

Una Storia Segreta

THE 20th ANNIVERSARY

**Museo Italo Americano
Fort Mason, San Francisco**

March 23, 2014



Missoula, MT internment camp with barbed wire.

Twenty years ago, on February 24, 1994, the exhibit *Una Storia Segreta: When Italian Americans Were 'Enemy Aliens'* opened at the Museo Italo Americano in San Francisco. The opening on February 24 marked the date in 1942 when enemy aliens of Italian descent living in so-called “prohibited zones” in California had to leave their homes and businesses in those zones and move elsewhere. This story—which we called the Evacuation—and other elements of the internments and restrictions on enemy aliens on the home front were contained in the narratives, photos and documents of the *Una Storia Segreta* exhibit. For the first time, what had happened to more than 600,000 Italian immigrants nationwide was presented for all to see.

The exhibit was an immediate sensation, drawing record crowds to this and more than 50 subsequent showings nationwide. Front-page articles in newspapers greeted it wherever it traveled. The exhibit was displayed in state capitols and city halls nationwide, starting with its showing in the Rotunda of the California State Capitol in Sacramento the month after it closed at the Museo. It has also received numerous resolutions and commendations from governors, mayors and state legislatures. After its appearance in Washington DC at the Rayburn Office Building, legislation was drafted seeking governmental acknowledgement that, contrary to most history books, these events *did* take place and affected thousands. Finally, after several years, the *Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act* was passed by both houses of Congress, and signed into law by President William Clinton on November 7, 2000. One year later, as mandated by the Act (Public Law #106-451), the Department of Justice issued a *Report to the Congress* officially confirming the story, and detailing the events, documents, and names of those who were interned, arrested, and otherwise affected.

In short, for a low-tech exhibit that its creators thought might have a life of one or two years, this ‘little exhibit that could’ traveled around the nation for almost twenty years, financed chiefly by the Italian American public who kept it going with fees and donations. Not least, it led directly to major legislation at the national level.

We are proud to commemorate the opening of *Una Storia Segreta* twenty years ago, as well as that dark date once called “*mala notte*” by one of those forced to move from her Santa Cruz home.

Below are some of the major elements of the wartime violations referred to above, and some of the places *Una Storia Segreta* has been.



BASIC FACTS OF *UNA STORIA SEGRETA*:

- **600,000 Italian Americans nationwide**, legal residents of the United States, were designated “**enemy aliens**” by Presidential Proclamation 2527 on December 8, 1942, and restricted—they could be arrested, deported, and/or have their property seized, and could not travel more than 5 miles without obtaining government permission. In late December 1941 all were ordered to turn in “contraband” such as weapons, radios with a short wave, flashlights, cameras, maps, and anything suggesting a link with Italy such as flags or banners.
- Nationwide, several thousand “potentially dangerous” enemy aliens were **arrested** in an initial FBI roundup starting on December 8, 1941 and continuing for many months. Of those, about **300-400 were sent to internment** camps like the one in McAlester, Oklahoma, run by the U.S. Army. Those still interned after May 1943 were all sent to the INS-run camp at Missoula Montana.
- **Internees were given hearings**, but could not have lawyers, or face their accusers. They could only offer letters and testimony to prove their innocence. Ezio Pinza (the lead basso at the Metropolitan Opera, arrested by the FBI on March 13, 1942) wrote this about what happened to him:

To understand the full gravity of my situation, you must bear in mind that the Bill of Rights, not always applicable to U.S. citizens in time of war, is nonexistent so far as an enemy alien is concerned. In being summoned to a hearing, he is **presumed guilty until he can prove his innocence**, and is expected to answer charges of which he is kept in ignorance... (pp. 211-12, *Ezio Pinza: Biography*).

