

Italian Secrets: How Omertà Kept An Experience Quiet

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“In silence and movement you can show the reflection of people.”
– Marcel Marceau

Upon hearing the word, internment, a slew of images and connotations materialize without control. These images are not fictitious. They are very real. A train station is pictured. A long line of men in suits and women in pearls stand on the platform for that train. The children cling to each other and to their mother’s coats. A lone suitcase, erect and still and as honorable as those whose lives are on the verge of uncertainty. Internment. The images are inescapable. The sad story of what Americans can do when gripped with fear to a people whose only crime was the possession of a last name, a language, and a culture. The Japanese were taken from their homes, their businesses

destroyed, and their families shattered. These are the images that emerge when the word internment is spoken. Most of the narrative, scholarship, and history of internment, center on the Japanese and Japanese American experience. This is terribly incomplete. The U.S. had declared war on Japan. The enemies were the Japanese. There were, however, other enemies. These enemies were branded “enemy aliens.” The “enemy aliens” were not exclusively Japanese. The U.S. was entering a world war against not only the Japanese, but also the Axis Powers.

The Axis Powers were our enemies. The language, culture, and physical appearances helped in the identification of our Japanese enemies. Identifying the other two-thirds of the Axis Powers would be more difficult, but not impossible. The German and Italian enemy would be easily spotted on the battlefield owed to uniforms, weapons and geography. The non-combatant “enemy aliens” of European ancestry already on our shores would be more difficult to identify. Many had been in the United States since at least the end of World War I. Those whose heritage was German or Italian, who were not citizens of the United States prior to the outbreak of WWII, were required to register with the United States government.

The process of registering non-citizens and maintaining a registry also included the Japanese. It will be revealed how this registry would be used to easily carry out Executive Order 9066. This facilitation would also spread out to include Italians and Germans. Germans and Italians living in the United States at this time were harassed and were subject to curfews, confiscation of property, and stripping of their livelihoods. This paper will limit itself to the Italian community, its experiences, and will attempt to address the little known history of Italian Internment in the United States during World War II. Although there were Italian prisoners of war detained in the United States at this time, those numbers will be not included in this work.

The illumination to the injustices shown Italians and Italian Americans during World War II and the memory of these events will be the focus of this paper. The Japanese experience is extraordinarily well documented and has been well studied. The Italian experience has not. Monuments exist today, in honor of Japanese Americans that serve as daily reminders, yet there is no memorial to Italians who were subject to the same treatment (albeit in much less dramatic numbers). It is not about the numbers. Of course, if the number of Italians being detained had been greater, as was the case with the Japanese (between 110,000 and 124,000), the story might not be as secret. The fact remains that the President of the United States on the eve of a global war, began to detain “enemy aliens” en masse, including Italians living in the

United States. The scholarship that exists is small and limited to a handful of academics. The topic is saddled with needing to create the narrative and understanding of what occurred. This paper will attempt to highlight the reasons why this is not more widely known. It is not the aim to disclose the events as they occurred. That work and that dialogue have begun. What cannot be avoided is the sending up of red flags.

The inevitable outcome can easily be reduced to the hackneyed. The almost inarguable instinct that history is a series of events that tend to repeat themselves ad nauseam is relevant, clichéd yes, but relevant nonetheless. Individuals are able to learn and change from transformative experiences; hence the term. The Italian American experience encompasses the open racism of the early 20th century and the shared difficulties “fitting into” a society that viewed them as troublemakers. Yet, the transformative experience shared by Italians during World War II rests within the secrecy of these events. The Italian immigrants (and citizens) managed to Americanize and turn themselves and their community into one that is almost completely inseparable from the Anglo-American. In fact, Italians today think of themselves as “white.”[1] The Americanization of the Italian communities around the country formed in part as a reaction to the experiences of those Italians on the west coast due to Executive Order 9066. The Italians forged their Americanization through their silence.

