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“Prisoners in Our Own Home: The Italian American Experience as America's Enemy Aliens”

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As they passed the lady in the harbor heading toward New York's Ellis Island, Italian immigrants viewed the Statue of Liberty as the symbol of American freedom and opportunity. However, in the early 1940s, their faith in the American ideals of democracy and freedom would be tested by the designation of 600,000 Italian immigrants as "enemy aliens." For a smaller number, Ellis Island would become a prison, a detention center where they would gaze beyond barbed wired fences at a symbol of freedom no longer within their reach. During World War II, Italian Americans distinguished themselves by serving in large numbers in the U.S. Armed Forces. The ultimate irony of the Italian American experience as "enemy aliens" is illustrated by a report that estimated that over 70,000 Italian American servicemen were sons of "enemy aliens". During the past decade, the experience of Italian "enemy aliens" has emerged from old scrapbooks to become an essential topic within Italian American communities. Focusing on the East Coast, “Prisoners in Our Own Home: The Italian American Experience as America's Enemy Aliens” examines the importance of this little known episode in American history by attempting to understand the fear and uncertainty enemy alien programs aroused in Italian Americans.



INTRODUCTION

This groundbreaking exhibit from the Italian American Museum in New York City illustrates the hardships that Italian-Americans endured during World War II as the U. S. government disregarded their civil rights and freedoms solely because of their heritage as Italians. The exhibit documents the treatment of Italian-Americans by the U.S. government as “enemy aliens”. Through stunning photographs and narrative texts, the exhibit looks at the life of Italian-Americans during World War II and the impact the treatment they received had on future generations.

SCRUTINY AND HARASSMENT

"Prisoners in Our Own Home: the Italian American Experience as America's Enemy Aliens", illustrates the U.S. government's treatment of over 600,000 Italian resident aliens during World War II. These people were photographed, fingerprinted and registered with the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation. Their movements and daily life were scrutinized by government agents at every level, making even the simplest chores an ordeal for Italians living in the U.S.

Additionally, these immigrants were also required to carry at all times a "pink booklet" that listed their home address, date and place of birth along with a photograph and fingerprint. They were also required to register their "enemy alien" status at their local post office, completing questionnaires about job history, previous residences, relatives in Italy and membership in Italian political groups. Failure to produce this booklet upon demand of a government agent often resulted in arrest.

In New York City, home to the nation's largest Italian American population, the government told Italian resident aliens to stay off the streets after dark; daytime travel was also restricted. Speaking Italian in public places was also officially discouraged by the U.S. government.

INTERMENT

In addition to the repeated harassment and forced documentation, many Italian immigrants suffered a far worse fate: detention in internment camps, such as the one at Maryland's Fort Meade. More than 2,100 Italians were detained nationally, some on Ellis Island; an ironic picture since for many Italian immigrants it was at Ellis Island where they first tasted American freedom and opportunity as they arrived in the U.S. from Italy.

Leaders in Washington decreed that the Italian resident alien's status as an "enemy alien" gave the government probable cause to search Italian Americans, effectively taking away their constitutional protection from unreasonable search and seizure. Search warrants could be obtained without any showing of suspicious activity or evidence of a crime. During this time authorities raided close to 3,000 homes of Italian resident aliens and seized many personal and business possessions.

CONCLUSION

Despite the harsh treatment of their countrymen, thousands of Italian Americans went on to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces and fought bravely during World War II. In fact, over 70,000 Italian American servicemen were sons of “enemy aliens”.

Through this exhibit, we can examine this little-known episode of American history and attempt to understand why our government feared ordinary people in the U.S. We can try to learn why the harassment of ordinary people by the U.S. Government was tolerated for so long. We can try to learn from this sad chapter in our history and hope that something like this never happens again.