Pinza was eventually given a second hearing and paroled—with the help of a determined American family, powerful lawyers and affidavits from the likes of Fiorello LaGuardia and Thomas Mann. Most others were not so lucky.
- Beginning in January of 1942, the FBI and other police agencies began **raids on Italian American homes**—even those owned by U.S. citizens—to search for contraband. Probable cause for search warrants was based simply on the fact that an enemy alien lived in a residence, thus implying that birth in Italy constituted probable cause that a crime had been or might be committed.



- February 1942—all 600,000 enemy aliens had to **re-register** (all noncitizens had just registered in 1940), carry the pink booklets with photo and fingerprints that were issued, and have their homes subject to searches for contraband.
- In California, **some 10,000 Italian enemy aliens**—including their American-born children under 14—had to leave their homes in coastal areas (including within San Francisco Bay) which had been declared “prohibited zones” by the Department of Justice. The deadline was February 24, 1942. In places like Pittsburg, Monterey and Alameda, thousands had to leave and find housing elsewhere. Bettina Troia of Pittsburg ended up living in a chicken coop. The government considered establishing similar zones along the East Coast but, in May 1942, was dissuaded by the huge numbers that would have to move.
- In California, some **52,000 Italian enemy aliens had to abide by curfews**—literal house arrest which forced them to be in their houses by 8PM and remain there until 6 in the morning. Many were reported for being out after 8, were arrested for curfew violations, and were then detained in INS detention centers. Many lost jobs thereby—Bill Cerruti’s grandfather lost his garbage contract in San Francisco because he was Italian. Aristide Bertolini in Santa Rosa was arrested for delivering tomatoes to a customer after curfew. Al Bronzini’s father lost his Oakland fruit stand. Victor DiSuvero’s father lost his position at Marinship. Others were arrested for having to change jobs and not notifying the government (see FBI records at National Archives, San Bruno.)
- In San Francisco the state’s **Tenney Committee** investigated the alleged fascist movement there, and led to the forced removal of dozens of San Franciscans of Italian descent, naturalized citizens all, from the city and the state. This Army-initiated **Exclusion Program** exiled people like Sylvester Andriano, a leading attorney and head of draft board #100 in North Beach. The Department of Justice scathingly criticized this program, refusing to enforce its orders.
- **Fishermen**, if they were enemy aliens, were prohibited from going near the docks, and could not fish; many took other jobs on shore. Those who were American citizens could get passes to the docks, but many Italian boat owners had their boats requisitioned by the Navy (75 boats from Monterey alone; dozens more from San Francisco, Boston, Gloucester, etc.) for use as mine sweepers and patrol boats. If these boat owners wanted to fish, they had to charter boats, at a loss. When their requisitioned boats were returned, many were damaged and required thousands of dollars in repairs.
- The restrictions on Italian enemy aliens were **lifted** in October of 1942 when Attorney General Francis Biddle announced in a speech at Carnegie Hall on October 12, 1942 that Italian Americans had proven their loyalty. However, this did not affect those who were interned, detained or excluded, most of whom remained in internment or exile until well after Italy surrendered and joined the Allies in the Fall of 1943.

Una Storia Segreta was originally prepared by the American Italian Historical Association's Western Regional Chapter (now Italian American Studies Association/Western Regional Chapter).

Curator: Rose Scherini

Project Director: Lawrence DiStasi

Project Coordinator: Adele Negro

Exhibition Designer: Elahe Shahideh

APPEARANCES:

STATE CAPITOL APPEARANCES:

California, Rotunda of the Capitol - 1994

Connecticut State Legislature - 1996

California, Capitol Gallery - 1998

Illinois, Chicago Center – 1999

New Jersey, State Capitol at Trenton – 2000

Massachusetts, State House, Boston – 2002

New York, State Capitol at Albany – 2002

NATIONAL CAPITOL APPEARANCE

Rayburn Office Building, Washington DC – 1997

CITY HALL APPEARANCES:

Providence RI – 1996

Jersey City, NJ – 1999

RESOLUTIONS AND PROCLAMATIONS:

California – Governor's Proclamation 1994

Assembly Resolutions 1994 & 1998

U.S. Congress – House Resolution 1994

San Jose, CA – Mayor's Proclamation 1994

Board of Supervisors Resolution 1994

New York – Legislative Resolution 1996

Connecticut – Assembly Citation 1996

New Jersey – Joint Senate/Assembly Resolution 1998

Governor's Proclamation 1995

Ohio – Governor's Proclamation 1999

Nevada – Governor's Proclamation; Assembly/Senate Resolutions 2001

1994 APPEARANCES

ROTUNDA OF THE STATE CAPITOL

Sacramento, California

SONOMA COUNTY MUSEUM

Santa Rosa, California

GALLERY 500

Pittsburg, California

PAVILION GALLERY

San Jose, California

THE CONFERENCE CENTER

Monterey, California

THE COLOMBO CLUB

Oakland, California

1995 APPEARANCES

LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY

Los Angeles, California

SOUTH BAY ITALIAN CLUB

San Pedro, California

THE BALCH INSTITUTE

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

ITALIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER

Wilmington, Delaware

PASSAIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Paterson, New Jersey

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Queens, New York

PORT WASHINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Port Washington, New York

CUNY GRADUATE CENTER LIBRARY

New York, New York

1996 APPEARANCES

SO. CONNECTICUT STATE LIBRARY

New Haven, Connecticut

CONNECTICUT STATE LEGISLATURE

Hartford, Connecticut

ITALIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER

Worcester, Massachusetts

CITY HALL GALLERY

Providence, Rhode Island

UNICO NATIONAL CONVENTION

San Jose, California

1997 APPEARANCES

RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
Washington, DC
SACRAMENTO STATE UNIVERSITY
Sacramento, California
CHICO STATE UNIVERSITY
Chico, California

1998 APPEARANCES

STATE CAPITOL GALLERY
Sacramento, California
ISTITUTO ITALIANO DI CULTURA
Los Angeles, California
SAN DIEGO PUBLIC LIBRARY
San Diego, California
BROOKDALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Lincroft, New Jersey
GARFIELD PUBLIC LIBRARY
Garfield, New Jersey

1999 APPEARANCES

STATE OF ILLINOIS BUILDING
Chicago, Illinois
THE JUSTICE CENTER
Cleveland, Ohio
CITY HALL GALLERY
Jersey City, New Jersey
ITALIAN CATHOLIC FEDERATION CONVENTION
San Francisco, California
SAN MATEO COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM
Redwood City, California
AIHA NATIONAL CONFERENCE
San Francisco, California

2000 APPEARANCES

PENINSULA SOCIAL CLUB
San Mateo, California
STATE HOUSE GALLERY
Trenton, New Jersey
DANTE ALIGHIERI SOCIETY
Cambridge, Massachusetts
DALEY CENTER
Chicago, Illinois

2001 APPEARANCES

ITALIAN CULTURAL CENTER
Reading, Pennsylvania
LAS VEGAS ART MUSEUM
Las Vegas, Nevada
FRATELLANZA CLUB
Oakland, California
ROCKLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY
Rockland County, New York

2002 APPEARANCES

BOSTON STATE HOUSE
Boston Massachusetts
STATE CAPITOL
Albany, New York
AIHA NATIONAL CONFERENCE
Chicago, Illinois

2004 APPEARANCES

FITCHBURG STATE COLLEGE
Fitchburg, MA
CITY HALL GALLERY – 10TH ANNIVERSARY
Oakland, CA

2005 APPEARANCES

MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY
West Long Branch, NJ

2008 APPEARANCES

GARIBALDI-MEUCCI MUSEUM
Staten Island, NY
FESTA ITALIANA
Seattle, Washington

2011 APPEARANCES

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. LIBRARY
San Jose, CA
PITTSBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM
Pittsburg, CA

NB: The exhibit is now being stored at the Pittsburg Historical Society Museum.
20th Anniversary co-sponsored by IASA/WRC and the Museo Italo Americano.