There are relatively few published works that deal specifically with the impact the Executive Order 9066 (EO9066) had on Italian and Italian Americans at the outset of WWII and even fewer on the suppression of that memory. It is a small group of scholars who have tackled this topic with the rigor normally associated with topics that are more exciting or lucrative, as is the case with the Japanese Internment. Lawrence DiStasi. Rose Scherini. Stephen Fox. Jerre Magione. These names are the beacons in an otherwise vacant and lifeless scholastic pursuit. The articles included in the bibliography are by no means exhaustive, yet they reveal how few resources are dedicated to these experiences. The existing research only highlights the overlooked story and, fails to examine the causes for quelling the events that impacted the Italian community of the Western United States.

Lawrence DiStasi, when pressed via email for his assessment as to the cause of this memory suppression, simply stated that it was “most likely shame. The shame of having to carry the label of enemy.”[2] It cannot be concluded, without further exploration, if DiStasi was merely dismissive in his tone or if he truly holds the position that it is purely a shame-based suppression. Shame has been shown to be a rather unconsciously powerful tool for suppression, so

it must be taken into consideration as a cause. Another, less psychological, yet more sociological would be the Americanization of Italians during this time period.

Mary Clark Moschella, in her monograph on religion and the Italian American experience, missed a clue during her research and subsequent publishing of her work. [3] When asked during a short correspondence, Moschella stated that she had not noticed a gap in the timeline that she presents for the Italian American experience in San Pedro.[4] What she had noted was the “super-patriotism of some interviewees, which may be related to a feeling that they had to prove they were American.”[5] She was not aware, until our correspondence began, that there had been *any* impact on the Italian community near San Pedro after Pearl Harbor. In her book, she mentions the Japanese experience and completely ignores the Italian experience during this same time period in a location where both communities co-existed and competed on a daily basis for their livelihood.[6] How does one ignore something they aren’t aware exists? Despite being completely unaware of these experiences, she managed to discuss the role that Church in San Pedro, Mary Star of the Sea, had in the Americanization of the community in San Pedro.

The insights from Moschella’s monograph, as well as independent and original research conducted at Mary Star of the Sea, lead to the conclusion that the cause for suppression might not be singular. It might be a combination of shame *and* a push toward Americanization. These two positions seem likely, yet it is not as remotely satisfying as the underlying possibility that both might be completely held up by a code of silence. A code that is, arguably, unique to the Italian community, both in Italy and in the United States. It is a term mostly associated with the illegal and the infamous. The meaning of the word itself is less notorious. The word that expresses this code of silence is *omertà*.

Omertà is a term that describes the value that is placed on silence.[7] The word itself is generally associated with the *mafia*. The word is being appropriated, as it manages to convey a concentrated essence of the long-term silence on this subject by Italians. This negative connection to the *mafia* makes the point that much clearer, if we are to assume a positive aspect in the use of the word. *Omertà* is an extreme form of loyalty and solidarity against those in power.[8] The basic attitude conveyed by *omertà* is that it is not a masculine trait to seek the support from authorities to resolve personal injustices. This simple attitude might explain the lack of information and resources on this topic.[9] It might explain the complete suppression of the actions taken against Italian and Italian Americans in the United States in

the 1940s in a sense, a non-reaction. When those in authority are to blame for personal misfortunes, it is possible that *omertà* is the coping mechanism that is employed.

The experiences emerge, despite the silence. Not from the telling of the story itself, as it should be clear by now, it wasn't told. The shading and the contrast of the narrative come through, in fact, because of the silence. You might argue that silence was forced upon the Italians. This argument is true. Italians were not permitted to read Italian language newspapers or write letters in Italian. This would strictly limit the dissemination of information, both within and without the community. Another way that communication was hampered was through the confiscation of technology. Cameras were seized. This would limit the storytelling aspect of life. It will be conceded that the forced "silence" on Italians had an impact. However, this argument falls short when applied to the Japanese. Silence was forced upon the Italians externally and, it will be argued, internally as a means of survival. Such was the power of authority.

