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Daily Life at Crystal City Internment Camp 1942-1945

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Daily Life at Crystal City Internment Camp 1942-1945

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

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In
History

by
Caitlin Dietze

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Abstract

Throughout World War II, the belligerent countries took enemy civilians, as well as soldiers, prisoner. The majority of the camps created to hold these prisoners were located in the European and Asian theaters of battle, but the United States operated prisoner of war camps and civilian internment camps as well. American internment camps, administered by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), imprisoned persons from the Axis countries of Japan, Italy, and Germany, deemed a threat to national security and categorized as a group as “enemy aliens.” Generally, these individuals were not threats, and a sizable number were legal U.S. citizens.

Crystal City Internment Camp, located in Crystal City, Texas, interned individuals from all three enemy national backgrounds and allowed entire families to reside with the arrested family member. This research will attempt to highlight the daily experience of the internees in the Crystal City Internment Camp through internees’ oral histories and official camp reports, with a focus specifically on the German prisoners. Although scholars have examined these internment camps, little attention has been given to daily life in these camps.

Keywords: Internment, World War II, German-Americans, Texas

... For that whole weekend my mother—which is common in the Brooklyn area where people lean out the windows and look—and just sat and watch, and she watched for my dad day and night for him to come home. She had no idea what happened to him. ¹

In 1939, before the United States joined the Allies in World War II, the FBI and the U.S. State Department began to compile lists called Custodial Detention Lists. The United States was not yet at war, but organized lists of possible internal threats to national security. These lists consisted of German, Italian, and Japanese nationals living in the United States. The U.S. government agencies placed these foreign nationals on the list because they were deemed possibly subversive, “fifth column”² threats, and were to be arrested in the event of a war.³ A number of the persons on the list were American citizens, and many were aliens living legally in the United States. Individuals living in Central and South America were on the list as well. In the hours following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the FBI and other law enforcement officials arrested approximately 2,000 of the individuals on the Custodial Detention List as a safety precaution. The FBI arrested some individuals guilty of sympathizing with and aiding their countries of birth, but most of the individuals were innocent persons, arrested on

¹ Art Jacobs on his mother’s reaction to his father’s arrest as an “enemy alien” in November of 1944. Art Jacobs, Interview by William McWhorter, Austin, Texas, April 12, 2010. Texas Historical Commission, Military Sites Program, Texas in World War II Initiative files, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, Texas 78711-2276. William McWhorter is the Military Sites program coordinator at the Texas Historical Commission who collected interviews with internees and others involved with Crystal City Internment Camp as a part of a bigger project on Texas internment camps.

² “Fifth Column” historically refers to a traitor, or a group of people trying to sabotage a larger group. Paranoia ran rampant as the war raged in Europe, and many Americans feared the presence of an internal fifth column of Nazi sympathizers as well as potential Japanese and Italian loyalists living amongst them. As early as 1940 J. Edgar Hoover expressed the sentiment that was growing amongst the American public, “That there is a Fifth Column that has already started to march is an acknowledged reality. That it menaces America is an established fact. That it must be met is the common resolve of every red-blooded citizen.” This fear of subversion of the German saboteur had roots beginning in World War I. This potent suspicion resulted in extreme prejudice toward German Americans. German was encouraged to banned from churches and schools, streets names were changed, and vocabulary was altered. Sauerkraut became “liberty cabbage, and hamburgers became “liberty steaks”.”

³ Arnold Krammer, *Undue Process: The Untold Story of America’s German Alien Internees* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 32.

questionable grounds.⁴ The United States Department of Justice detained and interned a large number of these individuals through its Alien Enemy Control Unit in internment camps within the United States. By the end of the war, the U.S. government had around 31,000 individuals in Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) internment camps.⁵ The reasons the government provided for arrest were often ludicrous and invented. For example, the government arrested and interned Franz Moedlhammer, an Austrian national living in the United States, for mistakenly being identified as a German national.⁶ On June 14, 1943, he petitioned the Supreme Court on his internment:

I am an Austrian, have never been a German citizen, left Austria during the German invasion in March 1938, and have never since returned either to Austria or to Germany. I am married to an American, father of an American child...
... grant me as an Austrian that privilege which the President of the United States and the Law of this country have established for Austrians to allow me to become again a free, fully respected member of the American society and to be recognized for what I am: a friend of this country without any menial reservation whatsoever and under no circumstances that, for what I am so far branded erroneously: a 'German alien enemy.'"⁷

The fear of Axis countries and Fifth Column threats in America generated hysteria and resulted in the mistaken arrest of individuals like this one, a man not even from Germany. The U.S. government interned numerous loyal and innocent individuals during World War II.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued proclamations No. 2525, No. 2526, and No. 2527 in the forty-eight hours after Pearl Harbor that stated

All natives, citizens, denizens or subjects of [Japan, Germany, and Italy], being of the age of fourteen years and upward, who shall be in the United States and not actually

⁴ Jan Jarboe Russell, *The Train to Crystal City: FDR'S Secret Prisoner Exchange Program and America's Only Family Internment Camp During World War II* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 5.

⁵ "World War II Enemy Alien Control Program Overview," National Archives and Records Administration accessed February 22, 2016, <http://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/enemy-aliens-overview.html>.

⁶ Austria was forcibly annexed by Hitler in March of 1938, an event referred to as the Anschluss.

⁷ Letter from Franz Moedlhammer to the Supreme Court, June 14, 1943, General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division, Record Group 59, Box 9 "Division Reports on Interned Enemy Aliens", Folder Mug through My, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

naturalized, shall be liable to be apprehended, restrained, secured, and removed as alien enemies.⁸

Subsequently, the U.S. government arrested and detained thousands of people, mostly individuals who lived on the West Coast, up until the end of the war. In order to keep these individuals from Axis countries contained and under constant surveillance, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, a Department of Justice agency, created and ran internment camps in the West and Southwest areas of the U.S. This large, diverse group of incarcerated individuals encompassed various different socioeconomic backgrounds. Many were upstanding U.S. citizens and contributors to the wartime economy. Numerous arrested individuals were active in industries that aided the Allied cause; most were loyal persons who considered themselves American. This research will concentrate on the daily life at Crystal City Internment Camp in Crystal City, Texas.

This former migrant-labor camp became the largest Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) camp as well as the only INS internment camp to house entire families.⁹ Open from December 12, 1942, the day the first internees arrived, to February 11, 1948, the Crystal City Internment Camp was also the only internment camp to house all three enemy alien nationalities, those of Japanese, Italian, and German descent, together.¹⁰ The camp held 4,751

⁸ William McWhorter, *Fort Bliss, Fort Sam Houston, Kenedy, Seagoville, and Crystal City: Enemy Internment in Texas During World War II*, Texas Historical Commission, Military Sites Program, Texas in World War II Initiative files, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, Texas 78711-2276.

⁹ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 42.

¹⁰ The U.S. government interned the Japanese in significantly larger numbers and on a much greater scale. On page 45 of *Behind Barbed Wire*, Davis explains that at the time of Pearl Harbor the Justice Department, which included the FBI, was in charge of internal security and the management of enemy aliens. In January of 1942, the FBI carried out large raids throughout the homes of West Coast Japanese, and eventually enforced other measures to monitor and restrict them. On March 18, Roosevelt created the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which took over the control of the Japanese. The WRA was to arrange the evacuation, relocation, maintenance and supervision of the West Coast Japanese. Once evacuated, the United States army transported the West Coast Japanese individuals to sixteen assembly centers, the majority in California, to be held until the WRA completed their camps. On page 67, Davis expresses mentions that the WRA had ten internment camps for the West Coast Japanese located in California, Arizona, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado and Arkansas. The WRA referred to these

internees during this period, 153 of which were born in the camp. The first internees to arrive at the camp were a mix of German aliens and German-Americans. On February 12, 1943, the first individuals from Latin America, Germans from Costa Rica, arrived, and about a month later the first group of Japanese American internees arrived at Crystal City.¹¹

The German population at Crystal City included Germans deported from Latin America and relocated to Crystal City, citizens of Germany fleeing the Nazi regime, second-generation German-American citizens, and German-American aliens.¹² For an assortment of motives, the U.S. government forced a number of the German internees to repatriate, and some chose to be repatriated. Of the total individuals interned under the Department of Justice Enemy Control Unit Program, approximately 11,507 German-Americans, thirty-six percent were interned.¹³

