The ‘secret story’ of ‘alien’ Italians is ready to be told

It was after dark on a warm August evening in 1942 when Arrigo Bertolini, called Bart by his friends and customers, took the phone call from a produce wholesaler. They were shortage of tomatoes for an important order, the caller said. Did he have tomatoes? Bertolini, whose 22-acre truck garden on Santa Rosa Creek was the livelihood for his growing family, had plenty of tomatoes to sell. So he climbed into his big old red Diamond T truck and drove from his house on Trowbridge Street to his garden on the north side of the creek to pick tomatoes to fill Levitz Zentner’s order.

Three blocks from home he was arrested by the FBI. He didn’t come home for three months.

Bertolini’s ‘crime’ was that he was born in Italy, did not have his American citizenship papers and had been caught out of his residence after the 8 p.m. curfew. “enemy aliens” were compelled to observe a wartime emergency measure.

His time spent in a government internment camp, with other Italians who had been similarly seized, is part of what Italian-Americans are now calling Una Storia Segreta — The Secret Story. But that is a recent development. For 50 years it was an episode of American history that had no name.

A panel of second-generation Italian-Americans with personal experiences in this matter spoke to a standing-room-only crowd at the Museo Italian Americano at San Francisco’s Fort Mason six weeks ago. During one of the narratives, a man in the back of the hall shouted out: “I can’t believe it!” A similar response came from the audience when the North Bay Italian Cultural Foundation heard project director Larry Bertolini speak on the subject at a dinner in Santa Rosa.

Children of aliens, indeed many elderly Italian immigrants who were directly affected, can tell you emphatically that it did happen.

Visitors to the Fort Mason exhibit, which is now traveling and will open Friday (May 13 through June 5) at the Sonoma County Museum, most assuredly will come away convinced.

THE RESTRICTIONS, which the spotlight of public history has deemed the exclusive province of Japanese-Americans, actually included both Italian and German aliens. In Petaluma’s large German community there were those who were affected. But the impact on the Italian-American community seems to have been more dramatic.

Make no mistake. Those who tell the story now are clear that they refer to the Japanese-American internment, in which American-born citizens of Japanese ancestry were taken along with the aliens.

“Don’t want reparations,” said DiStasi. “We just want a footnote in the history books… just one line saying it happened.”

In 1942, DiStasi, “People began to notice that their German neighbors were gone.” And the relocation of the Japanese was well covered in the press. “But the story was not complete,” he said. Two hundred fifty Italians were interned at Fort Missoula in Montana. Many spent months in internment camps. In all, a total of 1,521 Italian aliens were interned by the government, 161 of them were from the San Francisco Bay Area, the highest region after New York and New Orleans.

Some high profile members of San Francisco’s North Beach community were interned, including the editor of L’Italia and Guido Trenz, an actor and a critic for L’Italia who had been in San Francisco for 18 years and had not learned English since all his work and his social life was conducted in Italian.

This was the case for many of the Italians, which may account for why they were more heavily impacted than the Germans in this country. In all, 12,000 people in Santa Rosa (population 12,000 in 1940) the Italians lived in their own sections of town, partly by choice and partly because of early discrimination.

In some cases, they did not read and write Italian even. The relocation of thousands of families packing for voluntary moves involved, had a huge impact on Monterey, Santa Cruz, and Pittsburg in Contra Costa County. The Italian fishing fleet there were mostly Sicilians, spoke no English and had no papers. Estimates are that 1,800 Pittsburg residents moved to new homes, away from the ports and the military bases, in 1942.

LARRY BERTOLINI is one who wasn’t eager to talk about his father’s incarceration. “It was a bad time,” he said. “I have tried not to think about it. I had to leave school to run the garden.” He was the oldest. I was 13.”

It isn’t that he doesn’t remember the night they took his father away. “The sheriff’s office phoned our house,” he said. “My mother and I went down to the old sheriff’s office at Third and Hinton and we talked to the FBI. We got an attorney, Charlie DeMeo, but nothing could be done. He couldn’t even come home to get his clothes and things. We took them to him.”

Dirt Bertolini was a veteran of Company I, 3rd Alpine Division that fought the Germans in World War I, but he had no political affiliation in the old country. “I belonged to the Eagles,” his son Larry says. “That was it.” The family suspects a block wardens, another Italian, who was roundly disliked in the neighborhood, of turning him in.

The federal agents took the 46-year-old Bertolini to Sharp Park in south San Francisco. His children didn’t visit him. “We had no vehicle to go down there,” said Larry, “and if we had, gas was rationed. Those were poor times. I never even visited him once. We had friends who lived near there, and they went to see him a lot.”

Neither Larry nor his sister, Rita Gondola, remember their father talking about his experience once he returned home. “He didn’t talk about it at all,” said Rita, “I think it was an embarrassment. He seemed different. Quiet.”

Rita is angry about it now. “It changed his life,” she said. Larry seems more sad than angry and the memories. “It changed all our lives,” he said.

Bertolini, who was 21 when the war started. He took English lessons and, in 1945, was granted his U.S. citizenship. All four of his sons served in the U.S. armed forces. He even fought in Italy from Naples to the Brenner Pass. But he had to turn in his double-barreled shotgun. And he never got it back.

The travel restrictions that kept Italians within five miles of their homes added to the problems of hop and prune and apple growers who had already lost a main source of their farm labor when the Japanese were interned. And for some of the sides who lived in or around the dairying communities in the west county, the rules seemed absurd. One rule was they couldn’t cross Highway 1. In Vallejo, where the post office is west of the highway, they couldn’t cross the highway to go to the post office to register.

There is agreement among the second-generation that there were far-reaching effects. “We didn’t want to speak Italian anymore,” said one. “My father changed the way we pronounced the name, made it sound more American,” said another. Another summed it up in explaining why it’s been so difficult all these years.

“People turned their backs on the 1940s, and they couldn’t acknowledge that this happened, that their dream had been done to them.”

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