Authority is something that is generally respected and the authority of those in a new land might produce enough encumbrance to illicit the need for *omertà* from an entire community. In order to attempt to scratch the surface of this possibility, we must understand the authority that Italians were under. In order to feel the depth and weight we must attempt to fully understand what went into Executive Order 9066 in February 1942. Context is everything. Understanding this history should provide the context necessary that triggered the underlying cause of *omertà*.

If Americans, regardless of ancestry, can suppress actual events, it might hold firm that history *will* repeat itself. In a post-9/11 world where there is an "us" and "them" inclination, where refugees suffer at the expense of fear, and rumors about the need for "them" to being put into camps, it might be advisable to lift the rug and take a peek at what's been swept away and hidden for so long before we commit atrocities against humanity again. To understand the events that took place in the middle of the 1900s we must first look back to the end of the 1700s. Shakespeare famously wrote in the *The Tempest*, Act 2, Scene I, "what's past is prologue," and these words couldn't be more fitting.

We find the seeds of internment floating in the wake of the Revolutionary War under the leadership of President John Adams. Inheriting a tense relationship between the French and the United States from President George Washington, Adams is able to stoke the fires of fear and create the right level of paranoia to

pass legislation that would prove as inspiration to future presidents of the new American Republic.

Amicus meus, inimicus inimici mei

The Latin phrase, which translates to “my friend, the enemy of my enemy,” encapsulates the relationship between the newly formed United States, Britain, and France. President George Washington had created an alliance with Britain shortly before leaving office. This alliance angered the French, rendering the British as well as the new American country, enemies of France. John Adams, Washington’s successor as President of the United States, was left to allay any animosity felt by the French toward the newly formed American country. As with any great work of literature, a wrench would be thrown into the works that would threaten to distract and destroy any sense of peaceful resolution. In this case, the dramatist could not have created a more apt name for the undermining agents to which history simply refers to as X-Y-Z.

The “XYZ Affair” as history would memorialize it, represented the undermining of the new President’s attempts to assuage the tension between the United States and France. These French delegates, the X-Y-Z in the narrative, brought the threat of impending war upon the fledgling new country across the Atlantic. The threat of another war, one following the lengthy war for independence, might be even costlier to the new country. The fiduciary obligations that bound the United States to France were quickly severed and a two-year sea battle raged between these two nations. The war would be settled in a few years, but in the meantime, President Adams fearing a ground assault reacted the only way he knew how, through legislation.

The Alien and Sedition Acts

President John Adams stated that the threat of war, and those who wished to incite the destruction from within must be “exterminated.”[10] In a series of laws that became known as the Alien and Sedition Acts, Adams was able to neutralize the threats.

The first law passed dealt with the extension of time an immigrant was required to live in the country prior to being eligible for citizenship. The law, known as the Naturalization Act, extended the time for eligibility from five to fourteen years. The next two laws could be taken together as they relate to our narrative and would directly influence Presidents beyond Adams.

The Alien Enemies Act intended to protect the United States by allowing for the arrest, detainment, and deportation of all male citizens of an enemy nation (in this case the French). The Alien Friends Act, in conjunction with the Alien Enemies Act, would give the authorization to deport any suspected persons of plotting against the government of the United States. The Alien Enemy Act would be enforced with or without a declaration of war, which meant it could be used during peacetime as well as during times of duress. This dovetails nicely into the Sedition Act, which legally permitted the government to stop anyone from inciting revolt against the government of the United States. The Sedition Law would have had disastrous effects on our freedoms of speech and freedom of the press had they not expired at the end of John Adams' term in office in 1801. These laws are part of our legislative past, and thereby available for future generations to critique or mimic.

World War I and the Resurrection of the Sedition Act 1918

One hundred-twenty-years and twenty-six U.S. Presidents later the Sedition Act was raised from the dustbin of history. With the world at war, President Woodrow Wilson, despite his opinion on free speech, took the contradictory position of signing the Espionage Act of 1917.[11] A year later President Wilson resurrected the Sedition Act, with changes in terminology to suit the times, which were introduced under President Adams. The Espionage Act and the newly reconditioned Sedition Act would calm the fears of incitement from agitators living in the United States.

