# Table of Contents

**PURPOSE OF THE TEACHER’S GUIDE** ................................................................. 1

**SUMMARY OF THE VIDEO DOCUMENTARY PROGRAM** ........................................... 2

**TIMELINE 1768 – 2000** .................................................................................... 3-5

**CHAPTER I “ITALIAN MIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>The Decision to Leave Italy</th>
<th>6-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Analysis Worksheet</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson</td>
<td>Responses to the New Immigrants</td>
<td>9-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson</td>
<td>Searching for the Italian American Experience</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your Heritage Scrapbook</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggested Websites</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER II “WWII CHANGES IN ATTITUDES, SOLDIERS, INTERNMENT, AND POWs”**

| Lesson | Identification Card Policy for National Security | 14-15 |
|        | “Uncovering the Myths of Italian American Relocation” | 16-25 |
|        | “Overview of Internment, Relocation and Exclusion” | 26-27 |
| Lesson | Celebration of the Italian American Soldier | 28-29 |
|        | Medal of Honor Worksheet | 30 |
| Lesson | Comparing Italian, German and Japanese Exclusion and Internment Experiences | 31-32 |
|        | Comparison Chart | 33 |
| Lesson | Italian Prisoners of War (POWs) in U. S. Camps During WWII | 34-35 |
|        | Newspaper Articles | 36-38 |
|        | Italian Prisoners of War in the United States: 1943 – 45 | 39-46 |
|        | Extra Notes | 47-48 |
|        | Partial List of Italian Prisoner of War Camps Located in the United States | 49 |

**CHAPTER III “RECOGNITION AND REMEMBRANCE”**

| Lesson | Limitation of Rights During Wartime: Can This Happen Again? | 50-51 |
|        | Simulation |
| Lesson | Recognition and an Apology for War Time Treatment of Italian Americans | 52-53 |
| Lesson | Remembrance | 54-55 |
|        | Excerpts Uncivil Liberties: Italian Americans Under Siege During World War II | 56-79 |

**CLOSING THOUGHT** ......................................................................................... 80

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ..................................................................................... 81
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY GUIDE

The overall purpose of the Prisoners Among Us Study Guide is to bring students a part of American history that has been given little or no attention. This need was voiced from teachers and audiences who had viewed the documentary. One viewer stated that she wished she could put the documentary in every school. “How can we change or not repeat what we do not know?”

Built in three chapters, the guide begins by covering the Italian migration and assimilation into American culture. The second chapter contains four key elements: 1) How American and Italian-American attitudes were changed by World War II, 2) An assessment of Italian-American soldiers, 3) The little known story of the internment of Italian-Americans, and 4) The Italian prisoners of war held in this country. The third chapter concludes with recognition and remembrances of the issues previously covered, bringing these lessons into a comparative light with current issues.

In order to facilitate the use of the documentary a study guide has been created. This study guide was designed on the premise that students have, or will be viewing the documentary film in preparation for these lessons. The total length of the film is 88 minutes and while it can be viewed in its entirety, it can also be shown in two 45 - minute screenings.

The guide is directed toward high school and middle school students. We hope these materials will enhance and fulfill parts of your American History experience. If there are comments or experiences you would like to relate to us, please contact us through the web site www.prisonersamongus.com

“Prisoners Among Us WEAVES A RAY OF HOPE THROUGH ANOTHER SINISTER PERIOD IN OUR HISTORY. A MUST-HAVE TEACHING TOOL.”

Catherine Hillriegel, Sullivan West Central School District, Lake Huntington, NY
Prisoners Among Us: Italian American Identity and WWII

Summary

Prisoners Among Us chronicles the assimilation of Italians into American culture from early 19th century immigration through World War II. In particular, the film sheds light on our country’s “enemy alien” policies at the start of that conflict and the impact of these legislative acts upon unwitting families. Personal and collective experiences from this period have had a profound affect on Italian-American identity.

The outbreak of world conflict in Europe changed an already tenuous landscape and new loyalties placed a strain on natural family ties. Italy’s government joined Hitler as an Axis power and Italians, eager to become Americans, were faced with a dilemma. They encountered paranoia that ran the gamut from street-side prejudice to formal declarations of war upon non-citizen Italians. This sentiment reached a crescendo when President Roosevelt signed into law in December of 1941, Proclamation No. 2527, which branded the 600,000 non-naturalized Italians as potential “enemy aliens,” stripping them of their right to privacy.

The film’s frank examination of the influence this had on Italian American assimilation provides an historical context for how these people survived adversity and continued to thrive -- strong in their sense of identity and pride as Italian Americans. Through interviews, historical detail, photographs, archival footage, music, literature, and historical analysis the spirit of a proud people who ultimately emerge victorious is revealed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1768</td>
<td>Over 100 Italians landed on the east coast of Florida, the present day Daytona and New Smyrna beaches. The Italians were part of an extensive colonization project, which failed due to their inhumane treatment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1779</td>
<td>Two regiments, recruited mainly in Italy, arrived to fight for the American cause: the 3rd Piemont (473 men) and the 30th Du Perche (1064 men).</td>
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<td>1804</td>
<td>Italian warships sailed to the shores of Tripoli and fought with Americans against the Barbary pirates.</td>
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<td>1852</td>
<td>Constantion Brumidi, at age 47, arrived in America and labored for 25 years where his frescoes in the Capitol Rotunda cover 5,000 square feet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>The “Garibaldi Guard,” officially known as the 39th New York Infantry, consisted of 830 men, including some 50 Italians, fought with distinction in the Union Army in numerous battles from the first Bull Run to Appomattox.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, Civil War hero who was awarded the Medal of Honor, was appointed by President Abraham Lincoln as Ambassador to Cyprus.</td>
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<td>1815-1871</td>
<td>The Risorgimento or Unification of Italy was the process by which the modern country of Italy was forged from a collection of individual Italian States linked only by geography. Throughout that period the question of Italy dominated European politics: with personalities such as Cavour, Victor Emmanuel and, of course, Garibaldi becoming household names.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1880-1924</td>
<td>Nearly 10% of the Italian population moved to America due to economic and social conditions in the deteriorated Italy. About 70% of these immigrants came from Mezzogiorno, the area south of Rome where disease and famine were running rampant.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Eleven Italians found “innocent” in a New Orleans court were dragged from their cells and brutally massacred by a mob, making it the worst lynching in U.S. history.</td>
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<td>1920</td>
<td>May 5: Nicola Sacco and Bartomoleo Vanzetti were arrested. Sacco and Vanzetti were charged with robbery and the murders of a factory guard and paymaster in South Braintree, Massachusetts.</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>Immigration restriction law set an annual quota according to nationality.</td>
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<td>1922</td>
<td>October: Benito Mussolini and the Fascist party take over power in Italy until 1943.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1924  The Immigration Restriction League was formed in Boston in 1894 by Robert DeCourcey Ward. He spent the next three decades working for immigration restriction. The Act that led to the 40-year Great Pause in immigration was passed in 1924.

1927  August 22:  Sacco and Vanzetti were both convicted and despite widespread protests, were eventually electrocuted in 1928. Riots and fighting broke out worldwide with twenty people dying in one Paris street fight.

1940  Roosevelt’s “Dagger in the Back” speech condemned Mussolini’s declaration of war on France.

1941  An unmistakable shift occurred. The vast majority of Italians who took up residence on American soil rallied enthusiastically in support of their adopted country.

1941  December 7:  Previously identified aliens who were believed to pose a threat were taken into custody by the F.B.I. for Internment. The most famous internment camps were Ft. Missoula, Ft. Lincoln, Crystal City, and Ellis Island which held thousands of Italians, Japanese, and Germans.

1941  December 8:  U.S. enters WWII after the bombing at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. During the war years, nearly ten percent of Americans in uniform were of Italian descent. When the losses were ultimately tallied, of all ethnic groups, Italian Americans suffered the greatest number of casualties.

1941  December 8:  Franklin Roosevelt signed Proclamation 2527, essentially designating 600,000 non-naturalized Italians as enemy aliens. It was enforceable, based on the one hundred and fifty year old law, The Alien Enemy Act of 1798.

1942  Rosie Bonavita became the symbol for newly 3 million American women working in factories and shipyards during World War II. She was better known as “Rosie the Riveter” and espouses the slogan, “Do the job he left behind.”

1942  FBI entered homes of Italian Americans looking for and confiscating radios, transmitters and cameras. This was part of a program to produce fear and anxiety among Italians from coast-to-coast.

1942  February 15 & 24:  Relocation orders for “voluntary relocation” were issued. This was initially an “exclusion” program for all enemy aliens.

1942  February 19:  President Roosevelt signed into law Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War to designate military areas within our shores. As a result, on the West coast, thousands of Italians were forcibly relocated across arbitrary lines of demarcation.
1942 March 12: Opera singer Ezio Pinza was taken into custody by the F.B.I. Characteristic of these cases, the Department of Justice did not disclose the charges. Pinza was transported by boat to an internment facility on Ellis Island and was imprisoned for three months before a second hearing finally gained his release.

1942 May: Exclusion became an individual program for Italians and Germans.

1942 July: The United States realized that there was never a threat of enemy invasion from the Pacific. Those Italians who had relocated were allowed to return to their homes.

1942 October 12: President Roosevelt announced that Italians would no longer be classified as Enemy Aliens.

1944 Atomic physicist, Enrico Fermi, who became an American citizen in 1944, was at the University of Chicago. His contributions toward the invention of the atom bomb “saved over a million casualties to American forces alone,” stated Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson.

1951 Lawyer Michael Angelo Musmanno is elected to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. The appointment crowned a distinguished legal career, which saw Musmanno defending Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 and later presiding at the Nuremberg Trials.

1971 Columbus Day becomes a federal public holiday as declared by the U.S. Congress.

1976 February 19: President Gerald Ford officially rescinded Executive Order 9066 after thirty-four years.

1999 November: Former Congressional Representative for the State of New York, Rick Lazio, and Congressional Representative for the State of New York, Eliot L. Engel, co-sponsored HR 2422. Its intent was to finally detail the injustices Italian Americans suffered during World War II, ultimately encouraging a formal acknowledgement by the President.

2000 November 7: President Clinton signed the Wartimes Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act.
The Decision to Leave Italy

Objectives:

1. Recognize the political, economic, and social conditions of Italy after 1871.
2. Interpret primary sources from individuals’ experiences coming to America.
3. Distinguish the push/pull factors that helped to make the difficult decision to leave Italy.
4. Understand the emotional hardship that could affect the whole family.

Materials:

- Outline map of Italy and America
- Interviews from individuals who emigrated from Italy
  [http://www.italiamerica.org/id20.htm](http://www.italiamerica.org/id20.htm)
- Document analysis worksheet
- Atlas of Italy and America

Procedure:

Students will work in groups of three. They will each be given a map, atlas, interview and worksheet. They will then do the following:

1. Groups list reasons that would make them move from their homes today and where they would go.
2. Students read the interviews and answer the questions from the analysis worksheet. They should have a consensus for each answer.
3. Using their outline maps, students will locate and draw the places where the interviewed came from and where they settled in America.
4. Students then discuss their findings with the whole class. During the discussion each group should make note on their outline maps where people came from in interviews read by other student groups.
5. The teacher will make a chart on the board listing push- pull factors.
6. Students will determine what reasons why people left Italy based on their findings and recognize if the factors are political, social or economic.
7. The teacher will ensure that students determine reasons that attracted Italians to America. (Make sure to mention the advertising for labor by the steamship agents and industry in America along with other family members.)
8. The class will discuss their answers and the teacher should ask them why it would be a difficult decision to make.
9. The students will then compare their own reasons for moving with the Italians, and go over their findings in their groups.

**Possible Assessments:**

- Students write a letter to a family member back in Italy explaining their decision to leave Italy and come to America.
- Students interview a family member or friend to find out where they came from and create a scrapbook of family interviews.

**Extension:**

- Have students create a collage of images, symbols, words that would represent the push/pull factors that the Italians faced.
- Have students research and chart emigration in Italy from the 1700-1920s and create a map and chart that illustrates the data.

“When I found that the only way I could prevent my family from starving was to turn to stealing, I decided it was time to leave.”

*La Storia*, Jerre Mangione & Ben Morreale
1. Name of person in interview.

2. Where did he/she come from? What was it like in his/her town?

3. What does the person tell you about his/her culture, values, social class and customs?

4. How old was the person when he/she left Italy? How does age make a difference in his/her experiences?

5. What was the journey like coming to America?

6. Why do you think this person left Italy?

7. Why did this person want to come to America?
**Objectives:**

1. Describe the nativist’s responses to the new immigrants.
2. Compare the stereotypes of Italian Americans to the real image.
3. Consider how the Italian Americans overcame these obstacles.
4. Identify the social, economic, and political impacts of these responses.

**Materials:**

- Political cartoons displaying the stereotypical Italian American.
- News article on the Sacco and Vanzetti murder conviction.

**Procedure:**

Ask students to think about a stereotype. What does this mean to them? Make a list on the board of where we find stereotypes. Is there a difference or a connection between stereotypes and prejudice? Go over their responses. Next, have the students work in pairs. First handout the political cartoons of Italian Americans. Students should answer the following questions: How does the cartoon depict Italian Americans? What types of emotions does the picture evoke? How would the readers of the times respond to these pictures? As a class, go over the responses. Discuss why people would respond negatively to the new immigrants. Make sure the students cover the social, political, and economical factors. Then have student pairs share reading the news article on Sacco and Vanzetti. Have them identify the types of factors that led to the execution. Discuss why some thought the two were innocent. Have the students think of how the Italians overcame these attitudes from the movie.
Possible Assessments:

- Create a perspective poster of Living in America. On one side have the responses of the Italian Americans to the nativists. On the other side, have the nativists’ responses to the Italian Americans.
- Have students write about barriers they have had to overcome in their lives and how they responded to them.

Extension:

- Have students research incidents against the Italian Americans during the turn of the century. Have them present their findings to the class.
- Have them research the evolution of 19th century racism and how it affected the new immigrants at the turn of the century.

“To the ordinary American, the Italian is a dirty, undersized individual who engages in degrading labor shunned by Americans, and who is often a member of the Mafia, and as such, likely at any moment to draw a knife and stab you in the back.”

Southern Atlantic Quarterly, July 1905
Searching for the Italian American Experience

Objectives:

1. Research information through the internet for the multimedia scrapbook.
2. Develop a multimedia scrapbook of the Italian American Experience.
3. Appreciate the experiences the new immigrants faced in America.
4. Understand the value of one’s heritage.

Materials:

- Computer lab with internet accessibility
- Scrapbook Activity instructions

Procedure:

Ask students to think about what makes them who they are. Have them come up with ways in which they identify people. Have them distinguish between personality, roles, and their cultural identity. After going over their responses, ask them to think about why our past is so important. Point out to them that their values, traditions, and customs come from past generations. If the students can understand the struggles of the past, it can help to have them understand themselves.

Next handout the instruction sheet for the Multimedia Scrapbook. Go over the directions. Have students search the internet to create their scrapbook. They will compile a powerpoint scrapbook. At the end of the activity, the students will share their work with the class. Ask the students again what makes them who they are. Compare the first responses to their new responses.

Possible Assessments:

- Have students make presentations of their scrapbooks to the class.
- Have students make a webpage for the Italian American Experience.

Extension:

- Have students continue their research to find their own cultural identity.
- Students would research the immigration patterns within their own community.
INTRODUCTION:

How do you identify yourself? Do you look at your personality or do you describe your characteristics? Do you identify yourself with your cultural identity? All these characteristics make up the unique you. Your heritage is about the past, the story, and the struggle of your ancestors. It is what gives you your values, customs, and traditions. This is what makes the Italian American Experience.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Your job is to search for the Italian American Experience. You will create a scrapbook of their cultural past. Use the websites below to help in your journey. Surf through the internet to find pictures, text, maps, facts, quotes, or controversies that capture your journey. You will capture the text and images that you find important and then you will put them together in a power point scrapbook. Make it personal; it is your story that is being passed down to the next generation. Be prepared to share why you chose what you did and what it means to you. Your scrapbook will include the following categories:

1. Your story of why you left Italy.
2. Your journey to America.
3. Living in America. Where did you live and what was your job?
4. Your customs and traditions in America. What did you do in America?
5. The obstacles you faced in America.
6. What makes you an Italian American?
SUGGESTED WEBSITES:

The American Immigrant Home Page:
http://www.bergen.org/AAST/Projects/Immigration/

Ethnic America:
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/ethnic_am.cfm

Immigration History Research Center:
http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/index.htm

Immigration: The living Mosaic:
http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/index.html

American Memory Collection:
http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/immig/introduction.html

Causes for Italian Emigration:
http://library.thinkquest.org/26786/en/articles/view.php3?arKey=4&paKey=7&loKey=0&evKey=&toKey=25&torKey=0&tolKey=3

Order Sons of Italy in America:
http://www.osia.org/public/culture/culture_intro.asp

Sicilian culture:

South Italy Immigrants
http://www.italiamerica.org/id49.htm
**Objectives:**

1. Distinguish the various categories by which the U.S. treated the Italian Americans.
2. Understand how the Italian Americans felt during World War II.
3. Evaluate the procedure to determine who is an enemy of the state.

**Materials:**

- Executive Order 9066
- Identification Books

**Procedure:**

Inform the class that America has just declared war on Italy, Germany and Japan. Read Executive Order 9066 out loud. Hand out the identification books and have the class complete them. They are to create an Italian American person. Take pictures and fingerprint them to make the book look official. Have each student register with the teacher (administrator). Each book should be examined and notes should be taken for each student. Randomly identify some students as enemy aliens, some as non-citizens, and some as citizens. Do not answer any questions that the students have but rather have the students report to their assigned groups throughout the room. Those who are designated citizens keep their cards, but take away something that could be seen as a threat to the classroom like their books. Those who are the non-citizens are restricted to one side of the classroom. They are not allowed to cross a restricted line because there are sensitive classroom documents on that side of the classroom that they may try to steal. Finally, those who are enemy aliens are sent to the internment camp at the back of the classroom. They will always have their backs to the rest of the classroom.

