

Enemy Aliens

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Maya Sapper was 11 years old when her father was taken by gunpoint from their Guatemala home and sent to a prison camp in Texas.

Mary Stagnaro was five when her Italian mother, Italian-American father, two brothers and a sister were forced to leave their Continental Street home for a rental on Catalpa Street.

Heidi Donald and her sister Ingrid Cutler were in diapers when their German father and American mother were blacklisted, arrested and shipped from Costa Rica to a camp in the United States.

The childhood upheavals of these four Santa Cruz women are just part of the story that reflects the horrific experiences of thousands of Germans, Italians and Japanese living in the United States and Latin America during World War Two. It is a story of displacement, relocation, dispossession, and imprisonment.

Why is it being told now at a special exhibit "Enemy Alien: Hidden Stories of World War II" running through Feb. 28 at the Central Branch of the Santa Cruz Public Library?

Because those who have learned the lessons of history — like Sapper, Donald, Cutler, Stagnaro and retired school teacher, Mas Hashimoto — don't want them forgotten.

Presented by the Friends of the Santa Cruz Library and the Santa Cruz Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, "Enemy Alien Files" is 24 panels of photos, personal testimony, oral history and quotes from internees of World War Two.

"This kind of education is imperative at times of national crisis," said Dorothy Ehrlich, executive director of the Northern California ACLU, and featured speaker at tomorrow night's exhibit reception "Night of the Enemy Aliens" at the Central Library in downtown Santa Cruz.

Other speakers include Grace Shimizu, project director of the exhibit and director of the Japanese Peruvian Oral History Project, Sandy Lydon, local historian, and moderator Mike Rotkin, Santa Cruz City Council member and UC Santa Cruz lecturer.

"We are deeply concerned that once again we are close to the brink of repeating some of those very same mistakes."

When Mas Hashimoto was a young social studies teacher in the '60s, nobody was talking about what had happened in his childhood.

"It was really different for me to bring Japanese-American internment up in the classroom," he said. "It was such a personal thing. It wasn't in the textbooks yet."

Nearly forty years after the end of the war, the 1983 re-trial of Fred Korematsu, an Oakland man who had challenged the evacuation and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans (and been imprisoned for it) opened the floodgates of memory and testimony.

The overturning of his conviction forced the government to admit that it had no substantial basis to intern its citizens of Japanese descent.

"That case was won by a group of lawyers who were the children of the Japanese American families interned," Ehrlich said.

"They had witnessed the silence and opened up a discussion of the issues. By bringing it to light and seeking redress, they have prepared us to have the kind of discussions this exhibit encourages."

It wasn't until the late 1980s that the Japanese American experience was included in American history textbooks, once again because of the efforts of those who had experienced internment as children.

"We felt we had a responsibility to teach about the internment," Hashimoto said.

"The whole point was that it must never happen again."

The textbooks are still incomplete, but the clear simple language of "Enemy Aliens" begins to fill in the blanks with the stories of the 4,058 Germans, 2,264 Japanese, and 288 Italians taken from their homes in Latin America and imprisoned in internment camps in the United States.

"There's very little public awareness of the non-Japanese part of this story," Ehrlich said. "This is really the newest part of the discussion and it adds to the dialogue in an important way."

"When they took my father away, we didn't know where he was going or what was going to happen to him," said Sapper, a retired nurse who lives in Santa Cruz.

"I think it was harder on my mother than my father. He had time to rest and paint."

Sapper's mother was moved to Guatemala City and forbidden to leave. She was given a stipend of a hundred dollars a month from the family's frozen assets to support four children alone for four years.

"People — especially poor people — were very good to us," Sapper said. "Only once was I called a Nazi. Some people threw rocks at me. I was on my roller skates and couldn't get away."

With vivid photos and documents of the times, the exhibit, which originally opened at the National Japanese American Historical Society in San Francisco, explores the perceived political, military and economic threats that Germans, Italians and Japanese living in Latin America were alleged to present to the United States during World War Two.

"My father was the opposite of a Nazi," Sapper said. "It was an economic war. My father had something they wanted, so they took it all."

Like many internees of World War Two, the property taken from the Sapper family was never returned to them. After a lawyer got Sapper released from the camp, he was arrested again walking out of the courtroom.

His crime? Being in the country illegally. "His greatest fear was that he would be sent to Germany like others who were being exchanged for American captives," Sapper said. "He didn't want to go there."

Returned to his family and native country on Christmas Eve 1945, Sapper didn't talk much of his experience. "He said 'This is part of war and war is never nice,'" Sapper said.

It was the experience of World War Two internees that President Bush referred to in his post-Sept. 11 assurances that the United States would not do the Arab-Americans what had been done to the Japanese Americans.

"So many people were so relieved to hear him say that, so proud that he reiterated what had taken place," Hashimoto said. "But that lasted only one speech."

On Oct. 25, 2001, Congress overwhelmingly passed the USA PATRIOT (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) Act.

Violations of constitutional rights allowed by this act — the fourth, sixth and eighth especially — are keeping the ACLU busier than usual these days.

One aspect of the USA PATRIOT act actively contested by the ACLU is the Special Registration Program, which requires young men from more than 20

Middle Eastern and Muslim countries to register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

"Hundreds of young men who voluntarily appeared have been arrested and detained," Ehrlich said. "In many cases, it was that the INS had failed to update records that would show their status was in order."

According to Ehrlich, some of the same tools are being used against Muslim and Middle Eastern men that were used against American and Latin American citizens during World War Two.

"Singling people out solely on the basis of ethnic origin and without individual suspicion is morally poisonous and useless from a national security point of view," she said. "Any expert in security will tell you that you don't round up everyone. "You simply make the haystack so big you can never find the needle."

For many years, the humiliating experience of internment threatened to keep the stories secret. While some were told by government agents they should never speak of what happened to them, others just wanted to leave the past behind and get on with the future.

"There was a lot of humiliation about what happened," Stagnaro said of her family's relocation during World War Two "We would have big family holidays together, but nobody every talked about what happened.

"Now when I tell people I'm working on this exhibit and they say, 'I didn't know that happened.' My children didn't even know it happened."

With "Enemy Alien" organizers hope that knowledge is indeed power, and that knowing history means that it won't be repeated.

"The responses we've received show that people are making the connection to what is happening now," said Carol Fuller, exhibit organizer and board member of the Santa Cruz Chapter of the ACLU.

"History shows that we have to start responding to these signs early. By the time hysteria is in full tilt, it takes an exceptional person to speak out."

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