President Wilson could “imagine no greater disservice to the country than to establish a system of censorship that would deny to the people . . . their indisputable right to criticize their own public officials,” yet it was a time of war and he knew he needed to protect the domestic interests of the United States.[12] In allowing for the Espionage Act, Wilson had the stage set to reintroduce Adams' Sedition Act as an amendment to the Espionage Act. In creating this amendment to the Espionage Act, it made it a crime to take a critical position against the United States of America and its government. Making these anti-American remarks in the public sphere strictly limited the expression of free speech, and although the majority of the Espionage Act still stands, the Sedition amendments would be repealed in 1921. If the length of this introduction is any indication, this will not be the last we hear of these types of legislative actions taken on by the government of the United States against its own citizenry. Although repealed, the memory of these Acts lingered well beyond the depression. By the end of the third decade of the 20th century, the maneuverings of the United States government occurred with the antecedence of the repealed Espionage Act of 1917 and the

Enemy Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. With the world on the verge of the greatest war the world had known to that point, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had the shoulders of both Adams and Wilson to stand on.

A Modern Triumvirate: A President, an Administrator, and a General

The Japanese hastened the involvement of the United States in World War II through a surprise attack in the early morning hours of December 7th, 1941. The next day the President of the United States addressed the country and gave his famous speech in which he declared that December 7th would be a day that would live in “infamy.”[13] This speech would be followed by a call to arms and influence the United States’ involvement in a war the world was already weary from waging. This was not the only declaration that Roosevelt would make in the days immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The President would sign Presidential Proclamations that would alter the course of domestic policy as it related to citizen and foreign-born residents of the United States for the duration of the war.

A President

Presidential Proclamations were to be seen as the “instrument that states a condition, declares a law and requires obedience, recognizes an event or triggers the implementation of a law (by recognizing that the circumstances in law have been realized).” [14] On December 7th, FDR signed Presidential Proclamation 2525. It stated Japanese who were “fourteen years and upwards who shall be within the United States or within any territories in any way subject to the jurisdiction of the United States ... are termed alien enemies.”[15] The next day, Presidential Proclamations 2526 and 2527 would extend the label of “alien enemies” to Germans and Italians.[16],[17] A President, with the stroke of a pen and in an instant, made enemies of neighbors.

These proclamations would be toothless on their own. Resources were required to manage and administer these proclamations. Resources, in the form of soldiers, were also going to be spread to points-unknown in what would become World War II. This must have seemed obvious to Roosevelt. How could he successfully enforce these proclamations while waging war on foreign soil? Roosevelt would need to introduce an able administrator as well as military presence to enforce the measures found in these Presidential Proclamations. He would have J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, and Lt. General John L. DeWitt, of the US Army, as his accomplices and enforcers.

An Administrator

On August 27, 1940, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) began the process of registering those people the government deemed to be aliens; this included citizens and non-citizens alike. The Alien Registration Act of 1940, which was basically a revamping and expansion of the Espionage Act of 1917, and which had originally permitted the United States government to monitor non-citizens, or aliens, could now include United States citizens as well. Roosevelt, in a statement released on June 29, 1940, addressing the passing of the Alien Registration Act stated:

The only effective system of control over aliens in this country must come from the Federal Government alone [emphasis added]. This is as true from a practical point of view as it is from a legal and constitutional point of view. Since Congress, by this Act, has attempted to provide a single and uniform method of handling the difficult problem of alien registration in this country, it seems to me that attempts by the States or communities to deal with the problem individually will result in undesirable confusion and duplication.[18]

This statement, rather innocuously shifted the jurisdiction of the INS from the Department of Labor to that of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (which controlled the Department of Justice).[19] This subtle use of language gave the FBI, under J. Edgar Hoover, nearly autonomous control over the data being collected. Roosevelt had found his administrator.