It is the responsibility of the teacher (administrator) to maintain a sense of security in the classroom by identifying those who would be a threat to the nation and the school. The threat of spies and sabotage could hurt the U.S. Therefore anyone who is Italian American could be a threat to national security. Each group should decide what makes them an enemy? How could they be a threat to national security? What could you do and not do under this classification? How did you feel when you were identified? Go over their responses. Discuss the treatment of Italian Americans during World War II. Why would the U.S. think that they would be a threat to national security? What was the socio-economic impact of Italian Americans because of this?
**Possible Assessments:**

- Write a letter to the newspaper describing how you were treated during World War II.
- Create a Poster identifying the experience of the Italian American during World War II.

**Extension:**

- Research other countries that have used identification cards to control people (for example, South Africa).
- Compare the treatment of Italian Americans to Arab Americans after September 11.

“I recall receiving an ‘Americanization Award’ from the American Legion post at Walton Elementary School. It was given to us if we did not speak Italian and if we put aside Italian culture. I did not have the heart to tell my father the meaning of this award so I told him that I got it for good grades in school.”

Resident, Akron, OH.
Major myth: Italians and Germans were never affected.

For organizational purposes I have divided this paper into five parts, but keep in mind that events were happening simultaneously.

I. Policy initiatives
II. Public pressure rises
III. Tolan Committee’s influence
IV. Executive Order 9066
V. Policy reversal

I - Policy Initiatives

In late January 1942, after nearly a month of contentious negotiations between the Justice and War Departments, the government decided to relocate all enemy aliens—Italians, Germans, and Japanese fourteen years of age and older—away from strategic areas on the West Coast.

The most persistent advocate of this sweeping policy was the War Department’s man-on-the-scene in San Francisco, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt. DeWitt may have been a reluctant recruit to the notion of relocating the Japanese, as earlier historians and others have shown, but he consistently led the way in pushing for the relocation of Italians and Germans, commencing in mid-December 1941.

The well being of the enemy alien population took an initial ominous direction when, less than two weeks after Pearl Harbor, General DeWitt gave in to panic, apparently because of some scare stories about the activities of Japanese on the West Coast. He recommended to the War Department—the first of many such occasions—that all enemy aliens, regardless of nationality, be removed to the interior.

From late December to early January, the War and Justice Departments were locked in a behind-the-scenes struggle for control over the aliens. Both the FBI and the War Department wanted Justice to take tougher measures. DeWitt, in fact, had been asked to recommend that the War Department assume control. Major Karl R. Bendetsen, at that moment a uniformed lawyer in the judge advocate general’s office,
suggested to DeWitt that unless the attorney general agreed immediately to a program of enemy alien restrictions enforced by the FBI at its discretion, the general should get President Roosevelt to transfer authority from the attorney general to the secretary of war. DeWitt needed little more encouragement. The next day he proposed that the FBI be given “blanket authority” to go after the aliens, who he accused of disloyalty: “We can’t fool around,” he warned.

This pressure, combined with the deteriorating military situation in the Pacific, eroded the will of top Justice Department officials to resist the army’s demands. After a series of civil but frank meetings, representatives of the two departments agreed on January 6 to an alien relocation policy (minus the details) that favored a military solution.

II – Public Pressure

Ironically, just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when the United States was most vulnerable, there was little public pressure to lock up enemy aliens. Not until the hastily convened Roberts Commission (named for Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts) released its report nearly two months later—implying that Japanese Americans on Oahu had aided Japan’s air assault—did the pressure to do something about Axis aliens on the mainland commence in earnest. And from the start, nearly everyone who had an opinion on the subject of alien restrictions wanted the Italian and German aliens treated exactly like the Japanese.

The political pressure that drove alien policy paralleled the bad news from the Pacific. In the confusion, desperation, and panic, the politicians were extended an unlimited mandate to act. Resolutions from citizens, city councils, chambers of commerce, boards of supervisors, Congress, and law enforcement officials urging swift action were stacked higher and higher each day on the desks of responsible officials, including the President’s.

Two days after the release of the Roberts Commission report, California governor Culbert Olson told General DeWitt that federal action was imperative. If nothing was done, he predicted, “The people may take things in their own hands.” In Washington, Major Bendtsen, now transferred to the office of Provost Marshal General Allen W. Gullion, told DeWitt on January 29 that the California congressional delegation was “beginning to get up in arms,” and had scheduled an informal meeting the next day to formulate resolutions. Bendtsen attended the meeting, where he expressed DeWitt’s view that the army was willing to take control of the aliens from the Justice Department, if DeWitt were assured that the army had the authority to force other agencies to cooperate.
Bendetsen was right. On January 29, the Justice Department announced that, on the recommendation of the secretary of war, after consultation with General DeWitt, all enemy aliens would be required to vacate specified areas of the West Coast. Subsequently, the California congressional delegation unanimously approved a resolution calling for the evacuation and internment of all enemy aliens and dual citizens, regardless of whether their children were American-born. This resolution, which the delegation sent to the War Department, did not refer specifically to the Japanese. The leader of the group, Rep. Clarence F. Lea of Santa Rosa, stated that evacuation would be only the first step; that ultimately all of the aliens would be humanely “resettled,” initially in Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps.

A meeting in early February between California Attorney General Earl Warren and law enforcement officials from across the state, convened for the purpose of using California’s Alien Land Law to remove Japanese aliens from strategic areas, turned into a secondary debate about what to do with the Italians and Germans. A minority of delegates (one-eighth) felt that the group’s formal resolution calling for the evacuation of Japanese aliens ought to apply to the European aliens as well. The San Diego County district attorney suggested, ironically, that the Italians and Germans posed the greater danger: “You can always tell a Jap when you see one, but as for a German or an Italian, they can get by. They are the ones who are most difficult of the three to detect.”

The discussion continued. Attorney General Warren and others argued that the Alien Land Law could not be applied to the Italians and Germans because the “Japanese problem” was unique to California. But the district attorney of Stanislaus County countered:

“*When we go to recommend action to the Federal Government, I think we would be very glad to say it is the sense of this group that they ought to exclude every enemy alien, Japs and all the others from this area....*”

Still, a resolution favoring only a Japanese removal went forward to the secretary of war, but with the conferees’ expectation that the federal government would eventually find a way to deal with the Italians and Germans.

Local governments were among the first to fall in line. Seventeen counties, along with the statewide County Supervisors’ Association, urged alien evacuation in formal resolutions; the Los Angeles County board was the first to take the plunge on January 27. Another motion before the Association recommending evacuation of non-Japanese enemy aliens was defeated. Assistant Secretary of War McCloy would shortly refer to the pressures emanating from local sources in California as “drastic” and “unintelligent.”

Supervisory resolutions from Placer, Orange, and Yolo counties called for the removal of enemy
aliens, including their descendants “who are loyal or may become disloyal.” No one suggested how authorities were to identify those who might become disloyal, or give a reason why.

(There was much more, of course, but time doesn’t permit my including them here.)

Tom Clark—later attorney general and associate justice of the Supreme Court—working in the Justice Department’s Antitrust Division but sent to the coast at DeWitt’s request to coordinate alien policy with the general and California politicians, reported the situation in Los Angeles as being “pretty hot. Rep. Knute Hill (D-Washington) received a letter from a man in Orange, California: 90 percent of the people he knew, he said, wanted all enemy aliens moved away from the coast.”

And there was growing dissatisfaction in Congress with the Justice Department and FBI’s handling of matters. Many in that body agreed with Los Angeles Mayor Bowron that the children of foreign-born Italians and Germans were potentially more dangerous than their parents.

All this restiveness and bluster became specific on February 13 when the Pacific Coast Congressional Subcommittee on Aliens and Sabotage adopted a resolution—forwarded to the War Department and President Roosevelt—calling for the immediate evacuation of anyone determined to be dangerous to the defense of the United States. (This resolution anticipated by a few days Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066.)

On the eve of what would be President Roosevelt’s portentous decision to turn policy over to the army on February 19, the American Legion voiced its opinion about what ought to be done in letters to Secretary of War Stimson, Rep. John Tolan, who was preparing immediate hearings on the proposed relocation, and General DeWitt. The Legion clearly had no faith in the Justice Department’s ability to handle what it termed the Axis aliens, agents, and sympathizers residing in California, and it demanded immediate action—exclusion from the state—to prevent another Pearl Harbor.

To anyone believing that the Japanese were perceived as the only threat to American security early in 1942, the convictions of law enforcement officials across California provide more myth-shattering revelations. Just before the promulgation of a federal enemy alien policy, California Attorney General Earl Warren telegraphed a critical question to city police chiefs, county sheriffs, and district attorneys: can the danger be contained by treating all enemy aliens alike, or should we differentiate?

Not surprisingly, nearly half the respondents identified the Japanese as the most dangerous aliens; only four believed that either the Italians or Germans were the greater threat. But nearly 25 percent, whether they thought the Japanese more dangerous or not, believed that all three groups should be treated alike, although some of these men also thought that the Japanese were more dangerous.

In late February and early March 1942, the most vocal Californians wanted all of the enemy aliens out
without delay. Washington officials were warned on March 3 that opinion in the major Los Angeles and

San Francisco dailies revealed an ugly public mood and the possibility of mob violence if the army did not move swiftly. The Los Angeles Council of California Women’s Clubs petitioned General DeWitt to place all enemy aliens in concentration camps immediately, and the Young Democratic Club of Los Angeles went a step further, demanding the removal of American-born Italians and Germans—U.S. citizens—from the Pacific Coast.

Faced with congressional demands to expel all enemy aliens and their families—an action supported by State Attorney General Earl Warren—and the added public pressure, DeWitt concluded—again—that all enemy aliens should be removed from the West Coast. The general trumpeted his new mood: “I do not feel that it is incumbent upon this country to be sentimental in this matter.”

As previously mentioned, DeWitt had announced on January 29 that he was prepared to take over the alien program from the Justice Department. Subsequently, Secretary of War Stimson declared that enemy aliens would have to move out of Category A prohibited areas in the western halves of the Pacific states and southern Arizona (primarily waterfront locations and areas surrounding and adjacent to defense industries, power plants, reservoirs and the like) by February 24. There would be no exceptions.

The ever-resourceful Bendetsen now offered a tactical ploy to thwart the Justice Department’s constitutional objections: the attorney general might accept a policy of excluding aliens and citizens from prohibited and restricted zones, if such a program provided for licensing selected residents to return later. That way, Bendetsen calculated, the squeamish civilians in the Justice Department would not appear to discriminate against a particular class of people. DeWitt mused that Biddle and his men were just “trying to cover themselves” by criticizing the army. He boasted that the job of removing Italian, German, and Japanese aliens—as well as Japanese American citizens—would not be too big even if it involved as many as 100,000 people (a low estimate as it turned out).

Although Attorney General Biddle did not forthrightly confront the army, he did not give up—yet. At a luncheon in early February, he solicited the President’s support. According to Biddle, “I emphasized the danger of the hysteria...moving east and affecting the Italian and German population in Boston and New York.” We don’t know how seriously Roosevelt took this warning; later the President would endorse Biddle’s position completely, as though it had been his own. But the point Biddle made was one that the politically sensitive President could ill afford to ignore.
III – Tolan Committee

As the aliens prepared to leave, a congressional committee, sympathetic to the plight of the European aliens—but not the Japanese—began public hearings into relocation and internment. It issued periodic reports of its findings and recommendations, and met frequently with Stimson’s closest associate in the War Department, John McCloy. From February 21—two days after President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066—through March 12, the House of Representatives Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration staged successive hearings on the West Coast. The Tolan Committee, so-named for its chairman, John H. Tolan, hoped to exert a calming influence by publicizing the impact of the relocation program on the economic and social fabric of the West Coast.

Like the law enforcement officials queried by Earl Warren and mentioned earlier, Tolan Committee witnesses were split as to whether Italian and German aliens should be treated the same as the Japanese. Most thought not. But the hearings had forced a reconsideration of DeWitt’s plan.

IV – Executive Order 9066

The FBI began to back away from DeWitt’s grandiose scheme. The Bureau had concluded that Italians and Germans would be harder than Japanese to pick out of the general population, increasing the difficulty of DeWitt’s task. It was at this moment that the delegation from the Committee to Aid Italians Loyal to the United States in San Francisco warned a member of DeWitt’s staff that moving Italians was a significantly greater logistical problem than relocating the smaller number of Japanese, and the group threatened litigation.

In Washington, officials struggled to find a way to match these realities in California, much-influenced by the Tolan hearings, with their own requirements for national security. Assistant Secretary of War McCloy tried to bring DeWitt closer to heel: “There are so many that would be involved in a mass withdrawal, the social and economic disturbances would be so great that we would like to go a little slow on it.” DeWitt appeared to concur, saying that for the time being he would deal with the Italians and Germans as individuals and concentrate on getting out all the Japanese.

But documents unavailable to the Tolan Committee show that DeWitt and the provost marshal general’s office remained wedded to a course of mass relocation. The Senate Committee on Military Affairs, looking into relocation on its own in Washington, tried, with little success, to learn from the provost marshal general’s office how many enemy aliens there were and how many the army wanted to re-
move. The committee wanted an estimate of the nationwide impact since, as it concluded, based on the logic of what it was hearing, “The same thing is going to have to be done on the East Coast.” The PMG’s representative replied that about 100,000 people would be put in concentration camps, 60 percent of them Japanese and the remainder, about 40,000, divided equally between the two European enemy alien groups.

In its preliminary findings of March 19, the Tolan Committee expressed its fear about the size of such an expulsion in unambiguous terms. The government, it pointed out by way of analogy to the Italians and Germans, had not removed the Japanese from Hawaii, despite the obvious threat to American security there, because the Japanese made up 37 percent of Hawaii’s population. On the other hand, the Japanese were only 1 percent of the population of the Pacific states. The committee concluded,

“The numbers involved [in the Japanese evacuation] are large, but they are by no means as large, for the whole country, as those who will be involved if we generalize the current treatment of the Japanese to apply to all Axis aliens and their immediate families.... Any such proposal is out of the question if we intend to win this war.”

State authorities took the hint. Now, most of the California congressional delegation did not favor the mass expulsion of Italians and Germans, a reversal of their earlier, unanimous backing of DeWitt. Earl Warren told the California Joint Immigration Committee that it would be “disruptive of national unity” and a “crime” to expel Italian and German aliens, for despite their governments at home, they were just like “everybody else”—that is, they were not Japanese.

Biddle’s reluctance to endorse General DeWitt’s plan received the endorsement of a trio of respected Washington lawyers. Backed by the attorney general, they issued an advisory recommendation—clearly isolating the Japanese from the other enemy nationalities—that accurately forecast future policy:

“Persons of Japanese descent constitute the smallest definable class upon which those with the military responsibility for defense would reasonably determine to impose restrictions.... The Japanese problem is a special problem.... Similar dangers of disloyal activities by citizens of other racial stocks cannot, and, in fact, need not be handled in the same way. It would...present an insuperable problem of administration, not to mention the consequent disruption of defense production, to bar the millions of persons of German and Italian stock from either seacoast area.”

The War Department proceeded on this understanding. By February 11, Stimson had decided to recommend to the President that Italians and Germans not be expelled for the time being. Roosevelt, who, according to Stimson, supported this idea in principle, shied away from a personal commitment, telling the secretary to do what he thought best under the circumstances.
McCloy informed Bendetsen that the President had deferred to the secretary of war, and, in turn, Bendetsen advised DeWitt that Stimson probably would not approve a recommendation to evacuate the entire coastal strip. Stimson then met with McCloy and Clark to formulate a strategy to derail DeWitt’s ambitious plans, and told them that DeWitt was asking for too much if he expected to expel 120,000 people from the West Coast. “This is one of those jobs,” Stimson cautioned, “that is so big that…it just couldn’t be done.” Army historian Stetson Conn estimates that DeWitt’s recommendations for Category A areas, if accepted, would have necessitated the removal of nearly eighty-nine thousand enemy aliens, nine-tenths of the West Coast Germans, nearly three-fourths of the Italians, but less than two-thirds of the Japanese.

On St. Valentine’s Day, DeWitt submitted his final report on the West Coast situation to the War Department. He anticipated expulsion of 133,000 people—perhaps all enemy aliens—from expanded Category A zones (now termed military areas). Ironically, most of those residing in or near the most sensitive strategic points were Italian and German aliens, not Japanese.

Thus, the momentum had swung back to the extremists. The political pressure from the West Coast, DeWitt’s buoyant and sweeping recommendation, sympathy at the highest level of the War Department for removal of the Japanese, and the abject surrender of Attorney General Biddle were powerful persuaders that left the President few options. Not even Biddle’s closest aides realized the depth of his capitulation. A final series of conferences between the two departments provided Roosevelt with the consensus he needed to act. The attorney general kept his counsel and remained a team player. Despite his reservations, Biddle disingenuously told Roosevelt that “no dispute” existed between the Justice and War Departments. Thus, because alien relocation was not presented as a matter of interdepartmental controversy, the War Department’s recommendation never received a thorough presidential review.

In approving a draft of the executive relocation—or exclusion—order, 9066, Stimson confessed in his diary: “I have no illusions as to the magnitude of the task that lies before us.” Some officials—Biddle for example—believed the order only affected the Japanese. But a postwar investigation conducted by the War Department concluded that when the President signed the executive order on February 19, some officers believed it applied to the Italians and Germans as well. Governor Olson thought so, and certainly the Italian and German aliens believed that they might still be relocated. And they were not wrong.

