

# **The Internment of Italian Americans During World War II**

**By**

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**It is now seventy years since the end of World War II and most of us of Italian American background, born in the United States, have no memory of or experience with the situation faced by our parents, grandparents or other relatives, resulting from that conflict. We may vaguely remember those who served in the United States Armed Forces during the war because we have pictures of them in uniform, or even decades earlier while they were on the boats that brought them into this country.**

**But what it was like to be threatened with internment, or possible evacuation from their businesses or homes, because of the suspicion that they might have been allies or agents of the fascist/nazi enemies of this country, is, for most of us, far beyond our ability to comprehend. From this point in time, all such possibilities have literally been wiped out of our memories---if we ever had any.**

**What actually happened then has been forgotten, not just from ignorance or from shame, but because few people either recorded or considered those events important enough to the history of this country or to ourselves, to be recounted, much less celebrated or appreciated.**

**Today, we need to re-establish the memories of those events which literally serve as the background of all of us whose families originated in Italy---because they are part of who we are. We can no longer deny that history without admitting that it is not only painful to do so, but that to deny it is to attempt to delete it from time, as though it never happened. So, let us begin from the beginning, if we can.**

**Many of us who are old enough to do so, may recall the period immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941 (“A Day that will Live in Infamy!”, said President Roosevelt on December 8 of that year). Unfortunately, what very few of us recall is that suspicion of the loyalty of Italian Americans to the United States began as early as 1936 when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, and solidified in 1939 when Italy joined the “Axis Powers” with Germany and Japan in the “Pact of Friendship,” more commonly referred to as the “Pact of Steel.”**

**Shortly afterwards Congress passed the Alien Registration Act of 1940 requiring that all aliens, no matter how long they had lived in this country or even if they had been born here (dual citizenship), register as such at post offices throughout the country. In 1942 Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the US Army to exclude anyone “deemed necessary” from restricted zones along the west coast. Thus, some 120,000 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry were evacuated and interned in detention or “relocation centers” scattered throughout the country, and approximately 600,000 Italian Americans were required to carry photo identification booklets (similar to passports) at all times. They were even required to give up all “contraband” items such as cameras, flashlights, weapons and short wave radios.**

**Eventually about 1,600 Italian-Americans were arrested, 250 were interned in military camps, and some 10,000 were evacuated from the California coast, forcing as many as 1,400 to lose their livelihoods and fishing boats (90% of the fishing fleet was confiscated by the Coast Guard) along the San Francisco waterfront in the process. This was while fishing was considered necessary to the US economy and many of those evacuated had children and relatives serving in the very US Armed Services fighting the axis forces which they were suspected of favoring.**

**Some Senators and Congressmen even proposed removing Italian Americans from the east coast as well, but since it was estimated that there were well over 500,000 living everywhere from Boston to Florida and the Gulf Coast at that time, relocation would not only not have been feasible, but might have cost more than the actual war effort.**

**Meanwhile in California, curfews were issued confining some 52,000 Italian “enemy aliens” to their homes between 8 PM and 6 AM daily. Accordingly, they were forbidden to travel more than five miles from their homes on any given day. Not even Giuseppe DiMaggio was allowed to visit his son Joe DiMaggio’s restaurant in San Francisco at that time! And opera star Ezio Pinza was arrested on March 12, removed from his home, and was briefly imprisoned on Ellis Island. Eventually, the “insanity” of this situation caused Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York City, to demand an end to all these “ridiculous” and “clearly illegal” actions.**

**Finally, on October 12, 1942 (Columbus Day), less than a year after the original Order was issued, Attorney General Francis Biddle announced that “Italian nationals in the US would no longer be classified as ‘enemies’.” It is believed that President Roosevelt felt that he needed the support of**

**the Italian Americans, the nation's largest ethnic group, to successfully combat the axis powers, especially since the invasion of southern Italy was about to be launched. An estimated total of 500,000 Italian Americans served in the US Armed Forces during World War II.**

**But it wasn't until 1994 when a history instructor at the University of California in Berkeley, named Lawrence DiStasi, organized a traveling exhibit entitled, "Una Storia Segreta: When Italian Americans were Enemy Aliens," that the plight of so many Italian-American citizens and non-citizens alike, was first revealed and explored. This led Congressman Rick Lazio of Long Island and others, to introduce HR 2090 (Public Law No:106-451) "The Wartime Violation of Italian-American Civil Liberties Act," calling upon President Clinton to acknowledge what had been done, and for Congress to pass an Act to provide financial support for a documentary film to so educate the public.**

**It was considered essential to do so because 50 years after the end of World War II there were still no official accounts of such an important series of events which many felt should never be repeated. The Department of Justice was strongly urged to set up an advisory committee and publish a report detailing the "role of the US Government" ---in these ---**

**“unfortunate occurrences.” The Report entitled “A Review of the Restrictions on Persons of Italian Ancestry During World War II,” was released to the public on November 27, 2001(!), and President Clinton himself did issue an apology, as did the State of California in 2010!! (Mirabile dictu!)**

**Sources for this article include Wikipedia, Pace International Law Review, “Prisoners Among Us: A Teacher’s Guide,” and a “Fact Sheet on the Internment of Italian Americans during World War II” by Lisa Scottoline.**



**Cousin Gus Falco and wife Rita during World War II**



**Cousin Joseph Barbieri, Jr. 1943**