Hoover would have oversight of the Alien Registration process for nearly two years. Between August of 1940 and January of 1941 nearly 5 million registrations were recorded under the watchful eyes of J. Edgar Hoover.[20] Once the declaration of war was made in 1941, nearly 3,000 were detained. [21] Once the Presidential Proclamations were signed into existence in December of 1941, J. Edgar Hoover was ready to expand Alien Registration to include those now deemed as “enemy aliens.”[22] This, however, would only provide Proclamations 2525, 2526, 2527 with the necessary justification for the surveillance and identification of “enemy aliens.” Roosevelt, through Hoover, now had surveillance material on 3.78% of the population of the United States.[23] This had become a national security issue. By manipulating and expanding the national security issue it was clear that this had taken a decidedly militarist turn. The United States, after having survived the attack on Pearl Harbor, was able to use the fear of another potential attack along the West Coast seem inevitable. How better to enforce this notion than through the United States Army. The triumvirate was nearly formed.

A General

Before the last member can be added, it is important to note that an additional Executive Order by Roosevelt exists. On December 12, 1941, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8972, which stated, that the upper echelon of the military determine and preserve “military guard and patrols, and to take other appropriate measures to protect certain national-defense material, premises, and utilities from injury or destruction.”[24] Geographically, the West Coast would be the most vulnerable to an attack by the newly declared enemy. Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor and the West Coast seemed the next likely target, especially to Lieutenant General, John L. DeWitt of the United States Army and head of the Fourth Army and Western Defense Command with jurisdiction of the Pacific Coast including Hawaii.[25]

As commander of the Western Defense unit, DeWitt was at headquarters in San Francisco on December 7th, 1941. On December 8th, the Pittsburg Press picked up the story that DeWitt positively identified enemy aircraft flying over the city.[26] DeWitt conceded that he had been asked why he had not ordered the enemy aircraft to be shot down. His response was vague and telling which led some to speculate that DeWitt’s account might lack some authenticity and that the events might not have unfolded exactly as he explained.

“I say it’s none of their damn business,” he responded. “San Francisco woke up this morning without a single death from bombs. Isn’t that enough?”[27]

Roger Daniels, Densho contributor and historian writes, “no one who read the transcripts of De Witt’s telephone conversations with Washington or examines his staff correspondence can avoid the conclusion that his was a headquarters at which confusion rather than calm reigned, and that the confusion was greatest at the very top.”[28] Despite his emotional instability and reactive nature, DeWitt’s military rank granted him the access to the top office of the United States.

DeWitt seemed to know how to stimulate fear and plant the seeds of uncertainty required to align himself with Roosevelt and Hoover. DeWitt formulated a memo dated January 31, 1942, where he outlined the resettlement of enemy aliens and immigrants from sensitive zones.[29] DeWitt seemed to have designated a number of sites and zones to be critically vulnerable areas from Washington State, Oregon, California and even Arizona.[30] DeWitt, it appears, influenced Roosevelt. Roosevelt had the data collected by Hoover. Combined, these three men with their individual powers would form the modern triumvirate. A few days after DeWitt

submitted the memo outlining the vulnerabilities and the resettlement issues of both alien and citizen, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066.

Executive Order 9066: “Military Necessity”

The word “military” appears 12 times in Executive Order 9066.[31] The creation of critical zones along the West Coast, from Washington State to California, by a military commander made this more than a special happenstance. The influence of DeWitt on Roosevelt was strong. The conclusion that EO9066 was a “military necessity” is abundantly clear.[32] The authority vested upon the Federal Bureau of Investigation is also clear:

“This order shall not be construed as modifying or limiting in any way the authority heretofore granted under Executive Order No. 8972, dated December 12, 1941, nor shall it be construed as limiting or modifying the duty and responsibility of the Federal Bureau of Investigation [emphasis added], with respect to the investigation of alleged acts of sabotage or the duty and responsibility of the Attorney General and the Department of Justice under the Proclamations of December 7 and 8, 1941 [emphasis added], prescribing regulations for the conduct and control of alien enemies, except as such duty and responsibility is superseded by the designation of military areas hereunder.”[33]

Any doubt that this triumvirate coalesced vanishes after reading the closing paragraph of EO9066. The stage was set for the incarceration of innocent men, women, and children. This would impact the Japanese community the hardest, as reflected by the number of individuals incarcerated (between 110,00 to 124,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans), yet we are reminded of the Presidential Proclamations that were signed by Roosevelt on December 7th and 8th that also impacted the Germans and Italians. This is an echo to the memo written earlier by DeWitt. In the opening lines of this memo it clearly states that the “War Department be given immediate and complete control over all alien enemies as well as United States Citizens [sic]...”[34] It is clear that the targets also included citizens of the United States.