V – Policy Reversal

Astonishingly, the possibility of more drastic action resurfaced. Biddle now wrote FDR that he feared
the army planned to evacuate enemy aliens from the East Coast as well. Stimson, who saw the attorney general’s letter, sought to ease the President’s mind, calling the notion “foolish.” There would be no “mass” evacuation of the East Coast, Roosevelt assured the shaky Biddle. But the secretary was being slightly disingenuous, providing he knew what his assistant was up to. For McCloy had written General Joseph McNarney, chief of the Army Field Forces, that, as the war progressed, it might be necessary to remove Italian and German aliens from the East and Gulf coasts. McCloy went so far as to suggest that McNarney send his eastern and southern defense commanders to the West Coast to study the evacuation methods being employed there.

Stimson may have been believed that the problem on the East Coast had been laid to rest, which it had not, but he still had to sell the idea of a limited relocation to his officers out West. DeWitt continued to oppose the suggestion that individual loyalty examinations might be a way to sort through the aliens, and Bendetsen agreed that there were “a lot of dangerous” Italians and Germans out on the coast who had to be removed.

At this delicate moment, Lt. General Hugh A. Drum, commanding general of the Eastern Defense Command, publicly announced his intention to establish prohibited and restricted areas covering the entire Atlantic seaboard and inland—some sixteen states and fifty-two million people. Thus were the worst fears of the Tolan Committee fulfilled. Stimson assured Tolan that he shared the congressman’s concern. McCloy, too, expressed complete sympathy: “I believe we have a common approach to this problem.” Nonetheless, he took the precaution of meeting again with a Tolan Committee staff person on May 7, resulting in a committee request that the President put out a revised order precluding alien relocation in areas other than the West Coast.

Now it was the President’s turn to underestimate DeWitt. Although FDR had resolved the East Coast situation—he thought—General DeWitt still had not been corralled. It was Tom Clark who rekindled concerns about DeWitt’s objective. He wrote Biddle’s assistant that, “Anyone who had the idea that General DeWitt is going to delay the evacuation of German and Italian aliens is in error. He has consistently said publicly and otherwise that he intends to evacuate these groups as soon as his program with reference to the Japanese is completed.”

Roosevelt, by now thoroughly alarmed by the repeated warnings from the Justice Department and complaints from Capitol Hill and New York, swung into action. He ordered Stimson to take no action against Italian or German aliens on the East Coast without first consulting him—period. Alien control, he said, except for the Japanese, was a civilian matter, and all this talk about evacuations was having a bad effect on morale.
But the indefatigable DeWitt pressed on, threatening in early May to put six to ten thousand Italians and Germans in “relocation centers in a manner similar to that employed in the case of persons of Japanese ancestry.” Bendetsen warned MCCloy that the general was serious. He added that if the Justice Department failed to act more diligently, the War Department should exert energy under Executive Order 9066 “similar to that taken in the evacuation of the Japanese.”

When the War Department conducted a series of internal conferences on May 15 to prepare Stimson for a cabinet meeting later that day, it had the Tolan Committee’s latest report at hand. The congressmen were continuing to hammer home the logic of their earlier paper: the size of the Italian and German communities—more diverse and ten times larger than the Japanese—presented “problems more vast and far reaching than the Japanese.... Emergency measures must not be permitted to alter permanently those fundamental principles upon which this Nation was built.”

Clearly, the conclusions of the Tolan Committee were affecting attitudes in the War Department. Stimson recommended that the President order no mass relocation of European aliens—anywhere. Later, the President should merely empower commanders on both coasts to exclude individuals, both aliens and citizens, based entirely on military necessity and Executive Order 9066, and DeWitt was so ordered.

By late June, with the Japanese gone, General DeWitt bowed to the inevitable and abolished the six-months-old prohibited and restricted zones (except in certain sensitive areas) in the Western Defense Command.

On Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, Attorney General Biddle announced that Italian aliens in the United States would no longer be considered enemies. The discomfort and anxiety of the aliens and their families was over. Justice Department officials, civilians in the War Department, and strategic members of congress finally realized that it was neither feasible nor necessary to remove Italian and German aliens en masse. The principal consideration in taking the decision was that relocation would create a logistical nightmare, spark economic dislocation, and lower public morale.

Retreat had been sounded; reason would prevail, at least for the European aliens.
“It was not until the early 1980s that I first heard about the relocation of West Coast Italians during World War II. A student in my class on the war asked if I knew that the government had forced them to move out of the waterfront areas of Arcata and Eureka, California. I didn’t, and I was embarrassed. A quick trip to the library proved him correct: Italian and German aliens, who the U.S. government designated as “enemy aliens,” had been relocated up and down the West Coast in 1942. But with the exception of the aliens and their families, everyone I spoke to in the next few years was as ignorant as I had been about the operation.”  

Stephen Fox

Why was it done? Did the government believe that moving European enemy aliens a only a few blocks from the waterfront—or across the street—would lessen the danger? Apparently. But more fundamentally, officials simply panicked. Following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, American officials were under intense political pressure to do something to prevent alien sabotage and espionage. Italian and German aliens and their families—along with the Japanese—were viewed as serious threats to American security. Later the military came very close to relocating the Italians on the East Coast as well.

From documents the government is willing to release, we know that on February 15 and 24, 1942, for reasons of “military necessity,” approximately ten thousand enemy aliens were prohibited residence, work, or travel to restricted zones along the West Coast. But weeks later, after Congress had begun to investigate the effects of the relocation order on the economy and society, it dawned on the War Department that if they relocated and interned hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of Italians and Germans (logic at first seemed to dictate that American citizens of Italian ancestry might be just as dangerous as the aliens) it would overstretch the army’s logistics, threaten the country’s defense industries—which employed tens of thousands of people of Italian and German ancestry—and lower civilian morale. Particularly hard hit were those areas where Italians dominated the local economy, such as the coastal fishing industry. (None of these concerns pertained to the much smaller Japanese American population—racial targets for many years—and they were quickly moved to camps en masse.)

On June 27, 1942, the government, realizing it had made a mistake, relented and allowed the Italians to return to their homes and jobs. Finally, on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, the Italians were removed from
the enemy alien category altogether.

Despite all of the government’s meticulous record-keeping, its archives are totally silent about the actual experiences of Italian aliens during the four to eight months they were kept away from their homes and jobs. To understand that part of the story, which seemed to me the most important feature, I interviewed dozens of California people who had been relocated—or surviving family members—and told their stories in my book, *The Unknown Internment* (since republished as *Uncivil Liberties: Italian Americans Under Siege during World War II*).

For those with sons in the armed forces, those who were moved, those whose family responsibilities increased as a result of the relocation, or those who lost property, the experience was difficult and has left a legacy of bitterness. For others, it was a matter of adjusting to a new way of life, or, in a few cases, a better life. Most of the Italians accepted their fates as the consequence of a war that threatened their adopted homeland, but nearly all of them thought it was “crazy.”

This story shows again—and it seems particularly relevant following September 11, 2001—that it is possible for the United States, proud of its traditions of democracy, individual liberty, and fair play, to come near to losing its soul in a time of crisis, even during a “good war.” Americans, as they have in the past, will continue to face difficult choices in moments of crisis, when the popularity of cracking down on “enemy” aliens dictates policy and threatens civil liberties.

There has been an official acknowledgment, but a less-than-full accounting of what happened in 1942. President Bill Clinton signed the “Wartime Violations of Italian American Civil Liberties Act” (PL 106-451) on November 7, 2000. The law gave the Justice Department a year to report on the government’s internment, exclusion, and other harassment of Italian Americans during the war. But the report is far from complete, which the government admits. In addition to the thousands who were relocated—but are not named—it lists only fifty-nine Italian Americans as either excluded or arraigned before individual exclusion boards. As for individually interned Italians, the Immigration and Naturalization Service reveals that it detained 3,278 Italian Americans, including voluntary internees and those deported to the United States from Latin America. The Justice Department says 418 of them were interned for varying lengths of time.

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Celebration of the Italian American Soldier

Objectives:

1. Consider the difficulty of the Italian American soldier to prove his loyalty.
2. Summarize the citations of four soldiers to receive the Medal of Honor.
3. Recognize the efforts made by the Italian American soldier during World War II.

Materials:

- [Medal of Honor Worksheet](#)

Procedure:

Ask the students to recall the segment in *Prisoners Among Us*, of those who fought in World War II. Have them discuss the situations these men were faced with both on the home front and on the line. Have the students examine the question that the army recruiter asked; “What happens if you had to fight against a family member while in Italy?” How would they respond to that question? Ask the students how hard would it be to fight for your country when your country did not trust your family? Would you have something to prove?

Point out that some men went beyond the call of duty to protect their company. Thus, they were given the nation’s highest military award, The Medal of Honor. In fact, thirteen, the largest group earned during World War II, were given to Italian Americans. Have the students read about four recipients of the Medal of Honor. They are Sgt. John Basilone, USMC, Sgt. Anthony Damato, USMC, Pfc. Gino Merli, US Army, and T/Sgt. Peter J. Dalessendro, US Army. Have the students complete the Medal of Honor Worksheet. Go over their responses. Have students decide what is beyond the call of duty. Those who fought in World War II should be recognized. Ask students to come up ways to recognize them in their community. How do we continue to honor those who fight to protect our country?
**Possible Assessments:**

- Have students visit the National World War II Memorial site. They will work in groups to design a World War II memorial for their school.
- Write letters to World War II veterans within the community or those currently serving.

**Extension:**

- Research other Italian Americans who fought in World War II and present it to the class.

"FOUR AND A HALF MILLION FIRST AND SECOND GENERATION ITALIANS ARE LONGING FOR A MIRACLE: AMERICAN VICTORY WITHOUT ITALIAN DEFEAT."

*Fortune Magazine, September 1942*
1. When was it established and why?

2. What are the criteria to receive the award?

3. Summarize each citation:
   
   **Sgt. John Basilone**

   **Sgt. Anthony Damato**

   **Pfc. Gino Merli**

   **T/Sgt. Peter J. Dalessendro**

4. Do you think these men fought harder? Why or why not?
Comparing Italian, German and Japanese Exclusion and Internment Experiences

Objectives:

1. Compare the experiences of Italians, Germans and Japanese Americans during World War II.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of internment during a time of crisis.
3. Consider the social implications of internment felt by these groups.

Materials:

- Comparison Chart Worksheet
- Chart of types of treatment during World War II

Procedure:

Create a concept map on the board, with the words “Melting Pot” in the middle. Call up students to add to the concept map. Some responses would be America, immigration, and discrimination. Review these ideas so that there is a class consensus of the definitions of melting pot. In small groups, students are asked to discuss whether there are modern day examples of the American melting pot. Discuss how Americans see these groups and why.

Have the students recall the treatment of Italian, German and Japanese Americans during World War II. Tell the students that they will determine if the treatment between these groups was the same or different. Using the Comparison Chart worksheet, have groups determine their treatment during World War II. It is important for students to recognize that Italian and German immigrants could be naturalized, whereas Japanese immigrants were ineligible for citizenship. That is an important point for understanding the rationale behind mass Japanese internment. Many Italians had become American citizens, and only those not naturalized were held as “enemy aliens.” Students reflect on the disruption of lives, the embarrassment of questioned loyalty, and the escalated discrimination suffered by the Italian, German, and Japanese-Americans during the war. As a class go over charts, discovering the different and similar treatments between the two groups. Recall the concept map on the board “Melting Pot,” have the students determine if the treatment from World War II has any similarities to treatment of other ethnic groups today.
Possible Assessments:

- The groups will perform a skit of either the Japanese or Italian-American treatment during World War II.
- Create posters showing the treatment of the Italians, Germans and Japanese during World War II.
- Compile data on the ethics of internment camps. Research current day situations and determine causes, and potential results by keeping them in internment camps.

Extension:

- An excerpt from Ezio Pinza’s Autobiography of an Italian Internee (found in Only What We Could Carry. Berkeley, California: Heyday Press, 2000, page 191, edited by Lawson Fusao Inada) is divided into sections of three to five paragraphs. Groups of three students read their sections aloud to one another, and respond orally to their pieces. Next, students individually re-read their sections, highlighting key words or phrases that show impact or emotion. They collect their highlighted words, and arrange them into “found poetry,” which they will illustrate, share, and post on a classroom bulletin board.

“I WANT TO GO IN AND SEARCH THE HOUSE OR RESIDENCE AND PREMISES OF EVERY ALIEN... RIGHT NOW... WE CAN’T FOOL AROUND.”

Lt. general, John L. DeWitt, Western Defense Command, San Francisco
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Italian Prisoners of War (POWs) In U.S. Camps During World War II

Objectives:

1. Summarize the Geneva Convention.
2. Analyze the treatment of Italian POWs.
3. Debate the various responses to the treatment of POWs and ISU units.

Materials:

- POW Activity newspaper articles
- Italian POW Volunteers newspaper article
- Camp Atterbury, Indiana

Procedure:

Discuss how to define Prisoner of War. Go over points of the Geneva Convention. Ask the students where the U.S. put POWs during World War II. Why would they be brought to America? Mention some of the camps and their locations. Have the students think about motives for having camps in the U.S. Discuss the labor shortage in the U.S. and how the POWs might be able to fill those labor needs.

View four short newspaper articles on overhead. Then have students discuss treatment of prisoners of war, note categories of housing, food, etc. Next, read the article titled, “Italian POW Volunteers.”

Discuss these points:

1. How did POWs contribute to the manpower shortage?
2. What activities were provided for POWs for entertainment?
3. How did POWs react to their treatment?

Present the difference between a POW and the ISU units. Consider the response of the surrounding communities to these camps. Split the class in half. Have one side become either the community or the prisoners. Each side will determine how they feel about the ISU units. Make sure to include that some of the prisoners fell in love with women in the community. Ask the class to decide if those men who are involved with a woman in America should stay in America after the war.
Possible Assessments:

- Debate: Have students form sides and debate the point of view of a community member who resents the “coddling” of Italians with extra privileges vs. a person who sees the value of Italians as ISU members and their contributions to the war effort.
- Suppose you are an Italian POW who is a member of an ISU unit. You will be going home in one month. Write a one-page letter to your parents reflecting on your time spent in the U.S.

Extension:

- Role Play: Have one student be a newspaper reporter interviewing a detainee and write an article about the interview
- Scored Discussion comparing the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay to that of Italian Prisoners of War.
**Camp Carson Mountaineer**, Colorado Springs, August 3, 1944

**Italian POW Volunteers Aid Camp Labor Shortage**

**100 Anti-Fascist and Anti-Nazi Italian Prisoners Make Up Highly Skilled Ordnance Maintenance Unit.**

The manpower shortage at Camp Carson’s combined maintenance shops, where hundreds of vehicles are being prepared for overseas shipment, was greatly relieved Tuesday with the arrival of the 10th Italian Ordnance Medium Automotive Maintenance unit. The service unit includes more than 100 Italian prisoners of war, who have volunteered their services for the American war effort.

Prior to coming to Carson, the Italians completed a 12 week training course at Atlanta, Ga., Ordnance depot to acquaint them with American vehicles and methods of repair. They were selected for the volunteer service after a thorough screening by military intelligence to insure that no pro-Nazis or pro-Fascists were included. Every man in the unit has had extensive mechanical experience.

The American officer in charge is Capt. Thomas G. Beebe, New York City. He will oversee American administrative personnel consisting of six non-commissioned officers, four of whom are interpreters, and four Italian officers—a captain, two first lieutenants and one second lieutenant. The unit is organized according to the regular table of organization for an American Medium Maintenance company, except that the Italians will not bear arms and will receive no tactical training. The men will live in a regular barracks area.

The Italians in such service units wear American uniforms with plain buttons and no American insignia. They wear a green arm patch with ********* units receive no more ********* other prisoners of war for work done. The only extra “payment” members of the units receive for working for the American war effort is in additional freedom, a part of which may include sight-seeing and educational tours. At present, however, the Italians at Carson are restricted to the camp area but they are not under guard. They may patronize one of the camp’s post exchanges, and a theater, but must be accompanied by American personnel at all times. Any abuse of privileges makes them subject to immediate return to regular prisoner of war status at a camp.

********* Refers to missing text from the article
ITALIAN PRISONERS ENJOY SOMERVILLE

After attending Mass at St. Anthony’s Church, Somerville, last Sunday morning, 11 Italian prisoners of war from Camp McKay, South Boston, spent the day as guests of the William Paca Club, an Italo-American social organization.

Taken by bus from the camp, the war prisoners attended the Mass, which was celebrated by the Rev. Nazzareno Properzi, pastor of the church, after which they were driven to Richard Trum Field, Somerville, where they participated in a softball game.

A picnic lunch was served the prisoners at the Paca Club, at which Fr. Properzi was guest of honor. The lunch was followed by an informal baseball game at Trum Field and the prisoners were given more refreshments before they returned to Camp McKay.

Italian News, July 28, 1944

Italian Prisoners with Many Stars, Olympic Referee Play Soccer Sunday

Oct 28 Italian prisoners of war stationed in Greeley are looking forward to Sunday when they will play, or watch, the second soccer game of their Greeley “season.”

The game will be played at the Wildcat field at 10 a.m. Sunday morning. Prisoners will march from the barracks to the field and the gates around the field will be closed and guarded. Those who do not take part in the game are in the bleachers. Public is not permitted on the field, but may watch from the outside. Out of 100 prisoners played their first game last Sunday morning when Company 2 defeated Company 10 by a score of two goals to none. Company 2 scored in the first and second halves, thanks largely to the brilliant play of a Polish-Italian with wide experience. The referee was an accredited referee of the Italian National Soccer Federation who had refereed Olympic soccer games.

But his wide experience did not prevent him from getting plenty of razzing from the stands, just as American baseball fans razz the umpires.

Nearly 200 prisoners were in the stands and they were an enthusiastic and wild-eyed crowd of fans. Several of the players were “knocked out” during the fast game, but all were revived.

