



Palestine Herald-Press

Hidden piece of history

By **CHERIL VERNON**
The Palestine Herald

PALESTINE February 07, 2009 11:44 pm

— During World War II, the U.S. government interned an estimated 15,000 German-American civilians at over 60 camps and detention centers across the country — eight of them in Texas, at Fort Bliss, Camp Crystal City, Houston's police station and Ft. Sam Houston, as well as sites in Kenedy, Laredo, San Antonio and Seagoville.

The Palestine Public Library is currently hosting the "VANISHED — German-American Civilian Internment 1941-1948" exhibit which hits upon this part of our history — a history that currently does not make it into our history books.

On the final day of the exhibit at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Michael Luick-Thams, scholar and the director of Traces, a non-profit educational organization TRACES Center for History and Culture based in St. Paul, Minn. that created the exhibit, will give a talk at the library. Accompanying him will be Heidi Gurcke Donald who lived in one of the camps as a child and wrote a book about it called "We Were Not the Enemy."

"There were many (German-American) internment camps in Texas but it's a story of Texas that very few Texans know about," Luick-Thams said in a phone interview from New Orleans.

For the first time, TRACES will feature Latin-American connections to this larger story. As documented by the National Archives (see <http://www.archives.gov/genealogy/immigration/enemy-aliens-overview.html>), more than 6,600 Germans, Japanese and Italians living south of the Rio Grande were forcibly brought to the U.S. — largely to Texas — and held in camps. Many were later traded for German-held U.S. nationals and deported to wartime Germany, including Jews who had fled the Nazis. (For details, see a related LA Times editorial at http://traces.org/Media/LA_Times_editorial_20077-03-18.htm. Spanish translations will be provided for Texas showings, both for panels and exhibit guide book.)

Utilizing 13 narrative panels, an NBC "Dateline" documentary featuring internment in Texas and a 1945 U.S. Government color film about Camp Crystal City, props from the period and downloadable teaching materials, TRACES will circulate two copies of this unique exhibit around Texas through 2010, with showings planned in about 35 communities. Guest speakers and related programs complement this timely story's educational value and impact.

This project's main goals include presenting an unknown history to a wide audience, stimulating penetrating questions on the part of visitors to the exhibit and, when possible, leading them to subsequent discussions guided by local community leaders. It explores a virtually unknown yet significant historical event — possibly one of the U.S.'s least-known WWII sub-chapters.

While especially relevant to communities with high numbers of German-American residents, all kinds of communities across the state of Texas will have an opportunity to discuss the implications as well as legacy of the U.S. Government's WWII "enemy alien" internment program.

Luick-Thams notes that "through this exhibit and subsequent discussions, Texans will see World War II history in a new way, and 're-visit' an event and a period too often misunderstood and obscured by facile clichés. The discussion itself is meant to support healthy democratic involvement and processes."

Special guest and author Heidi Gurcke Donald who lived in the Crystal City camp as a child will speak

during the Tuesday program as well. The story of her family can be found online at

http://www.gaic.info/real_gurcke.html

Her father, Werner Gurcke, and his brother, Karl Oskar, lived through World War I as children in Hamburg, Germany. Karl Oskar moved to Costa Rica and married a native woman. Gurcke's father arrived in Costa Rica in 1929, having married her mother Starr Pait, an American, in 1936. Donald was born in 1940.

First, her father's name and wholesale business importing umbrellas, textiles and watches was put on the British Blacklist in 1940. Her sister Ingrid was born on July 17, 1941, the same day that U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in Proclamation 2497, declared some people to be on "The Proclaimed List of Certain Blocked Nationals." Werner and Karl Oskar were listed, as was her mother Starr.

The U.S. Blacklist destroyed what was left of her father's business and the family decided to try farming before their accounts were eventually frozen by the government. In January 1942, her father had to register as a resident alien. A secret FBI memo labeled him "one of the most dangerous German nationals in the country" in a report. He was one of 35 men named. The source? Informants could list and send in names from a coupon in the newspaper. In July 1942, the two brothers were arrested and taken to jail until they could be sent to a concentration camp the following week. Eventually, the government decided to take the women and children to the camp as well — ending up in Crystal City. By the time they arrived on a ship with horrible conditions, the children had whooping cough. Their interment lasted through 1944, though the family continued to have off-and-on problems until her father became a U.S. citizen in 1952.

Because she was so young at the time, Donald collected the information she has from her mother and from papers she found belonging to her father, who never talked about the experience.

Donald is currently working with the German American Internee Coalition (<http://www.gaic.info>) which is dedicated to making public the little known policies that led to the World War II internment, repatriation and exchange of civilians of German ethnicity, both in the United States and Latin America, she said in a phone interview with the Palestine Herald-Press on Saturday.

The organization not only educates the public about the U.S. government's detention and internment of over 11,000 German American and Latin American citizens and residents during World War II, it also reaches out to former internees, their families and supporters to allow them a place to share their stories and support their efforts. The group is seeking full U.S. government review and acknowledgment of the civil rights violations endured by the German American and Latin American communities. In 2001, Sens. Russell Feingold, D-Wisconsin, and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, originally introduced the European Americans and Refugees Wartime Treatment Study Act in the US Senate, joined by Sens. Ted Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, and Joseph Lieberman. The bill did not pass, but the GAIC is working on further legislation.

During the week, Donald will speak in Palestine, as well as at Texas A&M University and in Austin.

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Both speakers at Tuesday's program will conduct book signings. Both books are available at the library now. "Vanished" is \$10 and "We Were Not the Enemy" is \$13.

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Photos



Author Heidi Gurcke Donald, right, talks with her sister Ingrid, left, in front of the Enemy Alien Program exhibit at Manzanar. The Palestine Herald



A teddy bear, pipe and photographs make up a portion of a display from the “VANISHED — German-American Civilian Internment 1941-1948” exhibit. The exhibit is currently on display at the Palestine Public Library. The Palestine Herald



The Gurcke family’s picture was taken at the German-American internment at Camp Crystal City in 1943. From left are Ingrid, 2, Starr and Werner Gurke and Heidi, 3. The Palestine Herald



Panels such as these are currently set up at the Palestine Public Library as part of the “VANISHED — German-American Civilian Internment 1941-1948” exhibit. The last day of the exhibit is Tuesday, when the special program will be held at 5:30 p.m. The Palestine Herald