What’s past is prologue

The strike of a typewriter on a blank sheet of paper and the ink from a pen sealed the lives and fates of thousands. The blueprints for Executive Order 9066 were drawn from the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 and the Espionage Act of 1917. With the world at war, and the tangible fear of a potential attack

along the West Coast of the United States, arousal of proclamations and orders ruled the political landscape. These orders from the Executive Branch of the United States government, in conjunction with the FBI and the military, would increase the xenophobia and the unease aimed at those perceived as outsiders. These outsiders who spoke, ate, and behaved differently would become targets. These targets were not Japanese. These targets were the Italians. Was the gravity and seriousness of the authority of Roosevelt, Hoover, and DeWitt enough to encourage the Italians to take a vow of silence?

Hiding in Plain Sight: The Evidence

Images in a variety of archives show Italians, as well as Japanese and Germans, lining up to turn in what was considered contraband; shortwave radios, flashlights, firearms and cameras.[35] These confiscated materials could have been used by an “enemy alien” to signal offshore landing parties, communicate sensitive materials to enemies of the United States, or even to create civil disturbances. These are the obvious reasons to confiscate the contraband. It is suspected that one reason that more personal materials are not found in archives is due to the collection of these contraband materials, specifically the cameras. The collection of contraband material inhibited the harassed parties from recording many of the relocations, curfews, and visual evidence that might be collected by those being manipulated. This strong authoritarian approach surely impressed the Italians along the West Coast. This impression of authority might have been enough of a suggestion to turn to the omertà collectively.

By the beginning of 1942, 600,000 Italians in the United States, who were in this country legally, had their freedoms under very tight control.[36] Some of those citizens detained could not bear the embarrassment of these matters and committed suicide.[37] The suicides were generally underreported and as such the true numbers of these events are mostly unknown. This authoritarian control of forced registration of Italians, under the scrutiny of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, was the first sign that the authorities were in control of individual destinies. Forced to register as “enemy aliens” was a difficult and humiliating act. The confiscation of contraband was another way that Italians were harassed.[38] The Report to the Congress of the United States that was released in 2001, which incidentally and ironically, was completely lost from the news cycle due to the 9/11 terror attacks in New York City, clearly stated that civil liberties were indeed trampled at the expense of Italian Americans during World War II. The findings, however, only tend to underline the fact that most, if not all of the factual evidence, is freely available for any individual to find.

The availability of information, photographic or statistical, are almost entirely from government sources such as the files that have been made available from researchers utilizing the Freedom of Information Act. This has been useful in the dissemination of government documents collected by the INS and FBI. There are Presidential Library archives that provide some information as well. The FDR library, for instance, houses the speeches and proclamations. There are sources, but mostly photographic in nature and hardly dealing with the Italians directly. Take for instance, the archives of the Japanese American non-profit organization aptly named Densho (which means to pass on to the next generation”).[39] Densho only provides tangential evidence of what Italians faced during the same time period. Although the collections are vast and grow exponentially, it is rare to find anything at Densho that relates directly to the Italians. This limitation on these events makes the memory that much harder to produce. The Italians, however, have no Densho, which makes sense if we are to take the argument of omertà being activated here as possible explanation to this secrecy.