Greeley Tribune, October 28, 1943
Italian Prisoner
Thanks G.W. and
Friendly Greeley

Italian prisoners of war who were
stationed in Greeley at the Horace
Mann school building during the
beet harvest this fall, have ex-
pressed their appreciation for their
 treatment here.

In a letter to Great Western
Sugar officials in Greeley, Brigadi-
er Vaile Guseppe, writing in behalf
of the other prisoners who were in
Greeley writes:

"In particular we appreciate the
soccer ball game, which for a few
hours was a great help in breaking
the monotony and furnishing a good-
time. We are keeping a good record
of all the hospitality shown us by
your company—also the farm own-
ers and all associated. We want to
thank you all for the courtesy
shown to the Raffo soldiers.

"The people of Greeley have put
up with them in a most democratic
spirit without any sort of discribina-
tion and it is most gratefully ap-
preciated.

"So to the people of Greeley we
want to extend our thanks to one
and all for being so kind."

The letter was written in Italian
and on a typewriter. It was mailed
at the Prisoner of War camp at
Douglas, Wyo., whence the Italian
 came to Greeley and where they
 returned after finishing their work
here.

Greeley Tribune, December 18, 1943
They marched to work with their tools over their shoulders singing Italian songs and entertained townspeople with soccer games. Farmers described them as willing to work, good natured, and appreciative of the chance to work outside the prison. Women took them home baked cookies on Sunday afternoon, handing them over the fence to outstretched hands. One young man had a tiny black kitten tucked into his blue jacket as a memento of his camp—he named it Eloise after his sweetheart back in Italy. They decorated their barracks with religious pictures, but assured observers that they were not blind to the feminine beauty of pinup girls, which German POWs hung in their barracks.

Americans observed scenes like these during World War II when 50,000 Italian prisoners of war (POWs) settled in camps across the country. Many of these prisoners came to the United States directly from battlefields in north Africa or Europe. They went to camps in agricultural areas where labor was desperately needed. But when Italy became a co-belligerent in the fall of 1943 the status of the majority of Italian POWs changed. In October, 1943, Italy’s new leader Marshal Pietro Badoglio declared that all POWs should help the Allied cause. This released them from the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, an agreement signed by forty-seven countries in 1929, which restricted prisoners to non-war related work. Now Italian prisoners could engage in any labor short of combat.2

In order to maximize this new source of labor the United States government created Italian Service Units (ISU). Italian prisoners who joined these were known as “volunteers.” The Army began an all out recruitment drive among Italian POWs in camps throughout the U.S. Recruiters often exaggerated the benefits of joining the ISU in an effort to increase the number of volunteers. This led to considerable disillusionment later. This ambitious recruitment campaign led to the signing of 33,672 enlisted men and 1,090 officers out of an estimated 44,335 enlisted men and 3,278 officers in the country as of June 1944. Massive troop movements followed as the Army sent ISU volunteers from rural to coastal and industrial sites for combat related work. German prisoners of war replaced the Italians in agricultural areas.3

For purposes of identification ISU members wore surplus or used U.S. army uniforms with all buttons and U.S. insignia removed. A green brassard with “Italy” in white letters was sewn on the left sleeve halfway between the elbow and shoulder. The front of the service hat bore a green and red circular cloth patch with “Italy” in white letters.4
Training for ISU members began immediately following enrollment. It was the same as that for U.S. servicemen with the omission of tactical and weapons training. Forty-four percent of the men participated in the Mobilization Training Program and the remainder had on the job training. There were programs in four services: quartermaster (88 hours), Ordnance (120 hours), Engineer (92 hours), and Transportation (138 hours). Manuals, films, circulars and other teaching aids had to be hastily translated into Italian.  

The Army provided English classes for Italian soldiers. Initially volunteers had six hours of English weekly during off duty hours with instruction manuals issued to all participants and provision for civilian observation. Response to this language program was not enthusiastic. Men were tired after a day's work and not eager to spend off hours in a classroom. Many of the men were illiterate and embarrassed by the classes. Some studied with the thought of using their English once given freedom in American communities. This assumption led to later disillusionment. By July English instruction fell to five hours a week and by November two hours with additional time for those who wished. By February 1945, it declined to two hours of classroom English and two hours in basic military subjects (discipline, customs, sanitation, sex hygiene, malaria control, first aid) during on duty hours. Ultimately use of English was minimal. Italian personnel could give commands in Italian, U.S. personnel could use English or Italian and Italians learned to understand English commands. 

The need for manpower was so urgent that many Italians had to leave special training programs before finishing. By September 30, 1944 all men were involved in on the job training at camps throughout the U.S. The average Italian POW was a willing worker but language continued to be a severe handicap. Many Italians had been peasant farmers and were accustomed to working with their hands and not machines. Of 900 Italians training as dump truck drivers less than fifty had ever driven a vehicle and only ten had any mechanical background. While they were good laborers there was little chance of training many of them to be skilled workers.  

Despite ISU status the men were still POWs and subject to certain restrictions. They could not marry in the U.S. If housed with non signers or German POWS, the ISU men had to eat the regular POW diet in which organ meats took the place of fresh meat. If there were no positions for ISU officers or privates, they had to return to a regular POW camp and be treated accordingly.  

Disobedient POWs of any category got the same treatment--some variation of hard labor, forfeiture of pay, or a bread and water diet. Whatever the choice it was always in compliance with the Geneva Convention. All POWs had to return to the country whose army they represented without exception; no transfers were allowed simply to be near relatives. They could not be photographed in civilian clothing and they could not purchase war bonds. 

There were numerous advantages for Italian prisoners who joined ISU. They received $24.00 per month; $8.00 was in cash and $16.00 in canteen coupons. They could buy what they wanted with the cash on or off base. Non-ISU prisoners received $.80 per day in scrip for any labor beyond basic housekeeping tasks, and $.10 for basics like toothpaste and other personal necessities. ISU men did not work under armed guards as the German POWs, but under direct command and supervision of a small number of officers and soldiers. Their diet was better than other POWs as they were fed the post menu, which included cheap cuts of meat when apart from Germans.
ISU men also had more generous postal privileges than other POWs. But precautions had to be taken. All their mail was censored to protect families of men who were still in enemy-occupied Italy. One district censor wrote numerous letters to headquarters in Wadsworth, New York enclosing photos and letters sent by ISU men in outgoing mail. The confiscated photos showed the “Italy” armband of POWs indicating their ISU status. The men were not to send photos with these visible markings nor letters giving camp locations. One confiscated letter read, “Please understand that in order to send you this photo, I am risking imprisonment, or even worse. If this should be censored, I am finished...Write to the old address. This one is false.”

The most attractive aspect of volunteering for ISU status and subsequently the most controversial, was the soldiers’ opportunity to leave base and participate in social activities in nearby communities under escort. This was a useful reward for their labor, but not without danger. The government anticipated problems arising when ISU men met local women, and for this reason some officers had opposed socialization off base. Yet the need for labor was paramount and socialization was the main attraction in getting volunteers for the ISU. However, once POWs appeared on public transportation and at large gatherings like baseball games, charges of “coddling” prisoners erupted. General John Eager, commander at ISU headquarters at Ft. Wadsworth, New York, spent an enormous amount of time responding to these charges—both true and false—and justifying this off base policy.

Not all reactions were negative. Italian ethnic organizations and churches in urban areas invited ISU men to gatherings often giving them gifts on holidays. One New York City church invited twenty Italian ISU men as guests for Memorial Day services followed by entertainment. The congregation promised to provide transportation. Members of the Church of The Lady of Mt. Carmel in Yonkers, N.Y. invited 150 Italian volunteers for a chicken dinner, furnished buses for sightseeing, and a Yonkers girl to accompany each young man. The Yonkers Kiwanis Club did not react kindly to these demonstrations of friendship and passed a resolution in which it “emphatically denounces the practice of releasing prisoners...for the purpose of being entertained...and demands that it be discontinued... Any attempted justification... disregards the prevailing sentiment of American families whose loved ones have suffered and died perhaps at the hands of some of these.”

Civilians complained to their congressmen who asked military officers for an explanation. A constituent wrote to Representative Edward J. Hart complaining that fifty Italian POWs from Ft. Wadsworth were brought to church, Palisade Park, and supper in Union City while his 18 year old son lived in the swamps of Louisiana with two sandwiches and a little water every twelve hours as an American soldier. On August 9, 1944, Representative Thomas E. Martin forwarded a letter from the American Legion Post 27, Muscatine, Iowa protesting overly generous treatment of POWs at Rock Island Arsenal. Colonel John Nash responded. He explained that ISU men contributed valuable labor to the war effort and one of the only ways to reward them, lift their morale, and sell them on democracy was to provide off base excursions.

The Rock Island issue did not rest. In November 1944 the president of “The Marine Dad’s Club of Rock Island County” wrote to Representative Anton Johnson protesting that ISU men took advantage of their privileges by holding drinking parties with women on the
Arsenal Island, being allowed to leave base and stay with women off base overnight, and buying two packs of cigarettes a day at reduced prices— which was an advantage over American citizens. An officer was dispatched to investigate and concluded that there was laxity in the control of vehicles and granting of passes, but the base had a “story-telling” group that gave exaggerated accounts of outings. Corrective measures followed and more rigid discipline was enforced.  

In the summer of 1944 protests came from Igloo, South Dakota when citizens complained that Italian POWs used government cars and consumed precious gasoline to travel to Hot Springs every evening. Such actions were a “slap in the face to our boys.” From Charlotte, North Carolina, Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson received a letter complaining that POWs were being treated like “honored guests “while a constituent in Cleveland wrote Stimson protesting the coddling of “wops.” From Warsaw, Indiana came the suggestion that since Italy was a co-belligerent, Italians should be sent back to fight and keep American boys home to work in agriculture rather than sending them to fight in Italy. An ex-serviceman in Tulsa, with one son missing in action over Germany and one fighting in the Pacific, asked why taxes must go for the twenty Italian POWs in training courses at the University of Tulsa.  

“Rumor and Resentment Plagues Army at Giant Cumberland Valley Depot” was the lead article in a series of three detailing friction in the region surrounding the newly built Letterkenny Ordnance Depot located on more than 20,000 acres of farmland in the valley. Displaced farmers, pacifist religious groups, and residents in the surrounding towns were unhappy with the changed pace, crowded restaurants, and shortage of labor as the Depot employed 5,000 civilians. Letterkenny was the largest supply depot in the country and its size alone alarmed residents. In an effort to ameliorate uneasiness the army hosted tours of the facility. Resentment reached a peak however when ISU men stationed there entered nearby towns like Chambersburg. Italian-American groups offered to entertain them, but protests from American Legion posts reached such a peak that several activities had to be cancelled.  

Newsmen joined the public outcry. In his Daily Mirror column, Walter Winchell reported an incident in Hillside, New Jersey where Italian POWs allegedly threw empty beer bottles on the highway from a commercial bus. Upon investigation the bus company records showed no evidence of transporting Italian POWs on the day of the alleged incident.  

Despite protests, efforts continued to boost ISU morale and make life more bearable. The largest mutual aid society in Connecticut invited 25 to 50 Italian POWs to be their guests some Sunday afternoon. The War Prisoners Aid organization of the YMCA gave athletic and recreational materials to camps where ISU men were located. The Italian Welfare League wrote General Eager proposing an exhibition of ISU artwork done by units east of the Mississippi River. It could be displayed at the Welfare League headquarters on Ellis Island and prizes would be offered in three categories: sculpture, painting, and handicraft (three prizes in the last and most popular category.) Aware of the sensitivity of the ISU issue, the Welfare League agreed to limit publicity as the army wished, and to give prizes in kind rather than money.  

In Camp Kilmer, Massachusetts the army held a special Christmas service and dinner for
the men. Visitors came after mass. Dinner consisted of special Italian dishes and turkey and the Italian Welfare League gave wallets as gifts to the men. In other camps the men had chicken and spaghetti dinners, sang carols, listened to opera recordings, and received wallets as gifts.  

Inevitably relations between ISU men and women they met at social gatherings grew serious. As the war drew to a close in 1945 numerous women sent letters to President Franklin Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and the War Department pleading that the father of the child they bore be allowed to stay in the U.S. or at least that they be allowed to marry. One four page handwritten letter to Mrs. Roosevelt began, “This letter carries an appeal that may be useless, but to me it is certainly worth a try.” The writer blamed herself as much as the young man, said she and her mother had suffered enough already, and worried that the child would not have a name “...children’s tongues can be very cruel.” A pregnant woman in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania allowed that American boys would be compelled to marry or give financial support while “these boys are free to leave us with our burdens and disgrace...No woman wants an illegitimate child.” Other women simply wrote for information having fallen in love and wanting to know if their fiancé could stay in the U.S. or if “he has to get me pregnant...” in order to stay.

The government response was unyielding. The War Department prohibited marriage of enemy prisoners, all POWs had to return to the country under whose flag they were captured, and the question of pregnancy was irrelevant to enforcement of these regulations.

An additional problem of clandestine meetings was an increase in the cases of ISU men being AWOL. Some men were dropped from ISU rolls and reverted to POW status as late as August 1945 when men already started to be repatriated. One POW visited a young woman in Providence, Rhode Island. He later confessed to illicit relations with her. A search of his footlocker revealed copies of letters written by him to seven different women. He admitted to leaving the post several times without permission. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to one month confinement at hard labor and forfeiture of $16.00 pay.

Married women also had liaison with prisoners as one husband reported. His happy marriage of eight years was jeopardized by the attention of an Italian POW at Charleston, South Carolina toward his 34 year old wife. The husband wrote the army asking to have the 22 year old POW sent back to Italy to his wife and baby. If he were only transferred to another base in the U.S. his wife in her present state of mind would follow him. He concludes, “I want nothing more than to care for my wife and preserve my home.”

Illicit relations became so prevalent that the army issued a six page memo on July 11, 1945 calling for close supervision of ISU men when they attended social functions. Furthermore close intimacy should be prohibited and relationships should not be allowed to develop to the point of marriage. In addition to the obvious problems developing, women were helping men to go AWOL.

Social events however did not always foster friendliness. At a USO dance in Los Angeles with 200 American soldiers and 20 to 30 ISU men, girls objected to dancing
with POWs and the USO instructions to treat them “just like any other soldier.” The USO responded saying that the girls could always say no to a request to dance, but the girls still objected because POWs could “cut-in” and they were stuck.25

The issue never ended and the army was constantly defending the ISU. A memo from the Armed Service Forces (ASF) in New York to the Pentagon’s Bureau of Public Relations in July 1944 summed up the case maintaining that Americans have an antagonistic attitude toward ISU men based on emotion rather than reason. The memo continued that Americans see Italians as “killers of our boys.” Every effort must be made to portray ISU men as the Brooklyn boy who left to visit his grandma in Italy, got put in the Italian army and found the first chance to surrender so he could find out the Dodgers standing, or a poor Italian farmer who always hated Fascists, or a deeply religious catholic who built an altar from scrap materials. By August 1944 it was necessary to assign a full-time public relations officer to the ISU headquarters at Fort Wadsworth.26

To counter hostility the War Department issued press releases showing the contributions of POWs in relieving the acute labor shortage. Headlines reflected this positive approach: the Tribune-Sun of San Diego reported, “Italians Aid the U.S. Willingly,” and from the Washington, D.C. News, “Italian War Prisoners Give U. S. A Million Productive Workdays,” and “Italians Here Help Rush Supplies for Battlefield Yanks.” Another paper noted that ISU completed over 12,000,000 man hours of work without guards and without one incident of sabotage.27

Despite the efforts to emphasize the positive, Americans remained critical of privileges granted ISU. General Eager, always supportive of his men, was as disappointed as they were when he had to curtail their off base activities. Put simply, he said, “It is impossible to continue civilian passes because the public does not like this kind of privilege.” POWs were discouraged and disillusioned by unfulfilled promises; their work performance dropped and on occasion some groups went on strike. General Eager responded by urging individual commanders to set their own pass regulations with an eye toward liberalizing passes whenever the situation permitted.28

Hostility also showed on the bases. Mary Pripadcheff was supervisor of the publications office at Ft. Wadsworth, and remembers numerous examples of hostility shown by American soldiers. When two American soldiers saw an Italian soldier coming, they would get on either side of him and trip him. Other Italian volunteers had bruises on their arms and legs from stones tossed at them. American and Italian soldiers saw each other constantly as they passed to mess halls or went about their jobs. The tension and ill will between the two ran high. Guards turned their backs on this abuse. Mary served as a peacekeeper sensitive to feelings on both sides. Being of Italian descent, she spoke the language fluently and befriended the Italians in an otherwise hostile environment. General Eager commended her for this and urged her to keep up her good rapport with the men.29

Some of the ISU men at Ft. Wadsworth were engaged in top-secret work. This was never publicized; had it been, American reaction to the Italians might have been more compassionate. Every morning two busloads of Italian officers went to New York City. There, cooperating with U.S. officers, they broadcast top-secret instructions to the underground in Italy, which in turn attacked German strongholds. They also alerted the underground to where American soldiers were landing so distractions could be created
for the Germans until the Americans were safe.\textsuperscript{30}

As the end of the war approached instances of AWOL increased. Some men left to see sweethearts they may never see again. Others had difficulty facing the return home and the war’s destruction. By March 22, 1945 the average number of cases rose from 5 to 151 man-days per month. One unit at Camp Kilmer recorded 20 man-days shortly before leaving for overseas, but on the day of departure all were present. In other units a bad record was due to one or two chronic violators. In the case of Camp Shanks one man was responsible for 113 man-days in four months. Whatever his problem, it had a tragic ending as he was found dead March 3, 1945 from hanging in an abandoned chicken house in New Jersey. His was the fourth suicide in the ISU. For many, going AWOL resulted in being dropped from ISU rolls and returned to regular POW status.\textsuperscript{31}