The experience of the German people in the Crystal City Internment Camp can be analyzed through the particular case studies of Art Jacobs, JoAnna Howell, and Audrey “Mooneyen” Thornton, children internees. The oral histories of Bessie Masuda and Seiji Aizawa provide insight into the experience of the Japanese internees, compared to that of the German internees at Crystal City. Various official reports dictated by visiting individuals from different organizations also aid in exposing the conditions of the Crystal City Internment Camp, as well as daily life there. Despite their loss of freedom, daily life in the camp was benign. Camp officials provided internees with the necessities to keep them functioning and comfortable. Records show

camps as “wartime communities.” The WRA held around 120,000 Japanese people in these camps. The WRA internment camps were separate programs from the INS camps. According to *The Train to Crystal City* on page 38, during the course of the war the INS ran ten internment camps, and in total the U.S. government operated more than thirty internment camps. Daniel S. Davis, *Behind Barbed Wire: The Imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II* (New York: Dutton, 1982).

¹¹ William McWhorter. "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission, Military Sites Program, Texas in World War II Initiative files, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, Texas 78711-2276. Accessed April 24, 2015, <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/military-history/texas-world-war-ii/world-war-ii-japanese-american-2>.

¹² Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, xvii.

¹³ McWhorter, "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission.

the camp provided internees with substantial amounts of food, clothing, and recreational activity. Despite these measures, however, many internees remained emotionally traumatized after their release, as well as financially stressed.

The Texas Historical Commission in Austin, Texas interviewed and captured the distinctive experiences of Thornton, Jacobs, and Howell. These oral histories present an extensive analysis of the German experience in Crystal City. Art Jacobs was ten years old when his lower-middle class family chose to join their arrested father at Crystal City, the first time the young boy had left their New York City home. His father later committed his family to be repatriated from the United States to Germany. Both of Howell's parents were born in Germany, and the U.S. government detained her father, despite his previous efforts to become a U.S. citizen. Thornton had a German father and an English mother who both worked for Shell in Venezuela, and later moved to Costa Rica after her father was fired due to his German background. The U.S. government ultimately relocated them from Costa Rica to Crystal City Internment Camp. The majority of both the Germans from Latin America and the Germans residents of the United States interned in Crystal City were harmless, were the Japanese and Italian internees. The government relocated them against their will due to growing public hysteria after the Pearl Harbor attacks.¹⁴

Historiography

Most of the literature on American internment camps has concentrated on Japanese-Americans, the largest ethnic group interned. Historians have understudied U.S. World War II internment camps holding internees of other nationalities. In the realm of general public knowledge, the internment of German nationals and Italian nationals in the U.S. during World

¹⁴ Stephen C. Fox, "General John DeWitt and the Proposed Internment of German and Italian Aliens during World War II." *Pacific Historical Review* 57, no. 4 (1988) 407.

War II remains mostly absent. A plethora of secondary sources written on the Japanese-American internment experience exists. As the Executive Order 9066 pertained to those classified as enemy aliens, including German-Americans, Italian-Americans, and Japanese-Americans, the experience of the Japanese-Americans can be studied to further understand that of German-Americans.

In existing literature, many of the Japanese internment camps are referred to as “concentration camps.” The term “concentration camp” is one that evokes imagery of the ruthless camps orchestrated by the Third Reich during World War II. Nazi Germany created the concentration camps to imprison those deemed undesirable members of the Third Reich (including the handicapped, homosexuals, Roma, etc.), political prisoners, and prisoners of war. In 1933 the first *Konzentrationslager*, or concentration camp, was built in Dachau, outside of Munich. This facility was built to hold up to 5,000 prisoners, including “communists, Social Democrats, and anyone else who ‘endangered state security.’” By 1935, the Nazis built six concentration camps throughout the Third Reich.¹⁵