Memory is not always entirely accurate. Relying on oral histories to tell the complete story might not always provide the most reliable information. The climate of oral histories after World War II was tenuous. There were two sides of the oral history argument, those who saw the collection of oral history as an archival practice and those who viewed it as the “handmaiden to social history.”[40] Reliability in the oral histories is also questionable. Oral histories, one soon discovers, are not “reliable or free of wishful recollection” and might be tainted by the colorful filters of hindsight.[41] This is only to say that the few oral histories that have been recorded are subject to being unreliable for the reasons stated. The underwhelming number is due in part to the passage of time, as most parties would have passed away, but it seems that the concept of omertà is at play. The shame and the Americanization, played a role for certain, but the underwhelming numbers of actually recorded oral histories are minimal. The evidence for omertà is, in fact, found in the lack of evidence. The lack of evidence, oral histories in this case, supports the idea that there was a more than just a coincidence and that this seeming collusion of silence was more a cultural phenomenon than simply a coordinated effort.

Without cameras to record the banalities of life (the birthday parties, the religious ceremonies, the holidays), and without the freedom of letter writing in their native language and the restrictions on movements which limited the ability to congregate without stirring suspicion, all of these elements when taken together form a convincing argument that extends beyond shame and Americanization.[42] Without the ability to record events, the practice of

omertà might have been the de-facto coping mechanism. The lack of evidence is the evidence we seek. These restrictions, coupled with the suppression of language and culture bolster the push to Americanize as quickly as possible, but all of these underscore and support the idea that omertà is a strong candidate for the cause of the suppression.

The Lack of Evidence: Local Oral Histories

Without the proper training, it is difficult to label conversations conducted from February through May of 2016 proper oral histories. As discussed, the oral histories are inherently prone to wishful thinking. The conversations conducted were with second generation Italian Americans living in the Los Angeles area. Most conversations took place over the telephone, via text messages, and through email. Without fail, none of the subjects reported having ever heard of Italians being detained, restricted in their movements, or having their property seized (including fishing vessels).

One of the subjects, Mary Baum (nee Vuoso), whose father was originally from the Italian island of Ischia, recalled moving from San Pedro into the San Fernando Valley with urgency when she was child. She recalled that one day her father was a fisherman working with other Italians on the boats, and then one day, they were moving to the San Fernando Valley where her father would open a landscaping business.[43] She recalls being told that it had to do with the mafia, but she knew better than to fall for that. She never asked her father about the move and it was never really talked about.[44] She was not aware of any relocation activities due to World War II or due to Executive Order 9066. This was true of all subjects. This underscores the notion and validity that omertà was in full effect.

The Lack of Evidence: Local Historical Societies

In an effort to collect a variety of sources for this paper, historical societies were also consulted, notably, the San Pedro Bay Historical Society, in San Pedro, California and the Monterey Bay County Library, in the City of Monterey California. Both of these repositories of local histories should have been able to provide ample evidence of the relocation of so many Italians in their populations. Instead, nothing was found that testified to the zones established by General DeWitt. No record to indicate that fishing vessels were confiscated by the United States military. There are many artifacts that attest to the booming cannery businesses that both of the communities survived on for a long time prior to World War II and the decades that followed. In Monterey, for example, there seemed to be plenty of news articles that

referred to the southern move of the sardine, but nothing about relocations were to be found in these archives. The San Pedro Bay Historical Society echoed the fact that the sardines were indeed moving south at a fast rate. Many fishermen were moving from the northern fishing towns like Monterey and Santa Cruz and into San Diego.[45] The schools of fish were moving quickly and for long periods of time. The fishermen from the north began to settle in the San Pedro area, for a short while, and then moved on, presumably to San Diego. No direct evidence exists at this archive to support the actions by General DeWitt. Both of these cities, San Pedro and Monterey, contained at the time a military presence. It would seem that there would be stories or rumors of stories, instead, curiously, nothing seems to have happened if we are to believe the archival evidence.

Shame, Americanization, and Omertà

There will not be a definitive answer as to why the story of Italian Americans during World War II has been mostly lost. It seems that the likeliest of theories would posit a combination of factors. The easily identifiable causes, which have been addressed, are shame, the rush to Americanize, and the underlying code of silence found in omertà.