The repatriation process caused considerable controversy. Would ISU men be treated differently than regular POWs, what would the order of repatriation be, and should ISU men receive a special certificate? General Eager recommended that ISU men be repatriated as soon as possible as a reward for their contribution to the war effort. They received a 100 lb. baggage allowance while regular POWs had a 30 lb. allowance. Officers, both ISU and non-ISU, had a 175 lb. allowance. ISU men could take suitcases, footlockers, cosmetics, and other items purchased or given by friends. Some U.S. citizens argued that the men should not be allowed to take rationed items like cosmetics, soap, and certain clothing—that such generosity to the former enemy was not appropriate. In order that ISU could smoke on the way home, each man got an additional tobacco allotment just prior to repatriation.\textsuperscript{32}

A final matter regarded issuance of a certificate of service to ISU men. On August 15, 1945 a government memo stated that the U.S. opposed such a certificate for three reasons: The legality of volunteering for the ISU was questionable under Italian law, some Italian soldiers did not volunteer for the ISU fearing that it would compromise their standing in the Italian army, and certificates might be viewed as another instance of “coddling.” Yet on August 22 a memo from the Provost Marshall General indicated that the issue would be reconsidered—a proposed certificate was drafted with the recommendation that 40,000 copies be sent to headquarters for distribution. This apparently was not implemented. Upon repatriation ISU men returned to POW status. Their ISU form was marked VOID in large red letters and given to them as a souvenir.\textsuperscript{33}

Treatment of Italian POWs was one of the numerous wartime problems, which had no simple or satisfactory answer. Americans who had husbands, sons, or brothers fighting and dying overseas were understandably angered to see POWs enjoying themselves at social events. Yet those who worked closely with Italian volunteers knew how substantially they had contributed to the Allied victory. Were it possible to publicize all their assignments the criticism might have ceased. Fortunately at least some of the young men found friendship and understanding in the Italian communities, which reached out to make the soldiers’ lives away from home a little more tolerable. There was no easy answer to the ambivalence of their situation. They were technically prisoners, but not to be treated as prisoners. Their situation represented the complexity of war, even on the home front.
Endnotes

1. Records of the Office of the Provost Marshall General (PMGO), Record Group (RG) 389, Box 1621, National Archives (NA); *Nebraska Farmer*, Dec. 4, 1943; *Greeley Daily Tribune*, Nov. 13, 1943.
2. RG 389, Box 1487, NA; John Hammond Moore, “Italian POWs in America: War Is Not Always Hell,” *Prologue* Fall 1976: 141-142. For an account of German POWs, see Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York, 1979). Totals for POWs at the end of the war were Germans 373,683; Italians 51,071.
3. RG 389, Box 1487, NA; RG 319, “History of Military Training Italian Service Units Training,” Box 162, NA.
4. RG 107, Office, Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of War (War Sec.), Box 107, file 383.6, NA.
5. RG 319, Records of the Army Staff, “History of Military Training Italian Service Units Training,” Box 162, NA.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. RG 389, Box 1467, file Policy File, NA.
9. Ibid.
10. RG 389, Box 1467, file 000.73 Censorship, NA.
11. RG 389, Box 1369, file 250.1 ISU; Box 1475 file Passes, NA.
12. RG 389, Box 1475, file Passes; RG 107, Box 107, file 383.6, NA.
13. RG 389, Box 1467, file 014.13 Public Relations, NA.
14. Ibid.
15. RG 107 (War Sec.), Box 107; RG 389, Box 1467, file 014.13 Public Relations, NA.
16. RG 389, Box 1467, file Public Relations Press Clippings, NA.
17. RG 389, Box 1467, NA.
18. RG 389, Box 1469, file Red Cross and Similar Organizations; NA.
19. RG 389, Box 1467 file 006. Holidays, NA.
20. RG 389, Box 1369, file 250.1 ISU, NA.
21. RG 389, Box 1467, file Policy File, NA.
22. RG 389, Box 1475, file AWOL, NA.
23. RG 389, Box 1369, file 250.1 ISU, NA.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. RG 389, Box 1467, file 014.13 Public Relations Records, NA.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.; Box 1475.
30. Ibid.
31. RG 389, Box 1475, file AWOL, NA.
32. RG 389, Box 1468, file SPDC 014.
33. Repatriation, NA; Box 1469.33. RG 389, Box 1470, file Rewards, Badges, Decorations, NA.

Millions of soldiers were captured on the battlefields during World War II. It was the responsibility of the Allied Powers to house and care for them under the 1929 Geneva Convention rules. Prisoner of war camps housed these men in Britain, Canada, Australia, the U.S. and other allied countries and territories. The reaction of communities near prisoner-of-war camps was mixed; some appreciated the work done by the POWs while others resented their good treatment while U.S. boys were dying in battle overseas. A unique situation was created for Italian POWs when Italy switched sides and joined the Allied cause in 1943. The question became: What would be the role of Italian POWs? Would it be different from German POWs?

**Part I: Background/Geneva Convention**

Over 3,000,000 prisoners of war were captured by the Allies during World War II. Britain was the first to bear the burden of caring for these men due to its early entrance into the war. Britain quickly ran out of space and urged the United States to help. The U.S. hesitated and then with little enthusiasm agreed to take 50,000 POWs in August, 1942. All prisoners would be treated according to the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Ultimately 425,000 prisoners of war were sent from battlefields to the U.S. and distributed in 155 base camps and 511 branch camps across the U.S. Buildings varied from old Civilian Conservation Corps camps to hastily constructed new camps in areas where there was a desperate need for agricultural labor, which was the case of the camp near Greeley, Colorado.

Of the 425,000 POWs, approximately 50,000 were Italians scattered in 27 camps across the U.S. Having these enemy soldiers among the population challenged U.S. citizens. Should they visit possible Italian relatives who were housed in POW camps or would they be considered disloyal if they visited the “enemy.” This was a dilemma never before faced by Americans.

**Part II: Italian POWs and Formation of Italian Service Units (ISU)**

When Italy surrendered and declared war on Germany on October 12, 1943, the status of Italian soldiers changed. Italy’s new leader, Marshal Pietro Badoglio declared that all POWs should help the Allied cause. This released them from the Geneva Convention, which restricted prisoners to non-war related work. Now Italian prisoners could engage in any labor short of combat.
In order to maximize this new source of labor, the U.S. created Italian Service Units (ISU). Men who joined would be re-assigned, often to work on docks on the coast, at ordnance plants, and other war related industries. In exchange the men received one-third of their monthly pay in cash instead of script, a better diet than German POWs, the opportunity to go off-base and participate in social activities under escort, and other incentives. Nearly 35,000 Italian POWs signed up to join the ISU.

Teacher should briefly lecture based on the article, “Italian Prisoners of War in the United States: 1943-45.” Portions may be photocopied and given to students to read. Students should demonstrate a clear understanding of the shift from POW status to a member of the ISU and the reasons so many of the Italian POWs chose to switch.

**Part III: Romance, Going Home and Reflections on Life as a POW**

The social mingling of POWs with Italian women at church and other social functions led to romance and the desire to marry (which was prohibited for POWs). Many Italians wanted to remain in the U.S. but regulations were clear: all POWs had to return home after the war, with no exceptions. Yet, several women who had fallen in love with Italian POWs wrote letters to President and Mrs. Roosevelt appealing their case. In some cases, women went to Italy after the war to marry and then returned to the U.S. with their husband. An example of this is the case of Antionette Vece and Angelo Panni.

Antionette Vece and some of her girlfriends would walk by Fort Wadsworth (ISU headquarters on Staten Island, NY) and have conversations with the POWs there who were outside in a fenced-in area. The men tossed money to the girls to buy them newspapers and stamps. This led to daily conversations. One of the POWs, Angelo Panni, was attracted to Antionette and asked her to get a visitor’s pass to visit him inside the base. After many meetings and correspondence when Angelo was transferred to a camp in New Jersey, the two decided to get married. Angelo, however, was sent back to Italy after the war in 1946. They decided that Antionette would go to Italy to marry Angelo and then he would enter the U.S. and apply for citizenship. They were married in 1947, honeymooned in Venice, and the following year returned to the U.S. Angelo got a job with the U.S. Post Office in NYC and finally retired in 1985.
A Partial List of Italian Prisoner Of War Camps Located In The United States

Opelika, Alabama
Florence, Arizona
Angel Island, California
Camp Carson, Colorado
Trinidad, Colorado
Fort Gordon Augusta, Georgia
Fort Benning Columbus, Georgia
Camp Wheeler Macon, Georgia
Fort Stewart, 40 miles west of Savannah, Georgia
Camp Atterbury, 30 miles south of Indianapolis, Indiana
Concordia, Kansas
Livingston, Louisiana
Houlton, Maine
Camp McKay South Boston, Massachusetts
Princeton, Minnesota
Olivia, Minnesota
Warren, Minnesota
Wells, Minnesota
Clinton/Jackson, Mississippi
St. Louis Ordnance Depot in Baden, Missouri
Weingarten, Missouri
Missoula, Montana
Scottsbluff, Nebraska
Pine Camp, (Fort) Drum, New York
Port Clinton, Ohio
McAlester, Oklahoma
Stringtown, Oklahoma
Letterkenny Ordnance Depot near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania
Beaufort, South Carolina
Crossville, Tennessee
Fort Bliss El Paso, Texas
Hereford, Texas
Mexia, Texas
Fort Douglas, Utah
Douglas, Wyoming
Limitation of Rights During Wartime; Can This Happen Again? Simulation

Objectives:
1. Explain the Clear and Present Danger test.
2. Evaluate the balance between security and civil liberties.
3. Construct an opinion based on the simulation.

Materials:
- Library and Internet Research
- Against the Patriot Act: http://action.aclu.org/reformthepatriotact/
- For the Patriot Act: http://www.lifeandliberty.gov/

Procedure:
Ask the students to recall the Supreme Court response to Schenk v United States with the Clear and Present Danger test. This limited civil rights during wartime. Review how limitations were executed during World War II. Introduce the Patriot Act and its purpose. Pose the question; “Is National Security more important than civil liberties?” A new senate committee has been created to study this question. It is the Committee of Safety and Security. The committee must hold a hearing to determine if there needs to be new limits on rights to protect our nation.

Students will be given roles for the hearing. Divide the class into three groups; Senate members, those that will testify for more restrictions, and those that will testify for fewer restrictions. The students will be given time to research for the hearing. During the hearing the Senate members will have prepared questions for the two sides. They will allow those that are for more restrictions to testify first. They will be allowed to read a statement, and then the Senate members may ask questions. They will then proceed to the testimony against more restrictions, with the Senate members asking questions. Based upon the testimony, the Senate will vote and decide if there should be a limitation of rights.
At the end of the simulation, ask the question if executive Order 9066 could happen again?

**Possible Assessments:**

- Write a reflection paper on the process of the hearings. Students should focus on what their role was in the simulation and what was the final outcome.
- Research the debate on the Patriot Act. Find the current status of the Act. What are the implications if the Act becomes permanent?

**Extension:**

- Write letters to Congress either in support or against the Patriot Act.

“It is long past the time that Americans learn about this little known chapter in our history.”

Studs Terkel, Author *The Good War*
Recognition and Remembrance

Recognition And An Apology For War Time Treatment of Italian Americans

Objectives:

1. Explain why Italian Americans want an apology for their treatment in World War II.
2. Interpret law 106-451, how does it address the injustices of the past.
3. Hypothesize why it took so long to resolve this conflict.

Materials:

- Newspaper Article “Italian Americans want an Apology”
  [http://vikingphoenix.com/public/Japan Incorporated/e09066/9066it-1.htm#cctimes%20article](http://vikingphoenix.com/public/Japan Incorporated/e09066/9066it-1.htm#cctimes%20article)
- Public Law 106-451-Nov. 7, 2000:
  [http://www.usembassy.it/pdf/other/hr2442.pdf](http://www.usembassy.it/pdf/other/hr2442.pdf)

Procedure:

Ask students if there should be compensation for the United States’ past actions? They should define types of compensation. Discuss their responses. Students then read the “Italian Americans want an Apology” article. Pairing up, they should discuss what the article is about and share their responses. What does the Italian American community want from the Government? Find an example of why they would want that particular type of compensation. Have them identify the other types of compensation given earlier, have the pairs hypothesize why the Italian Americans did not want other types of compensation. As a class, go over their responses.

Introduce Public Law 106-451; point out the date in which the law was enacted. Ask them for the reasons it took so long for this law to be passed. Still working in pairs, let the students read through the law together, and provide a summary of the law. Have them compare the article to the law. Do they address the same issues? Discuss why or why not. Come back to the beginning question; should the United States be responsible for its past actions?
**Possible Assessments:**

- Essay: Do Italians, Italian-Americans and their descendants deserve an apology from the United States Government for their treatment during World War II? What should the Federal Government do today to close the book on this chapter of American history?
- Persuasive Letter: Write your Congressperson and/or US Senator and make an argument why Italians, Italian-Americans and their descendants deserve an apology from the United States Government for their treatment during the war. In your letter include the steps you recommend the Federal Government take today to close the book on this chapter of American history.

**Extension:**

- Create an advertisement to demand the U.S. Government’s apology.
- Find out if there was compensation given to the Japanese and Germans by the Government.

"Have Americans acquired the courage to look at people as individuals and the patience to design remedies for society’s problems, including national security, that do not assign labels?"

*Uncivil Liberties: Italian Americans Under Siege during World War II, Stephen Fox*
Objectives:
1. Interpret interviews from people during World War II.
2. Hypothesize why history books do not mention this episode in their texts.
3. Compose an article that would tell the story of Italian Americans’ treatment during World War II.

Materials:
- Six interviews from Uncivil Liberties: Italian Americans Under Siege During World War II, about how they were treated during World War II. (Lily Boemker, Mary Cardiali, John Molinari, Joe Neri, Marino Sichi, and Joe Spadaro.)

Procedure:
Divide the class into six separate groups. Distribute one interview to each group. The groups will read the interview and share their thoughts on how their person felt and was treated during World War II. They will summarize the interview and share their findings with the class. As a class compare the interviews. Were they treated the same and how did the interviewees feel about this type of treatment? Ask the students how they would feel if their family was put into that type of situation?

Have the students discuss why this particular part of American History is not in the textbook. How should the textbooks remember this? Point out that Public Law 106-451 states “the story of the treatment of Italian Americans during World War II needs to be told in order to acknowledge that those events happened, to remember those whose lives were unjustly disrupted and whose freedoms were violated, to help repair the damage to the Italian American community, and discourage the occurrence of any similar injustices and violations of civil liberties in the future.” Discuss what this excerpt of the law states and has it been done? Explain to the students that they will adhere to the law and tell the untold story. Therefore, each group will create a proposal to recognize and record this moment in history. Share the proposals with the class.
**Possible Assessments:**

- Each group will then write and publish their version of the untold story.
- Each student identifies the key issues in the treatment of Italian Americans during World War II. A chart will be made comparing these issues to actions that have occurred in the United States since World War II.

**Extension:**

- Have students research their own community. They will locate and document those stories that happened during World War II.

"This is not an Italian story. It is an American story. We want to get to the truth."

Eliot L. Engel, U.S. Representative, New York
I remember my dad had one or two records of Mussolini making speeches. He kept them; he was for Italy, and, let’s face it, the Italians were for Mussolini until he got mixed up with Hitler. We wanted no part of that. That’s why the Italian army just deserted and laid down their arms by the thousands. That was my impression at the time, at least. The Italian people were proud of what Mussolini was doing for their nation. He was bringing them out of poverty; he had the trains running on time; he was modernizing the farms. For the first time in their lives the peasants had some tractors to work with, machinery. And they had something to eat besides a piece of bread and a slice of goat cheese. But dad took those records out in the back yard and smashed ‘em into a million pieces and buried them. Now they’d be collectors’ items.

My dad came over in 1920, and my mother and I came in 1922, when I was two. Right after Pearl Harbor, General DeWitt issued an order. That son-of-a-bitch, I hope he rots in his grave. Anybody of Japanese, German, or Italian descent could not live west of highway 101. That was the demarcation line. We had applied for our citizenship papers, and were in the process of getting them. My parents hadn’t gotten theirs because they couldn’t read or write English. If my father had gotten his, then I would have automatically been a citizen before I was eighteen. [Sichi’s reference is to “derivative citizenship,” which was provided for in Sec. 339 of the Nationality Act of 1940.] But he didn’t get his in time, so we had to apply individually. Then, with the war on, they froze it [naturalization] and we had to move out.

We owned a chicken ranch, here, on this property. We had to sell out close to five thousand chickens. My dad took a beating. Five thousand hens he sold to Seely & Titlow for twenty-five cents apiece. They were all laying hens, not for breeding. After all this happened he got back into it after a fashion, but his heart wasn’t in it. Anyway, we had to move out [when the war started] and some people across the street took us in. We lived there for a few months. Then we got a little cabin, a little three-room shack about halfway up the road to their house. We could look over here [at the old house], but we couldn’t come near it. We weren’t too happy about it.

I was courting my wife at the time, and we weren’t allowed out after eight o’clock at night. We had to be inside, but I figured, “Oh, to hell with it.” I’d go
where I’d want. Went all my life, so why not now? I was twenty-one at the time. Well, somebody turned me in. Called the FBI. A so-called “friend.” Wore one of those dollar-a-year badges. Special police at dances, things like that. And next thing I know I had a real sharp looking young man knocking on my door. He was looking for my dad, then found out he had the wrong guy and wanted me. He says, “I understand you were out after eight o’clock?” What could I say? I said, “yes.” So he arrested me for violation of the curfew; I forget what else he called it. This time they caught me. I was on the right side of the line, but I was out after eight. I’d go to the movies—sit right next to the police chief. He never paid any attention to me ’cause he’d known me practically all my life, and he figured I was just as safe as anybody else, so what the heck? I know who turned me in. He didn’t wake up very good the next morning. Some friends went in and busted his head open, blacked his eyes, and busted his nose. He didn’t recuperate very fast.