The Nazi guards’ treatment of the prisoners was notoriously inhumane, and throughout Europe millions perished in the concentration camps. Disease, starvation, execution, as well as other acute causes of killing, ran rampant in the concentration camps. Prisoners slept in diminutive, crowded, and exceptionally uncomfortable quarters. Guards emotionally and physically abused them. Various authors, including Brian Hayashi in *Democratizing the Enemy: the Japanese American Internment*, John Howard in *Concentration Camps on the Home Front*, and Allan Austin in *Concentration Camp to Campus: Japanese-American Students and World War II* cites the U.S. internment camps as concentration camps, emphasizing their

¹⁵ David Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 108.

severity, and in turn rendering them comparable to the Nazi concentration camps. Referring to his usage of the term “Concentration camp,” Howard stated:

Though obviously quite different from Nazi death camps, these compounds for the forced, indiscriminate incarceration of an entire ethnic minority population have earned the designation concentration camps from many scholars of Asian American history. The phrase was also widely used by political figures of the time, including Arkansas Governor Homer M Adkins and President Roosevelt.¹⁶

Because only approximately half of the Japanese interned returned to the West Coast after the war, Howard considered the use of the term “internment,” which refers to “a concept recognized in international law for the treatment of citizens of ‘enemy nations’ during wartime,”¹⁷ as inaccurate, as many of the Japanese ultimately never returned to their homes. He referred to these locations as concentration camps throughout his work.

Former internee Arthur Jacobs described Crystal City in the following manner: “It was a nice place, except you were fenced in. But as a child you don’t really recognize that, you know what I mean?”¹⁸ This is a stark comparison to the experiences described by children survivors of Nazi concentration camps. Hermann Langbein, an Auschwitz underground leader, described the children prisoners:

The children were all skin and bone. The thin skin rubbed on the bones and became infected. The sick children would drink the washing-up water as there was often no other water. Sometimes the children’s blankets (in the sick barracks) were washed and put back still wet on the beds... [T]heir little bodies wasted away with gaping holes in the cheeks big enough for one to see through, a slow putrefaction of the living body.¹⁹

This vivid depiction is quite dissimilar from the recorded experiences of the children at Crystal City Internment Camp.

¹⁶ John Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008),15.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Art Jacobs, Interview by William McWhorter.

¹⁹ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 258.

In Uprooted Americans, Dylan S. Myer, former Director of the War Relocation Authority (WRA), discussed his role in, and exclusive perspective of, the removal of 110,000 individuals of Japanese ethnicity, 70,000 of whom were U.S. citizens, from their homes and into War Relocation Centers. Myer's account uses official War Relocation Authority (WRA) documents, correspondence, and his own commentary. Roosevelt appointed him in 1942, three months after the War Relocation Authority had been created. He alluded to the disorganization and the chaos of the situation:

Neither I nor most of my staff were well informed regarding the problems we faced. We lacked information about the evacuees and their history. We were generally uninformed regarding the anti-Oriental movements on the West Coast, the pressures, rumors, and fear that lead to evacuation.²⁰

Myer conceded that although the mass evacuation of Japanese Americans proved to be unnecessary, it produced some positive results, including eventual greater tolerance and understanding of Japanese-Americans. He did, however, explicitly state that this internment program became the nation's "worst wartime mistake." The forward by the Japanese Citizens League and his own narrative both bolstered the outlook of Myer as tolerant and benevolent. Myer maintained a concern for the internees' wellbeing. He stressed the fact that most of the WRA camps closed ahead of schedule, and that he did everything in his power to make the internee's experiences as comfortable as possible. He particularly emphasized his efforts on behalf of the college leave policies for internees, allowing them to leave the camps to complete college degrees, as well as establishing military service eligibility.

The instance of Latin-American Germans taken from Central and South America to be placed in internment camps in the continental U.S., including at Crystal City Internment Camp,

²⁰Dillon S. Myer, *Uprooted Americans: The Japanese Americans and the War Relocation Authority During World War II*. (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1971), 6.

is analyzed in *Nazis and Good Neighbors*²¹, *The Train To Crystal City*, as well as “*We Were Not the Enemy*,” *Remember the United States Latin-American Civilian Internment Program of World War II*. In *We Were Not the Enemy*, Heidi Donald, who was a child when her family was sent to Crystal City, provided the insight of an actual internee. However, this also gives her a bias, and her personal emotions dominate this book. The experience was traumatizing for her parents, something she acutely noticed as a child. Her passion on the subject is clear, and the following quote showed her attachment to the story:

I learned part of our story from my mother, who was in her eighties when she finally let me interview her. Her memories were so painful that it took over a month of visits to record her recollections, offered in fragments through her tears. [My father] He had faced not only the destruction of his own way of life, but also the distress of knowing his parents and youngest brother were living through another war in Germany.²²

This camp affected her family’s wellbeing, and made it difficult for Heidi to remain neutral.