Shame, to borrow from a psychological perspective, is an expression of self-consciousness.[46] The prospect that the Italian community was silenced due to shame is a real possibility. There are three distinctions that must be made when considering the reliance of shame as a factor: what one imagines one to look like to another person, the judgment by that other person, and the self-awareness which will dictate whether to feel pride or shame.[47] Consider what Charles Cooley, father of the looking-glass-self, says about shame and its application to our understanding of what, in theory, the Italian American community was experiencing:

The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling.[48]

There was a certain level of pride within the Italian community for their accomplishments in the United States. Take for instance the two exemplary figures of the time: Fiorello LaGuardia and Joe DiMaggio. These two men were the pride of Italian Americans. La Guardia served as mayor of the city of New York for three terms. Joe DiMaggio, on the other hand, captivated and

entertained with his athleticism. Both of these men, of Italian ancestry, dominated the public sphere and elevated the notion of what it meant to be Italian in the United States. It meant to be accepted. This was a source of pride. This, of course, was in direct contrast to the shame of being forced to register as an enemy alien by Italians at this time. Of note, Joe DiMaggio's father and mother were both required to register as "enemy aliens" while their son served in the U.S. Army.[49] This unsettling fact, straddling the line between pride and shame, strikes squarely in the center of the tenuous relationship Italians had with the government just prior to the involvement of the United States in World War II and beyond. There existed a sense of urgency to Americanize and DiMaggio and La Guardia, both, served as role models and displayed that it was possible.

Race played an important role in Americanization. The Italians and Germans would have an easier road to Americanization than their Japanese counterparts. This cannot be stressed enough, and might hold the answer to why the Japanese were much easier targets than the Italian and Germans. This identifies the advantage the Italians had over the Japanese at this time in respect to being perceived as Americanizing. Many sources report the use of patriotism as a form of proving loyalty to this country. Newspaper clippings from Monterey and San Pedro report how loyalty to the United States was an important part of "growing up American" during this time.[50] A headline from a newspaper article in the *Monterey Newsdaily* reads: "Italian-Americans Will Repeat Flag Pledge July 4th." The article opens with the lines: "Monterey's Italian-American citizens will, at their own request, conduct a brief patriotic program...give the Pledge to the Flag, following several musical numbers by their younger members." [51] The Americanization was seen mostly through the young members of the Italian-American community. This shift is at once subtle and obvious when considering the naming practices.

Changing a name from a purely ethnic sounding Giuseppe to Joe or Joseph could be viewed as a sign of cultural assimilation; Frank and Anthony replaced Francesco and Antonio.[52] This was not unique to Italians. The turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants also employed this process of cultural assimilation through name changing as well.[53] As the child's name was called in class it had become more "Americanized" which allowed the child to be less conspicuous and more accepted. Consider the awards that were given to children during this time period for displaying their "American-ness" by not speaking their parents' language.[54] The need to blend and fit in as quickly as possible was a matter of survival. If Joe DiMaggio could do it so could you.

The mayor of a major American city was Italian. Anything was possible, just not yet.

The prospects of clawing past the stigma of being labeled “enemy alien” was more than some could endure.[55] Shame would force a silence that could be hidden behind the efforts of Americanization. Hiding in plain sight, the Italian men and women, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, became Americans. Being labeled “enemy aliens” by the authorities, the forced relocation from their livelihoods as though guilty of committing a crime, curfews, surveillance, the endlessness of stigmatizing elements might be enough to force the submission of just about anyone; this was not freedom. Silently suffering and enduring despite the shame, and silently shedding a culture and embracing another in exchange for hope: these were the outward expressions of omertà.

That code of silence gave those Italian Americans, so long ago, the strength of perseverance. The practice of omertà quickly allowed them to bury this dark chapter in their lives. Burying it beyond the reach of their friends and family, the silence of these events, emerged years later, not by a sudden divulgence, but by exploring the available information. It is important, now and in the future, to uncover these stories. Regardless of why or how they were suppressed, if we don't know what we don't know, we might continue to make similar mistakes in the future.

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