They confiscated all of our guns. I had a .22 and a .410, and my dad had a .22. That’s about all the things that we had at the time. I had just bought my folks a brand new Zenith console radio, which I still have. We took it down to the shop and had the short-wave component disconnected. They were afraid I’d use it for receiving or transmitting some way. I kept one .22 long shell, which I made into a dum-dum. I intended to use it on a certain person. But I never had a gun to use it with.

The guy who arrested me was nobody local. Even the police chief said afterwards, “Heck, I’ve known you all my life. I never knew you weren’t born here.”

“No, I’ve been living here since I was two years old.” I didn’t know any other country, really.

So they locked me up in the county jail for five days, waiting for transportation, I guess. And from there, they took me—two marshals and another prisoner—in a car, a Chevy, I remember. They said, “We can be tough on you, or be easy. Whatever you want. If you want to cooperate we won’t put handcuffs on you, but if you want to get smart, we’ll cuff you.” I said I wouldn’t do anything. What could I do? So they let us sit in the back seat of the car. At Willits, they let us out at a Standard station to go to the bathroom, one at a time. They put us on our honor while they gassed up the car.

They brought us to what I think was FBI headquarters [INS detention facility] on Silver Avenue in San Francisco, a big mansion up on the hill with a big wall around it. When they turned us over to the manager, he said, “Well, what am I going to do with them? We have no facilities to keep these people.” So he locked us in a big closet. We sat there for quite a while, just sat on the floor. Pretty soon they opened the door and let us out and loaded us into a paddy wagon. We didn’t know where we were going. It turned out they took us to Sharp Park, near Pacifica. They had quite a concentration camp there, a
holding camp I guess you’d call it.

I remember the camp was divided in half. The Japanese were on the left side as you went in, and we were on the right. I don’t know; it seemed like there were thousands of people; it was quite a large gathering. There were Germans, English, French, Italians, every nationality you could think of.

We didn’t get to talk to the Japanese. They had us separated by a double fence, big enough to drive a truck between, and they patrolled it steadily, on foot and by truck. And barbed wire. It must have been at least ten feet high with barbed wire coming up on the ends on both sides. Couldn’t get in or out. We had barracks, mess halls, a camp bakery. Naturally, there was a commandant’s office, and everything was enclosed by a chain link fence. There were guard towers at every corner and all around the perimeter. Those guards were armed; I found out the hard way. We were playing baseball one day, and I was out in the field. Somebody hit a ball and it got past me. I ran after it and everybody was shouting to hurry up and throw the ball in. All at once, I heard a sound that made the blood kind of stop. Heard a “click-click,” and when I looked up, I’m looking down the barrel of a .30-caliber machine gun aimed right at my head. I wasn’t more than five or six feet from the fence and he was right above me, just motioning me off. He says, “You aren’t supposed to be near this fence. Back off.” I tried to explain that I was just after the baseball, but he said, “I don’t care what you were after. The next time we’re going to shoot.” There was no next time. I didn’t go near it again. I wanted nothing to do with it. They claimed the fence was electrified at night, but we weren’t sure.

It was a summer camp as far as we were concerned. Conditions were good. Still, we were locked in at night, about nine or nine-thirty. We had a chance to go to the latrine, and then we were locked in. Doors and windows were barred. And that was it. We didn’t get up until seven o’clock the next morning. If you had bad kidneys, you were in trouble. We had some relatives in San Francisco, and they’d come out on Sundays to visit me, through the fence.

Everybody had to work. We were asked what we could do, and I had been a baker, so I was assigned to the camp bakery. There was a big, fat German, a prisoner. He spoke with a real heavy accent. “Ya, what’s your name?” he said.

“Marino Sichi.”
“Ya’re a god damned wop”—just like that.
“No, I’m Italian.”
“I don’t want no wop working for me. Get the hell out of here.”
So I said, “Screw you,” and left. I went back to the barracks and stayed. The next day the guards came after me and wanted to know why I wasn’t working. I told ‘em.
“You got to work.”

“I ain’t gonna work with him. He don’t want me, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to work for a damn Kraut if that’s the way he feels about it. I ain’t gonna work for him.”

The next thing I know I got hauled before the camp commandant, who had me stand at attention in front of his desk—all that baloney. He said I’d have to work for the baker, or else.

“What the hell you gonna do? Throw me in a damn concentration camp?” His face got the color of your jacket [red]. When he calmed down a bit he says, “Go on back to your barracks.” So I did. But the next morning they marched me over to the laundry. My job was to fold the sheets as they came out of a huge machine. We worked until about ten o’clock, and then they’d come in with coffee and hot pastry from the bakery and we’d have a break. We’d sit around, fifteen, twenty minutes a day. Same thing happened around two o’clock. After that, we had the rest of the day for recreation. They had a gym, but you could do anything you wanted. Baseball, horseshoes—anything you wanted. They had a library; they had everything.

We got paid, too. When I was in the laundry a guard came in and asked if anybody knew how to press a shirt. I pressed shirts at home, so I figured I could press his. He said, “Can you run that mangle?” I said, “No, but if you’ll show me how it won’t be any different than a steam iron, I imagine.” He showed me how to press it right down the middle of the pockets, right across the button. He gave me two bits. After that, I spent most of my time pressing shirts for the guards. I made a pile of money. Heck, I didn’t care whether I went home or not. Probably making more money than I did in civilian life. But no, I didn’t want to stay there. All kidding aside, it wasn’t any fun. We hired a shyster lawyer who took us for $200 dollars, but I got out. When I came back, I was really careful. I didn’t want a repetition of it. Shortly after that they removed the restrictions and we were able to move home again.

I had mixed feelings about this country. I wanted to stay here. I wasn’t too happy about the situation because I figured I wasn’t doing anything wrong. So I was born on the wrong side of the ocean. It wasn’t my fault. I had applied for my citizenship papers and, if things had been different, I would have had them. But it just didn’t work out that way. So, just because of a technicality I was thrown in the hoosegow.

I didn’t like that, and I wasn’t too happy about being drafted, later on. By then, I was back at work at the bakery on the “right” side of Fourth Street. I was even classified as essential labor. They didn’t seem interested in me, then all at once they started after me. When I went down to San Francisco I said, “What are my options. I’m an enemy alien.” The marines refused me. They had a desk with three people: army, marines, and navy. The second man, the marines, took one look at my papers and said, “I don’t want no damn enemy alien.” I thought, “Thank
“God.” He threw my papers over to the navy guy and he said the samething. “Thank you,” I said, “You can’t dig a foxhole on the deck of a battleship.”

And he threw me to the army guy who said, “We ain’t particular. We’ll take you.” So I went in the Army. I went down a number of times before they finally took me in February of ‘44 because I was classified 4-F. I had problems with my stomach, and the doctor was treating me for ulcers. And then when I got in the service I found out it wasn’t ulcers, it was colitis. I got discharged on that.

One thing though, the army handed me my citizenship papers with an M-1 rifle. When I passed the physical, I asked what my options were. They said you can refuse induction and you’ll never be a citizen. We may ship you back to Italy. Or you can sign up and you can get your papers. They didn’t tell me I’d go to jail, just that they might ship me back to Italy. I was already a draft dodger from Italy. They had called me up to serve in the Ethiopian campaign when I was seventeen, and I said, “Go to hell. I don’t owe you anything.” The Italian Consul in San Francisco called me up. They were calling all the Italian citizens who were born in 1920. They called it the Class of 1920.

If I tell you how I got my citizenship papers, though, you’ll laugh. If you could see it. Camp Fannman, Texas, middle of summer. They told us to put on our Class A uniform. We were going to town and become American citizens. They loaded us onto these six-by-six trucks and headed for the county courthouse, Deaf Smith County, Tyler, Texas. We went up to the judge’s chambers, and there was a character strictly out of Judge Roy Bean: boiled white shirt, string tie, white suit, planter’s hat lying on the bench next to him, and a big mouth full of chewing tobacco, which he spit into a spittoon. I remember him saying, “You all swear to uphold and defend these here—spttttt—United States of America—spttttt—?” And he’d clang that old spittoon every time. You wouldn’t believe it unless you saw it. I got a little slip of paper that said I was now a citizen of the United States. That’s all there was to it. There were Germans, Italians, you name ‘em—Austrians, French. We went down on the courthouse lawn and we rolled and we laughed; it was the most hilarious thing. This was supposed to be a solemn occasion, and here was this judge with his “spttttt.” He could hit that damn spittoon from six paces.

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Lily Boemker,  
McKinleyville, California

When I came home from school, where we were taught the events that were going on in Italy, I would try to explain to my father about Mussolini, what he was doing. Our views were so different, though. My dad, he was a true Italian. We would go ’round and ’round about Mussolini: he “did a lot of good,” and so forth. That’s all he could see, what Mussolini did. We wouldn’t argue, but we had misunderstandings. It got so that when I’d walk in from school I’d say to my dad, “Viva Italia!” You know how Mussolini would say, “Viva Italia!”? Oh, dad would hit the ceiling. He spoke from the heart, though. He was quite a fella. And my mother—she studied that Constitution. She could give you every page, just like that. She itemized everything; she was so proud.

How did your father react to that?

*He just overlooked it. He said, “If you want to do it, you go ahead.”*

Did he react when Italy declared war on the United States?

*Oh, yes. At first, he felt the Americans deserved it. But then as time went on he could see the wrong that was coming out of it. He was a very kind man, a good man.*

The law came that people who did not have their citizenship papers, and who lived on the west side of G Street [highway 101 in Arcata] had to move. This must have been in January or February of 1942. I was a senior in high school. Where were we going to go?

We decided to move to Eureka. I wanted to graduate with my old class, so I commuted back and forth to Arcata High School until June of ’42 when I graduated. My mother and father couldn’t attend. My mother could have, but she wasn’t well. My uncle and aunt brought me over, and I went through the ceremonies and everything. Then I went back home to Eureka.

How did you first learn that you had to move?

*Well, the Italians in those days would visit. People would meet in one home and just visit. One evening, our friend down the street came and said, “The news is on the radio that the aliens have to move.” I went to the post office and found out for sure. At the time, we thought of just moving to the other side of G Street. But my dad was working in Eureka, and we thought, “Well, it would be better for him not to have to commute back and forth,” so we moved to Eureka.*

Was it because your father couldn’t travel more than five miles that he didn’t attend, or
because the high school was across the line?

It was across the line. Yes, that’s why. There were quite a few of us—Joe Nieri, Marino Sichi—and you were looked down upon, let’s face it.

I would stop at the old house—we rented the house out—and collect the rent for my parents. We didn’t have a car or anything like that. Let’s see, we moved back—I think August of ’42, we moved back to Arcata. Yes, it was in August, because my uncle died in May—he was from Italy. I graduated in June, August we moved back, and September is when I met my husband.

Did anyone ever say what you might do that would be dangerous?

At the beginning, no. We found out in Eureka why they wanted us to move. They were afraid that we were going to give signals to submarines and things out in the ocean or bay. Nobody official ever told us; it was just rumors.

And you know, my sister and I became air wardens. There was one night I remember. The wind was blowing; it was a rainy stormy night. My sister looked at me, and I looked at her, and she said, “Do you think we should go out?” When the air raid sirens started, you were supposed to go out. So we decided, no, we’re not going to go. And then we thought, “What if something happens? We gotta report it; you have to write everything down.” So we walked up K Street, went down J, up Eleventh, down J, up Tenth. Then we saw something on the sidewalk. My sister and I both thought, “Gosh, what’s happening?” And here was this man. We thought he was dead. His pants were torn, his leg bleeding, and oh my gosh, we didn’t know what to do.

We started screaming. Everybody around there came out of their houses. I can still see it, right in front of the Roberti’s house. Finally, Mary said, “We have to call in something happened. A car hit this fellow and he’s dying.” We weren’t too sure what to do, so we found a phone and called an ambulance. I think it was an ambulance—we called somebody. They came and put him on a stretcher and took him away. Come to find out—you know what they pulled on us? What they had done, they got a beef tongue and slit it. You know how a tongue bleeds. And they ripped his pants open, put the tongue inside, and he was “bleeding.” That’s what they did to us. We had to report it. Just think if we hadn’t gone out that night. They’d have known we weren’t on the job.

Let me get this straight. At the time you were forced to leave your home in Arcata, you were actually working for civil defense?

No, but we were asked to be air raid wardens for four blocks in our neighborhood. You were asked to donate a certain amount of time. But we had to stop, of course. We also took turns as lookouts up at Redwood Park, where they had an observation station. We were keeping watch!

Was it difficult to find a place to rent in Eureka, and somebody to rent your Arcata home?

No. Some American people rented our place and we didn’t have any problems. It was not a financial burden on the family. Dad was never out of work.

As a high school student, what did you think was going on?
In those days, when you’re a teenager, you wouldn’t even let people know that you spoke Italian! I was very, very angry, and I’d get angry with my dad. There’s no two ways about it; I would get angry with my dad. He hadn’t become a citizen. He lived and thought as though he was still in Italy, but he was over here. And I can still remember saying, “Do you think you’re going to live forever? You have to change; you have to change.” And he would say, “I’ll never change, never.”

Did you blame him for what happened to the family?

In the way he thought, yes. But in his personal being, no. He was such a loving, kind man. I only saw my dad cry once, and that’s when we had to leave our house in Arcata. We had a cellar, and he had made wine. He had a hose, and he brought the hose down into the cellar and put it in the barrel to put his wine in gallon containers. Evidently, he walked away, the hose came out of the container, and his wine went all over the back-yard. Tears just poured down. It hurt him so.

How did you know you could move back? Were you notified individually?

No, we weren’t notified. They put up notices at the post office. So we moved back and things started to look up. But in the meantime, my mother became sick. With the anxiety, the pressure, and the stress she became a diabetic. We couldn’t understand what it was. She was going to the doctor, and he couldn’t find out what the matter was. And then when we moved back to Arcata a doctor in Eureka found that she was a diabetic.

Your mother felt that this was somehow connected to your having to move?

We all felt that way, yes.

What did you think about the government’s policy?

When you read about the Japanese and how they were put into concentration camps—well, look what they did to us. They should compensate us somewhat.

My mother always told me, you should kiss the ground you walk on over here. My husband and I went over to Italy eight years ago and met all my cousins and my aunt and uncle who are still living. We saw the house and the bedroom that my dad was born in, and my mother’s house and the room she was born in. They have these long stone houses, you know. My mother would bring this up. She said, “You know, when we left Italy nineteen people were living in one house.” The brothers got married and just lived off the land that they could farm. This was the only thing they could live on.

It was very, very moving to go back to Italy. The city has walls around it, and I would say it’s about ten miles from Lucca. It’s called Paganico. I knew all my relatives over there by name. The reason I knew was that, through the years, my mother would make packages of clothing and things like that to send. I can still remember, it was forty-four pounds; that’s the limit. I was always the one to put the address on it, Paganico, Provincia de Lucca.

Our daughter went to school there for a year. And she just fell in love with our relatives.

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I was born in Detroit, Michigan, but my husband was an alien. He and I had to move in 1942. He lived with his mother and his sister in Brentwood. My mother was an alien, too, but with five little kids. They had to go to Oakley, and I had to go back and forth from my mother’s house in Pittsburg to see my husband in Brentwood and my mother in Oakley. I had to bake bread once a week, twenty-five pounds of flour—bake bread for my mother; cook it in Pittsburg and bring it to Oakley; go to see my husband in Brentwood and bring him some food.

It was about five or six months we were out. My mother came home sooner, but not my husband. She came home because she had her boys in the service. My brother talked to the chaplain in the Navy, and he said, “What am I doing here when my mother’s out? She’s got two sons in the war and she’s out as an alien.” The chaplain wrote to Washington, I think, and then we got a letter and they sent my mother home earlier with her little kids. They were all American-born, the kids.

It was really a struggle; I really had it rough. I had all that “freedom.” [laughs] My husband and mother couldn’t come to Pittsburg. If they’d catch ‘em coming to Pittsburg, they’d get arrested. So I had to help my mother out because there was no stove over there to bake bread for the kids to eat. First make it, and then bake it. Yeah, the kneading—oh boy! When my mother was sick my brother Joe used to knead for her. And it was always twenty-five pounds at a time. Roll it, lay it away to rise, put it in the oven to bake. That was a lot. I did that once a week.

There was no washing machine to wash the kids’ clothes in Oakley. It was just a little cabin, and she had those five little boys. There were a lot of dirty clothes. She had a nice home in Pittsburg, but I had to stay there and do all that stuff and bring it to her. Plus I’d go see my husband in Brentwood. And I did that three or four times a week.

I had a little boy, nine months old. I had to carry him back and forth with me in the car. And then my husband finally went to see if he could get work because we had no money. We were starving. Before he moved, he was a contractor in the canneries. He used to work in the cook room, stacking up cans and all that stuff. Then he was out of work for about six months after he was put out.

Did your husband eventually find work?
Yes, a day job in Isleton, and he moved there, into a small apartment, by himself. Isleton’s on the other side of the Antioch bridge, about twenty-five miles. You had to pay a fare to cross the bridge. We had a car, and I could drive, so I kept the car because I had to go back and forth. I was taking care of my mother and I didn’t want to leave her stranded. I used to bring my little boy back and forth to Isleton, and one time we almost got killed. He was throwing up in the car and we didn’t have car seats in those days. I had him right next to me. I was watching the baby throwing up, and here I was going to have a wreck. And it scared me to death. I didn’t like to go back and forth too much.

My feelings about all this now? It’s over! It made me feel bad that they treated us like that. I don’t believe the Japanese should have any compensation. If they do, everybody else should too. Why not? They think they’re better than the rest of us? You know, where my mother was, there in Oakley? My God, some old woman, as old as my mother—she got so sick, the poor lady, because they got her out of her house. I thought she was gonna die. Her mouth got all full of sores. She was a mess. She was so depressed and upset that they threw her and her husband out. They were both aliens, and they were sick all the time they were out. They had no children in the service, but they did have children who were born in this country. They were horrible days, really horrible days. It was so sad and gloomy.