Jan Russell’s book, *The Train to Crystal City*, is the only study to focus exclusively on the Crystal City Internment Camp. It goes into depth on the camp’s inception, the day-to-day life in the camp, and the closing of the camp. Russell used oral histories of German, Italian, and Japanese internees as well as individuals working in the camp. She analyzed the diaries of the officer in charge of the camp, Earl Harrison, and Joseph O’Rourke, his deputy. Russell also researched the internees from Latin and Central America, and the individuals who were repatriated. Her analysis of the history of the camp and the legislation that created it as well as terminated it covers a large scope of information. Russell’s usage of oral histories allows the reader to empathize with the plight of the internees.

²¹ Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²² Heidi Donald, “*We Were Not the Enemy*”, *Remember the United States Latin-American Civilian Internment Program of World War II* (New York: iUniverse, 2008), xix.

Arnold Krammer's book concentrates specifically on the experience of German alien internees. Krammer cited Roosevelt's views, a nation-wide bias, on the German threat in comparison to that of the Italians: "I don't care so much about Italians. They're a lot of opera singers. But the Germans are different; they may be dangerous."²³ Krammer addressed the tendency of literature to concentrate on the Japanese internment. He also expressed that the internment of the Japanese-Americans during World War II would not have been possible without the precedents established against Germans during World War I.²⁴ In addition to the treatment of Germans in the U.S. during World War I, Krammer also outlined the behaviors of other Allied countries toward enemy aliens during World War II, including Canada and Britain, providing comparison and context.

Pre World War II

During World War I, the general U.S. population fostered widespread anti-German sentiments. Regulations and laws passed during this period set the precedent for those enacted during World War II. Throughout the course of the Great War the United States government interned 2,048 German-Americans. On April 6, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson released twelve regulations on German-born males over the age of fourteen. This included one that banned them from owning explosives, guns, or radios, and one that banned them from living within a half-mile of aircraft stations, forts, arsenals, munitions factories, or naval vessels. On November 16, 1917, Roosevelt released eight more regulations, demanding the registration of the 250,000 male German- American enemy aliens living in the United States. This extended to women in April 1918.²⁵

²³ Krammer, *Undue Process*, 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

In 1936, the formation of the German-American Bund further fueled the American public's suspicion and apprehension toward German nationals. The Bund ardently supported Nazism and Hitler, preached anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic rhetoric, and emphasized the importance of American neutrality in the European War. At its height, the Bund had as many as twenty-five thousand members.²⁶ Membership ranged from approximately 10,000 to 25,000 members.²⁷ Compared to the total population of German descent living in the U.S. at the time, this was a small number. The reports of membership fluctuated, and Franz Kuhn²⁸, the leader of the Bund, cited numbers anywhere from 8,299 to 230,000. This exaggeration sparked fear at the prospect of a large Nazi following in the United States. Inflammatory and sensational journalism augmented these fears. The Bund held meetings, rallies, and marches, published propaganda, and sent money to Germany to fund the Nazi party.²⁹ In February of 1939, over 20,000 supporters attended a Bund rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City, where Kuhn referred to the New Deal as the "Jew Deal." He and other speakers expressed other anti-Semitic sentiments as well.³⁰

Many other small anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi groups developed throughout the United States, but to a less established following. These groups reprinted Nazi propaganda from German periodicals, much to the anger of the American public: especially to the fury of German-

²⁶ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ In *The Train to Crystal City*, on page 97, Russell discusses Kuhn at length. Kuhn, the leader of the German-American Bund, was also a well-known figure in Germany and a popular propaganda tool for the Nazi party. He was born in Munich in 1896, and during World War I he fought with the German army as an infantry officer. The German Army awarded him the Iron Cross. After the war, a string of crimes left him unemployable, and as a last resort, he left Germany for the United States. He gained employment at the Ford Motor Company, and became a naturalized citizen. Kuhn founded the Michigan chapter of the German American Bund in order to support the Nazi party in Germany and fulfill his own desire for fame. Ultimately he was arrested and interned in Crystal City Family internment Camp, joined by his wife and his son; all three arrested as enemy aliens. He had a temper and incited tension and drama in the camp.

