward Ennis, the head of the Alien Enemy Control Unit.

Like Ina, Fujimoto felt it was critical to remember the DOJ camps. "I think the wartime experience is a reminder of what happens to people in a time of crisis, especially if they are marginalized and aren't organized. It's very important that people really come together and realize the power that exist when people start working together, so I think this is not just about looking back at how bad the situation was but we want to say what have we learned from it and how do people work together to develop a community, as well as a society, that gives us this promise of democracy."

Rodney Sakamoto had two grandfathers in separate DOJ camps. His maternal grandfather, Shokichi Ishimaru, ended up at Fort Lincoln; his paternal grandfather, Giisuke Sakamoto, wound up at the Missoula DOJ camp.

"I've been trying to find out for quite a few years now what happened to them when they came to these places and what was it like," said Sakamoto. "I thought this would be an opportunity to learn a little more about what happened. I imagine they were 65 or 70 years old when all of a sudden they were uprooted and taken to Montana and North Dakota, which were totally foreign to them, and they didn't speak any English. It must've really, really been traumatic."

United Tribes

Today, Fort Lincoln has been converted into the United Tribes Technical College.

"How ironic that Fort Lincoln, which once held relocated Germans and Japanese, is now occupied by Native Americans whose long history have been marked by repeated tragic episodes of relocation and resettlement," said author Christgau. "Those of us who want this history preserved are grateful to the United Tribes for recognizing a part of the tragedy that happened here during World War II."

David Gipp, president of the United Tribes Technical College, noted that the land now legally belongs to the college and can be said that "the Indians have taken over the fort."

In discussing the United Tribes decision to participate in the exhibit, Gipp said, "We realize that freedom is not the same for everyone. It wasn't back in 1941, and it isn't even that way today. We are revisiting the past to learn about what we need to do to protect fundamental freedoms of _expression, of movement, of the ability to take advantage of this democracy."

Gipp pointed out that it was not until 1944 that the final third of the American Indians, through an act of Congress, became United States citizens.

"When we look at the internment years, we see again the loss of basic rights and we can see the parallels in history that have happened to people like the Native people, the first Americans, as I like to say, who were the last Americans to receive citizenship, at least as a group," said Gipp. "We see what happened to the German and Japanese American internees and the things that they gave up and were forced to do. To me, this exhibit is an acknowledgement of a part of our history, and it is yet to be fully told and fully discovered."

For more information on the Snow Country Prison exhibit
<http://www.ndmoa.com/prision/index.html> «« Click here.

Posted with the permission of Martha Nakagawa -- miikochan@aol.com