Do you think relocation changed your life in any way?

Sure it did. It does change your life. It’s always on your mind. You think about it, that you missed a lot of your life. I missed all those months being with my husband. And my child? He was growing up. His best years—I mean months—we were spending along the highway, running here, running there. And that made me feel real bad.

It always made you feel like people were looking at you cross-eyed. My husband was afraid to go even one mile from where he was living. He took it real hard. He was really afraid. What were they going to do, sabotage?

We did come into town one night, and we had to look for a man here who was taking care of the aliens. If you wanted to come to town you had to pick him up to ride into town with you and bring him home again. He was well known in Pittsburg, an Italian fellow. Yeah, it was really something. So don’t tell me the Japs suffered more than we did. Maybe they lost their property, I don’t know.

Everybody was so happy to be back home. I think that [relocation] was terrible. But it makes me mad now when I hear the Japanese; they want money; they’re fighting. They don’t deserve any money. They’re not better than the rest of the people. They started the war. I don’t like to be in the same boat with them. Look what they did to us at Pearl Harbor. Killed all those beautiful boys. The Italians had no choice [in the war]. If it wasn’t for Mussolini they wouldn’t have fought against America.

© Stephen Fox
My grandparents emigrated to São Paulo, Brazil, where my dad was born. They stayed there for about six months, then went back to Italy. Consequently, when my parents were married my brother and I were born in Italy. My dad came over here in 1924 and worked for two years, and then sent money for us to come to the United States.

We came when I was three years old. The family settled here and dad worked in the lumber mills and camps. Along comes the war, World War II. My dad was not considered an enemy alien, because he was born in Brazil. He got his citizenship, I’d say, after the war; I can’t remember what year it was. It was after we came back from the army, though. But my mother and my brother and I had to relocate across this imaginary line—G Street, the old highway 101.

We heard about the order, and we read it in the newspapers; but the official word came from the local police department. They came around and explained to us what we had to do. We were living at Eleventh and K Streets, about five blocks too far west. So we had to relocate to the east side of G Street. I was seventeen and a senior in high school. It really hurt me ‘cause we had all gone to school with these kids from grammar school on up, and of course, we knew everybody and they knew us. I was supposed to graduate with them, and was looking forward to it. Well, my brother and I lost that year of high school. I had to go back to the class of ‘43. But when the class of ‘42 had their reunions, they always asked me: “Well, you were in our class, right?”

“Yes, but if you remember correctly they had this enemy aliens thing, and we weren’t supposed to cross the line.” ‘Course those people now, they say, “Oh well, it was a stupid thing to do to a person.” There were three of them that I talked to; they kind of forgot what happened. But I said, “Do you remember when we had to go across that imaginary line?”

“Oh God, yes, we forgot about it.”

“Well, I didn’t!” So I have to go to reunions with the kids that were behind me. It comes up every time and it brings back old memories. It bothers me, it really does. You kind of forgive, but you can’t forget. It’s embedded too deep.

I was on the first string basketball team, and that’s another thing that hurt me.
I was going to get my second stripe and then a sweater. I could have walked around school with two stripes on my sleeve! I couldn’t participate in sports in ‘43 either, because technically that would have been my fifth year in high school, and they only accepted four years of athletic eligibility. That’s something that really hurt. I couldn’t even get into the yearbook, my pictures or anything like that. I didn’t try to argue with them, but I explained, “It was five blocks from this imaginary line. What harm is it going to do? Just let me go to school for another year, until the end of June.”

“No. We’ve got orders to relocate you, and that’s it. You have to go.”

It happened during basketball season, I remember that. I was sitting on the high school gymnasium steps, when the principal came and told me I had to leave school. That was my last day. I still remember sitting on those brick steps and thinking, “This is it. Three-thirty’s coming.” I had a big lump in my throat, and I said good-bye to all those guys. But I got to go back to school the following September.

The whole family moved. We rented a house on Ninth Street, near where the Arcata ballpark is now, right across from the fire station. It wasn’t really difficult, other than moving. But we had to pay a higher rent, which hurt. We couldn’t travel across the imaginary line. If we had to go to the dentist or a doctor—they were on the west side of the line—we could cross, but we had to get a police escort. To go from our house to the doctor or dentist they had to call a police officer to come and pick us up after we were through. Just like we were in jail. I thought it was really foolish, or stupid, or whatever you want to call it. The dentist and doctor were on the plaza. They thought it was kind of dumb, too, but they had to go by the regulations. They were all sympathetic. Besides not being able to cross this line, we had to be on our property by seven o’clock at night. No later. if we were out, well, there were two or three spies around—neighborhood people—who would report us to the police. There was one guy that we know who turned us in; the police chief told us.

We snuck up to the show after dark, through a lot of alleys and backyards. We’d jump across peoples’ yards, hide in the bushes, then go in through the back door of the theater. That was an awful thing, you know, sneaking around like that. If we didn’t go to the show for entertainment, though, we were stuck at our house.

I couldn’t get a job; all the jobs were on the west side of the highway. All we could do was sit around the house. We used to love to go clam digging, but that was too far for us to travel. And on Sundays, all the grocery stores and other stores were closed. Before the war the family used to go on picnics out at Camp Bauer or Blue Lake. And we couldn’t even do that; we had to sit at home. The Japanese were in concentration camps; I really felt sorry for them. But we were just like in a concentration camp, too, but for a short time.

Mom felt sorry for us. She wasn’t too concerned about herself. Most of the time she’d keep to the house, clean and cook and all that stuff.
‘Course we liked to wander; you know kids. But we couldn’t go out on dates or anything.

They made us go in the army. We had to register for the draft, even being enemy aliens, which I could not comprehend. Course at that time I didn’t understand too much of what was going on. Whatever they told us, we did. So we registered, and I said, “Well, I’m not going into the draft because we’re enemy aliens. We’re not supposed to be in the army or the armed forces.” We registered anyway, and got a notice to report to San Francisco. But we didn’t go. We were that bitter. So they sent a sergeant, or somebody, and the local police. They came over to our house and gave us an ultimatum: “You will go down for a physical and if you pass, you’re going to go in the army or you’re going to prison.” So we didn’t have too much of a choice. We talked it over and thought about it, and decided we didn’t want to dirty the family’s reputation. So we said, “Don’t ruin the Nieri name. We’ll go.” So we did. We went in the army on May the third of ’44.

At first we were in the artillery down at Camp Roberts. About two months later they took all the aliens—mostly Mexicans—over to the county seat at San Luis Obispo. They swore us in and gave us our citizenship papers. They couldn’t have an enemy alien in the army, so we had to be citizens. Later we found out that because they needed more infantry for the Normandy invasion, we would have to convert to the infantry. But of all the places, we were sent to Italy! And we got into the fighting there, just above Rome. Yeah, it wasn’t very pleasant, but it was the last two weeks of the war. Still, when those bullets buzz over your head, and you don’t know if your name is on it, it’s terrible.

I saw all the aunts, uncles, cousins. In fact, I even saw the house and the room I was born in. The people were really glad to see us. When the Germans made a final push up there by Milan I got hit in the back with mortar shrapnel. And off all the places to be sent, I was sent back to Lucca, my home village, to the field hospital. My brother was hit, too. We were in the same foxhole. They sent us to this field hospital in Lucca, and we were talking to this civilian who knew my uncle and he told him and the family came over and visited us. That’s how we got to know where they were.

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You were a member of the “Citizens Committee to Aid Italians Loyal to the United States”?

Yes. It was organized as a non-profit corporation titled, “Italians Loyal to the United States.” It was not a “citizens committee” in the sense of a general, citywide committee, but it was composed of people of Italian descent. The reason for the creation of the committee was that the [Italian] community was rampant with rumors that after the evacuation of the Japanese by the military authorities in this area, the people of Italian extraction would be next. And so the committee was formed to forestall any such activity. The committee met from time to time to attempt to persuade the Italian population that the rumors were unfounded. But, in any event, as happens during wartime, there was considerable apprehension that this might happen to people of Italian descent. The committee did have meetings with Earl Warren, the attorney general of the state of California, who had taken a position [favoring] the evacuation of the Japanese. He assured us that to his knowledge there was no such action [re the Italians] contemplated. We then asked for a meeting with General DeWitt, commanding general of—I believe—the Fourth Army at that time, and who was the general who would issue the order for evacuation.

We would have supported all aliens as well as citizens because the aliens—so many of them never got around to getting citizenship—had been here for thirty, forty, fifty years. Joe DiMaggio’s father, for example, had never applied for citizenship; he was a fisherman. He eventually passed, but it took him a long time. Mostly the fishermen were people who had not gotten around to getting citizenship, and there were a lot of them. They were busy, or they were afraid of the examination, or whatever. I remember in my law practice I was speaking more Italian during the course of the day than I did English. I had clients who couldn’t read or write, even in Italian, let alone English. They’d never gone to school in Italy. You see Italy was a new nation if you really analyze it. A lot of these people came here at the turn of the century, and Italy was unified in, what was it, 1870? So the public school system had never taken hold.

There were Italians who had been vocal in support of Italy, people on the Italian radio, for example, who extolled Mussolini and the virtues of his accomplishments. Some of the most vocal…aliens were actually deported or at least placed in camps. I think the Italians at that time were sent to a camp in Montana—Ft. Missoula.

We had an Italian school in North Beach, which I attended as a boy. It was community
supported, but the books and teachers were subsidized by the Italian government. All of us had to go whether we liked it or not; our parents wanted us to learn Italian. I could only speak the Genoese dialects. I did not know the official Italian language, which of course is the Florentine dialect. So our parents wanted us to go to Italian school, and we went there five days a week, from four to six p.m., after American school. When I attended, which was in the 1920s, there was no [Italian] government propaganda at all. We had innocuous textbooks, but very fine teachers. And whatever Italian I know to this day, I learned there. The school was not for propaganda. As far as I could tell, the monarchy was never interested in propagandizing its people in foreign countries. They were interested in preserving the language and the heritage. But I have no recollection of any of the teachers giving us any propaganda about what Italy was going to do militarily and so forth. They praised all of [Italy’s] cultural attributes, and they had a right to do that.

When Mussolini came to power, I was aware that school was beginning to become an agency for propaganda. The students would march in the Columbus Day parade, and they wore the Balilla uniform. It was a uniform similar to that worn by Mussolini’s youth organization known as the Balilla. Balilla was a young Italian boy of Genoese descent who, according to history, threw a rock at a French general when Napoleon occupied Genoa, starting a riot that resulted in the expulsion of the French. Balilla was always considered a patriot, particularly for the youth. And so Mussolini had this youth organization, which had a special kind of uniform with—I think it was a black shirt, much like the others. I can remember these young students marching in the parade. Whether they did it voluntarily or they were told to do it, I don’t know.

There was a feeling in the community that the school was being used to acquaint the students with Mussolini and his attributes. While I had no relationship with the school, it was generally known that the teachers who had been sent over were naturally sympathetic to their own government. Of course, the school closed down when the war broke out and Italy became an enemy of ours, and the school as such has never been resumed. There are Italian schools in the community, but they’re operated by separate agencies that have no connection with the Italian government.

Did government officials ever tell you that they suspected these schools of teaching Fascism?

No. When I spoke to officials, I was unaware that they were concerned about Italy ever being an enemy of ours until war was declared. That took everybody by surprise, although I’m sure our government was concerned that Mussolini had gone to war on Hitler’s side.

There was a segment…in the community that was vocally anti-Mussolini. They just didn’t like him. Some believed in democracy; some may have been socialists. Who knows? And I’m sure that these people were naming names of people who had praised Mussolini.

Some of them that I knew, for example, were veterans of World War I in Italy. They were our allies; they came here as young immigrants. They couldn’t join the American Legion, so they formed an organization called the Italian Legion. From what I hear, some of them may have gotten up at their meetings and extolled Mussolini. The result was that most of them were taken on that first sweep, even those who had kept their mouths shut. That organization really had no relationship with Mussolini, except that they had served in World War I under the king. They were our allies; they helped us win the war.
But here again it shows you how things get distorted. When you think back to those days, everybody was scared. The authorities were scared. Everybody was acting with an abundance of caution.

During the war, I had an office in the North Beach district. At that time the area was practically 100 percent Italian. The FBI agents, whom I got to know fairly well, would use me as a contact. They’d come in: “Do you know So-and-So? Is he all right? Is he a danger?” Things like that, involving individuals. There were two agents from back east, two lawyers, who decided that I was at least somebody in the community who knew a lot of people, and apparently had checked on my background and loyalty.

One day, one of the Italians that was a client of mine came in and said, “The FBI’s been down to see me.” He was president of a social group called the Balilla Social Club, named after the group I told you about. My father was a charter member. It had been formed in 1918 as just a group of Genoese Italians who had picnics, dances, and dinners I used to go to the picnics as a boy, and it was just a nice social gathering. Well, being named Balilla, and this organization in Italy being named Balilla, the FBI got all excited. And so this guy, this client of mine, was afraid he was going to be deported or something. So I said, “When the FBI agent comes back, tell him to come up and see me.” It turned out the agent was one of two men that I had known, both non-Genoese lawyers from the East Coast. I think they were either Neapolitan or from southern Italy. So they probably wouldn’t have heard of Balilla until this thing came along. I explained to them that Balilla was formed before Mussolini ever came on the scene. We were the first. We had the name before he adopted it. I told them the story about Balilla, what a patriot he was and so on, and that was the end of that story. But it just shows you. They were doing their job.

There was an Un-American Activities Committee in Sacramento, and a few people in our community were summoned before it. Here again, people had reported to the committee that So-and-So was not loyal because he had said some nice things about Mussolini. Even before that committee got curious, there were some people in the community that were really maligned because of some Italian connection. You have to remember that at the time I grew up most of the first generation Italians whose parents were born in Italy had a strong affinity for Italy. My father had served three years of compulsory military service in the Italian army under the king. And he was always proud of his service. So the first generation of Italians was kind of a bridge generation, and they’d heard all these wonderful things about Italy. Some of them may have said, “I think Mussolini’s doing a good job. He got the trains running on time.” I think everybody in the community soured on him when the Ethiopian thing came along. But before that, I think there was the feeling that maybe this fellow was doing something for the country. Of course, the biggest mistake he made was to align himself with Hitler. Until that time I think you could generally say that the Italians thought he was doing a good job for Italy. I think he did a lot of things internally that were good for the country. Some of those things, and they weren’t too concerned about his political alignments with other nations, but they were aware of those alignments.

The Italians were smarting a bit in that they thought they got a bad deal after World War I under the Versailles Treaty. And they thought that Italy didn’t get what it deserved as one of the victors. So Mussolini sold that concept. Italians here said, “We think he’s right. Look, we lost all of these people and we didn’t get anything but Trieste or something.” So you could see that the feeling was there, that there was some belief that the Italian cause had some merit. Some of these people may have spoken favorably about
Mussolini, and I could hear, I remember some of them saying, “He’s telling Great Britain off. Nobody else did before him. But he’s telling them off. The king didn’t do it, but he’s doing it.” Anything that would put Italy in a better light among nations they supported.

Apparently Mayor Angelo Rossi was accused of being a Fascist?

I remember that occasion because I was active in politics. That was the most ridiculous thing, because Angelo Rossi was already a first- or second-generation Italian, born in the mother lode area [Sierra gold rush country]. He came down to San Francisco, couldn’t speak a word of Italian, had never been to Italy, was from an area where there was an Italian community, but not as vocal about things Italian as they were here. The only thing Italian about him was his name, really. To my recollection, he never took part in Italian community affairs. He was appointed a supervisor because he was a downtown business man, and when Mayor [James] Rolph was elected governor, Rossi was appointed by the Board of Supervisors as mayor. He had taken a trip to Italy when he was mayor, and they published a picture of him in Time or one of the literary digests, I forget, with his hand outstretched. And they made a lot out of it, that he was un-American. It turned out that he was on this liner going to Italy and he was pointing at the Statue of Liberty. But the way the picture was taken, he had his hand so that it looked like a Fascist salute. He was maligned for awhile, but some of these things were political. Some people just didn’t like anyone else, and began to exploit the situation.

Ettore Patrizi was the editor of L’Italia, one of those earlier newspapers. He was pretty vocal in favor of Mussolini. And, of course, he was asked to leave. Here again, he was an Italophile and probably believed that Mussolini was a great man. My generation all read the American dailies, but my folks, of course, subscribed to L’Italia. They liked it, and a lot of Italians in the outlying areas were subscribers. I’m sure there was some propaganda in those papers, at least until the Ethiopian campaign. Again, I remember Italians who thought, “Well, England didn’t give us what we wanted as far as colonies are concerned, so we have the right to go out and get one.” Mussolini was trying to convert Libya to an agricultural country, and he was sitting on all that oil and never knew it. His whole orientation was agriculture; it never crossed his mind, apparently, that Italy could be the industrial nation that it is today. I remember that his theory was that it was a burgeoning population that Italy had, and you needed places to send them to. Colonies, that was his theory.

I remember going to Italy during Mussolini’s time. I was a college student, and my father took the family back for a trip, his first after thirty years. I remember the trains running on time, the black shirts, and a lot of rigid controls. Black-shirted militiamen would accompany the ticket collector on the train. You had to show your ticket to get out of the station, not just to get in. I personally was not bothered. I was a tourist.

Mussolini was one of the great public speakers of our time. The crowds loved him. As a matter of fact, some of his speeches have been incorporated in books containing the outstanding speeches of all time. He had a facility of immediately getting control of a crowd. And they’d listen to him, and, of course, he told them what they wanted to hear. I remember one of his speeches. He took it right out of Shakespeare’s “Mark Antony.” He said, “Friends, brothers, listen to me.” Those were his first three words. He called me a brother. If you study him from the aspect of a speaker who wants to communicate a message, and at the same time get people to listen, I guess he was good at it. And so people would praise him here for his speeches. “Look at that guy. He’s telling England off.”
Five of us from the [Citizens’ Committee to Aid Italians Loyal to the United States] were invited to the Presidio, but we did not get to meet General DeWitt, who apparently was busy with more important things. We met instead with one of the subordinate generals; unfortunately, his name escapes me. We had a very interesting conversation. He assured us that as far as he knew, there was no such action contemplated with respect to the Italians. We told him that we were pleased at his response. But lest there be any doubt of the feelings of the community—at least the leadership of the Italian community—we impressed him with the idea that moving Italians was a lot more of a logistic problem than moving the Japanese, who were, of course, a considerably smaller number [of people].

We reminded the general that, particularly in this area, up through northern California, the Italians were very active in many industries and commercial endeavors: the garbage collection, the farmers. We talked about A.P. Giannini being the president of the Bank of America. And we impressed upon the general that if you moved all of these people, the same thing would have happened that happened with the Japanese—that it would have included people of Italian descent who were born in this country. And we impressed upon him strongly that it certainly would disrupt the productive industrial and commercial endeavors in the community. We had already had some indication of disruption of commercial activities.

Fishermen were mentioned. Of course, the fishermen had already suffered from a different approach. You see, most of the fishermen were Italian aliens, and they had already been prevented from going out onto the bay because they were considered [enemy] aliens. In addition, by previous orders, Italian aliens could not live or be within a seven or eight block area of the waterfront and then there was the curfew. At that time I represented the Scavengers’ Protective Association and, of course, our men used to go out at four o’clock in the morning.

As a matter of fact, to digress, I was [also] attorney for the largest fishing organization in the Bay Area known as the Crab Fishermen’s Protective Association, which actually went out of business because most of its members were Italian aliens and couldn’t go out fishing. So a good part of my time was spent dealing with the U.S. Attorney, who had the authority to grant exemptions from curfew regulations. He assigned a deputy in his office, Alfonso Zirpoli, who is now a judge of the United States District Court. He was of Italian descent and certainly sympathetic to Italians. The U.S. Attorney’s policy with regard to the granting of exemptions was a liberal one. They were granted upon representation that the Italian alien was not a threat to national security.

Your committee was lobbying on behalf of Italian Americans whom you were afraid would also be relocated or interned?

Yes, plus the fact that we wanted to impress the government that there were Italians in all walks of life, some of them in very high positions at that time. We were loyal to the United States, period. We were unhappy with Italy’s declaration of war against the United States. Our approach to the general [at the Presidio] was really two pronged. One, we wanted to impress him with the mass of Italians that would have to be moved and the effect that would have on the economy of the area. But we also gently hinted that, as far as the Committee was concerned, we would litigate the matter and urge the Italians not to go. We now know that meetings were held by community leaders of Japanese descent to decide what course of action they would take with respect to the evacuation order. They decided to comply.
Did this general seem to have any prior understanding of the problems you foresaw in an “evacuation” of Italians?

Well, you know how military men are? They’re not very communicative. But I think he was aware of it. He probably didn’t want to tip his hand or didn’t want to put the general on the spot, so he was really non-committal. I think if things had come to a sorry pass, our committee would have taken some affirmative action in the sense of filing lawsuits or whatever would be necessary. We pretty much made up our minds that we [Italians] were not going to go, and we were going to advise the Italian community not to go. It would have been a terrific disruption.

I became keenly aware that our government had a list of potentially dangerous persons. On Pearl Harbor day, military and FBI agents took these persons into custody. I, as an attorney, got calls from mothers and wives—“They’ve taken my son away!” “They’ve taken my husband away!” They just moved through the community and rounded up people that they had on this list. And I knew a number of them; several were clients of mine. They were not disloyal to the United States, but they had a certain pride in the accomplishments of anything that Italy would do. Perhaps at some Italian organization meeting they had gotten up and said, “Isn’t Mussolini great?” “For the first time Italy is recognized as a power.” “He’s doing all these wonderful things, restoring agricultural land and the swamps, making the trains run on time,” and things like that. A very good friend of mine was one of those who was taken that night. He was an American citizen, born in Italy, and he was proud of things Italian. He bought a film that showed Mussolini and some of the things that he had done, and showed it at a meeting of a community organization. He bought the film on Market Street in San Francisco. “Castle Films,” I think they called it. It didn’t come from Rome; it was an American documentary. Our government had done a thorough job of pinpointing people who might be a threat to our national security.

I finally found out where those who had been apprehended were being kept. They were out to the Salvation Home on Silver Avenue in San Francisco. It’s a school now; I forget the name, but it’s on Silver Avenue. I went out there a few times after I found out where these people were. They had military tribunals to screen them. It was sort of an informal hearing. Some of the hearing officers were reserve lawyers that I knew, who were reserves in the judge advocate department of the military. The conversations would sometimes go like this:

“Johnny,” meaning me, “is this guy all right?”

“Oh, yeah, he’s loyal. He’s not a problem.”

Most of them were released within a few days. But I guess if the government—out of an abundance of caution—had any apprehension that these people would commit any sabotage or whatever, they just moved right in. I’m telling you, I had a hectic two days, people calling me at home.

Nobody ever attacked [J. Edgar] Hoover on whether the FBI had probable cause [to arrest these people] or not. Looking back, in our climate today, you’d sue for most anything. In those days, you were a little hesitant about taking on the government in wartime. You might be accused of being disloyal if you took the cudgels from one of these persons. The upshot of it was that most of them were released within a few days when the government was assured that these guys were all right.

Were you aware of a place called Sharp Park, in Pacifica?
I just knew it was there, that people had been put there. But I think that was sort of a temporary thing. The interesting thing was that, as the war went on, we had Italian prisoners of war in this locality, so it may have been at Sharp Park, also somewhere in the Alameda naval area, if not the base itself. Things got a little incongruous. These Italian prisoners would be released on weekends and would come over, and the Italian families would invite them for dinner, and they were beginning to consort with their daughters, and marriages resulted. I had a couple of cases there involving marriage breakups where the POW replaced the husband. Judge Zirpoli and I collaborated in the defense of an Italian grower down in Half Moon Bay who felt sorry for some of these POWs. I don’t know how he did it, how they were getting off, but anyway, he employed them on weekends to work since labor was short. He was giving these POWs some work and, of course, it was against the law to do it. But he didn’t go to jail. I don’t remember whether there was a fine imposed or what. A lot of people were employing these POWs. They were young, able-bodied, and they wanted to make some money before they went back to Italy. So they just merged into the community and, here again, the Italians took to them. I remember them walking through the district wearing special uniforms so that you could tell who they were.

Did anything in the Italian community change because of these events?

The community changed. My children, for example, don’t know about any of this unless I tell them or they read about it. It’s hard for them to believe some of the things. “What was it like?”—that sort of questioning. After World War II, the community began to change with the prosperity that developed; the new generation wanted better accommodations. They went to Marin County; they went to the Peninsula. North Beach began to disintegrate as an Italian community.

After World War I we used to have very active Italian organizations: Sons of Italy, Italian Catholic Federation, social organizations. They were active at a time when all fraternal organizations were active—the Druids, the Eagles, the Native Sons [of the Golden West]—which was the thing to do to get some recreation. But with the change in attitudes, television, the automobile, the airplane, some of these organizations went out of existence, some were left with just a handful of members. So the attitude of joining organizations changed drastically after World War II. And the community became diffused. North Beach, which was a solid community in the thirties when I started to practice law, has only about fifteen percent Italians now, [the rest is] mostly Chinese. So you don’t have any real strong Italian memberships anymore. The young people couldn’t care less about fraternal organizations. But up to World War II it was a homogeneous community where a lot of things took place and you knew what was going on. You had two daily Italian newspapers, two or three Italian radio programs daily, and morning and afternoon papers, in Italian. After the war, they merged into one and eventually it went out of existence. The only Italian paper you have now comes out of Los Angeles. It has one page dedicated to San Francisco.

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Vitina: My father came to this country as a young boy in 1919, then went back to Italy and married my mother. I was born in Italy. In 1936, when I was about six years old, my father sent for my mother and me to join him here in this country. We did, and I became an American citizen because my father being a citizen. But my mother was an alien. She spoke very little English because coming to live here in Monterey, there were a lot of Italians nearby, and they spoke a lot of Italian. Even at home, our language was Italian.

My father, my mother, and I were born in Marettimo, Sicily. As a young boy my father dreamed of coming to America like everyone else. It was the land of prosperity, the land of all our dreams come true. Coming from a small island, there wasn’t much hope to get ahead there.

My father became an American citizen because he thought that was the thing to do. My mother had not because of the language barrier. But when we moved to Salinas, she realized that it was important that she learn the language and the Constitution, which at that time was very difficult for her. All of a sudden, she realized that she was considered an alien, so she wanted to be a part of this country; she wanted to be an American citizen like my father and me, and she did.

I remember going to Palermo and going through the examination to see if we were healthy before we entered the country. We came with other immigrants, friends of the family. It was easier that way because of the language; we didn’t understand a word of English. After we landed in New York, we boarded a train for California. I don’t know what happened with other people, but we were on this train for four days and nights, and I was hungry. But we didn’t know how to ask for food. I kept looking and hoping that somebody would do something. Finally I told my mother, and she was telling other people with hand motions that I was hungry. It worked because right away somebody brought us sandwiches, apples, and milk. It was difficult.

Giuseppe: I came to the United States in 1920, from Sicily. I was engaged to be married when I came the first time, then I went back and got married. When the restrictions came in 1942 I was a citizen but my wife was not, so the family moved to Salinas. I came back to Monterey every week to fish, and to check the house.

Then the government took our fishing boats. We had to fish to earn a living, so some of the other fishermen and I went up to Seattle to charter boats. With those, we were able to call out our crews again and resume fishing.

The government kept my boat for about two years. But when they returned it, it was in very bad shape. I spent a lot of money to repair it so I could fish with it again, but it was no use. I had to moor it to Wharf No. 2 and continue to fish with the rented boat.
One night when we were out fishing a sudden squall came up and we had to go up near Santa Cruz. The weather was so bad we couldn’t come back to Monterey. The storm broke the anchor chain on my damaged boat and it was swept up on the beach. The insurance company tried to pull it off the beach and refloat it, but it was a total loss. The bottom was so broken up it kept sinking.

**Vitina** [daughter]: The coast guard called my mother during the storm, telling her that the boat had broken its mooring and was headed toward the beach. My mother was panicked because my father was out fishing and there was no way to get in touch with him. The fleet was anchored at different points out in the ocean where the water was a little more calm. I remember telling the coast guard that my father was out, and I asked if there was anything they could do. “No,” they said they had no orders to go there and do anything about it.

**Giuseppe:** I called the shipyard to see if they had any idea how to salvage it. A man from there worked on it a little bit, but he said it was too expensive for me to have it fixed and offered four thousand dollars for it. What was I going to do? I couldn’t fix it myself. So I sold it to the shipyard for four thousand. Soon after that the men from the yard rigged some canvas to cover the bottom of the boat and somehow, with pumps, managed to raise the boat and tug it to San Francisco where they fixed it up real nice.

I asked the man from the yard if he would sell it back to me. I offered thirty thousand, but he said it would cost me sixty. I said, “No, I’ll build a new boat for less than that!” To be fair; it cost them some money to have it fixed up; probably thirty thousand just to replace the engine. I got some insurance money for the loss, but that went toward the attempts to refloat the boat before I finally sold it.

Did the government pay you for using the boat?

Six hundred dollars a month. While they had it, the navy paid the insurance and taxes, everything. I didn’t have to pay anything, and they sent me a $600 check every month.

**Vitina:** The fishermen were told that the government needed their boats to patrol the Panama Canal and other areas. So all the fishermen were left without their boats. But this was their livelihood, and they had to make a living for their families. My father, my uncles, and others went up to Seattle and rented boats. That meant another loss for the fishermen. They usually worked with shares the boat gets so many shares. So when they rented from another company all of the profit went to them.

My father experienced yet another loss by having to do this. When the government took his boat it wasn’t properly maintained like a fisherman would do it. So it was returned to my father, but it was in such poor condition he was unable to use it for fishing again. All the boat owners—the fishermen in Monterey—had already chartered other boats; they had contracts for which they were responsible. So they tied up their boats here in the bay and continued fishing that season with the rented boats.

When the boat crashed on the beach, it was like losing a member of the family. Because my father fished on this boat day and night, and put all his love into it, it was such a sadness for him. I think that was the only time I actually saw him cry. We were all bitter. I was a child, and then to see my parents cry, and to see everything dad had worked for was gone. Because they owned their home, everything else went into the boat. It changed everything. But after a while he decided to build another boat. He called his
second boat the New Marettimo. The first boat was just Marettimo.

Joe [Vitina’s husband]: It means “small ocean.” Mare is ocean, and timo is small.

Vitina: When my father had the second boat built, it cost much more than he paid for the first one. He managed to get a bigger loan, but that meant more headaches and responsibilities to pay the loan off. The seasons were good, though, and through the years it was paid.

To tell these families to leave their homes and go somewhere else and rent, that meant extra expense. To charter different boats when they already had their own fishing boats, and then the loss. We were losing money all the way around.

We also heard what was happening to the Japanese. Then somehow the word got around that they were going to do the same thing to the Italians. My mother always lived in fear that the Italians were going to be put away. That’s why she was so nervous about being home in the evening by eight o’clock. There was talk that they had spies out in the street, or things like that. Really. And she never wanted to go out. Of course, she never thought of coming to Monterey to check on her home. So I think they lived in fear all that time.

Vitina: I was in grammar school in 1942, and for a time, it was very confusing. There was so much news going out that all the aliens were going to concentration camps. Thank God the Italians were not. But we were told to leave Monterey because it was considered a war zone, and so my family decided to move to Salinas.

It was very difficult for my father and mother because my mother had to leave her home. I remember leaving my schoolmates and saying good-bye to everyone. What I really recall was how difficult it was to find a place to live in Salinas. When we did go out looking for a place to rent, and the owner found out we were aliens, we were turned down. It was difficult as a child to accept something like that.

There were a lot of people from Monterey, including relatives, moving to Salinas. They chose Salinas because it was approved for the aliens, and yet it was close to Monterey. My father owned a fishing boat, a purse seiner, and he fished for sardines here in the bay. So, from Salinas, it was convenient for him to go to Monterey to fish during the week, and then come back to Salinas on the weekends. Other people moved to San Jose.

My parents owned their home in Monterey, and we kept that while we lived in Salinas. My father and I used to come back here on weekends to check on the house and pick up a few things that we needed. He came back here to fish during the week the only day they didn’t fish was Saturday.

My father owned a car, so that’s how he got back and forth. He would leave my mother and me Sunday afternoon because they started fishing Sunday night and worked until Friday.

How long were you in Salinas?

I think from January to June. I remember June, because that was the month I came back to graduate from grammar school with my classmates.

I also remember that the aliens were told that they had to be in their homes at night no later than eight o’clock. We would be having dinner at a relative’s, and my mother was so nervous, looking at the time, making sure that we left that house and were home before eight.
Joe: I was young at the time I went to Salinas: nineteen. I worked there in a [frozen food] plant. We heard of other aliens who couldn’t fish who had to work out in the fields picking fruit and vegetables.

I was single, so I moved in with a group of five single men, and we rented a house. After three months, when there was no more work in Salinas, I moved to San Francisco and was there six or seven months. Even after the aliens could come back to Monterey, they still couldn’t fish, so for me it was better to stay and work in San Francisco. I worked in a freezer there; we froze turkey and vegetables for the government. I went by there the other day and it’s gone.

While I worked in San Francisco, my mother still lived in Italy. I received a letter from her after about two and a half years, through the Italian Consulate in Portugal. They forwarded it to me. One day while I was at work an FBI agent came up to me and started asking a lot of questions about how I got this letter from Portugal. I had to explain where my mother was and what was in the letter. They were checking us very, very close to see if we did something wrong.

When I got back to Monterey, I received a card from the draft board; they wanted me to go in the army. I didn’t want to serve in Italy. I had a good skipper who depended on me a lot, so he went with me to the draft board and got me a deferment. Since fishing was so good, I was considered to be in an essential industry. Our cannery sold directly to the government, not to commercial stores. The soldiers needed the food, so I got to go to work again.

I finally became a citizen in 1946 and bought my first car. On April 18, I got my citizenship papers, and on April 27, I married my wife. It’s a month I don’t think I’ll forget.

Did you know the government planned to give money to people who were relocated to help them out?

Vitina: We didn’t know anything about that. When the government decided to take the boats it was considered something that had to be done, like when they drafted your son. It was a way of helping the government. Now that you say this about the fund, I feel they should have done something to help out all the families. Financially it was very difficult.

Joe: Not only that, but my father-in-law had to hire a lawyer and pay him to go to the government to get his boat back. The government should have made that easier. He also had to pay for a trip to San Francisco and back, where the boat was based.

Vitina: To tell these families to leave their homes and go somewhere else and rent, that meant extra expense. To charter different boats, when they already had their own fishing boats, and then the loss. We were losing money all the way around.

We also heard what was happening to the Japanese. Then somehow the word got around that they were going to do the same thing to the Italians. My mother always lived in fear that the Italians were going to be put away. That’s why she was so nervous about being home in the evening by eight o’clock. There was talk that they had spies out in the street. She never wanted to go out. I think they lived in fear all that time.

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“America, it seems has always possessed the ability to re-think its prejudices and shift itself into a position of tolerance. And the remarkable fact is, in spite of, or perhaps, more accurately, as a result of, the struggle and sacrifices of confused and frightened Italian immigrant population, these survivors and their descendants have returned to us volumes of fortitude, character, and heritage, which, ultimately, has enriched us as a nation.”

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