²⁹ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 98.

³⁰ Krammer, *Undue Process*, 5.

Americans and Germans. The Bund was not representative of the German population that resided in the United States, yet many Americans could not differentiate between the two. Frequently the American public incorrectly perceived German individuals loyal to the United States as Nazi sympathizers, and discriminated against them. The U.S. government interned a large number of actual Bund members, however, and they were reported to be some of the most ill-behaved internees. In one instance at Crystal City Internment Camp, guards had to aid a German couple attacked by a Nazi gang within the camp.³¹ By 1941, the Bund membership diminished, and in December of 1941, after the U.S. entered the war, the U.S. government outlawed the organization.

In contrast to the Bund, many individuals formed groups to express anti- Nazism and to convey Germans' loyalty to the United States. These groups included the German-American Congress for Democracy, The Loyal Americans of German Descent, The German-American Democratic Society of Greater New York City, the Wisconsin Federation of German-American Societies, and the German American-Nazi League among others.³² These groups desired to separate themselves and other German-Americans from the Bund members and the Nazi party.

As war raged in Europe, within the American public feelings of hysteria and apprehension toward Germans flourished. A Gallup poll released on June 10, 1940 presented the question "Should all people who are not United States citizens be required to register with the Government?" Ninety-five percent of respondents answered yes, reminiscent to the registration requirements active during World War I.³³ The Alien Registration Act of 1940 required all aliens to go to a United States post office to be registered, fingerprinted, and photographed. In October 1941, all aliens with assets over one thousand dollars had to provide a summary of those assets to

³¹ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 139.

³² Krammer, *Undue Process*, 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

the Treasury Department. An additional law required those aliens who wished to leave the U.S. to obtain a permit.³⁴ The environment in the United States was one of paranoia and distrust.

Establishing the Internment Camps

The Executive Order 9066, issued February 19, 1942, stated that all Japanese, German, and Italian enemy aliens were to relocate from zones deemed important for U.S. national security by the U.S. military. The Executive Order 9066 also created the War Relocation Authority to enforce this process. It later became mandatory for all Japanese individuals to move to inland camps, though only selected German and Italian nationals had to move.

President Roosevelt and Attorney General Francis Biddle emphasized that the relocation of a large number of Germans and Italians on the West Coast, similar to the relocation of the Japanese, would upset German and Italians on the East Coast. These two large groups were vital to the wartime economy. Those officials against internment also argued that Italians and Germans were more assimilated into American culture than the Japanese; it would be more difficult to separate them from the rest of the American society.³⁵ Earl G. Harrison, the commissioner of the INS, stressed that four out of every five German noncitizens had family ties in America, and over half had no military threat due to their advanced age.³⁶ Harrison explained that America had “the smallest proportion of aliens to the total population in our history- approximately 3.5 percent!” he continued, “...The ‘American Alien,’ for much the greater part, is neither a refugee, nor, at any time, an enemy alien. He is, in reality, an immigrant- a product of American history.”³⁷ These complex dynamics and conflicting opinions made the imminent process of interning Germans during World War II convoluted. Regardless of these discussions,

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Krammer, *Undue Process*, 415.

³⁶ Ibid, 28.

³⁷ Ibid.

the internment of a number of German and Italian nationals, along with Japanese nationals, occurred.

The War Relocation Authority, the Department of Justice, and the State Department were responsible for selecting the citizens and aliens of Japanese, German, and Italian nationalities to be interned. The FBI and War Department collected intelligence information to help discern who should be interned by creating lists of thousands of people potentially dangerous to the United States. The Department of Justice created the Alien Enemy Control Unit Program in charge of creating the internment camps. The United States Army transported the selected internees to the internment camps. The Immigration and Naturalization Service administered the camp at Crystal City, Texas.

In most cases, U.S. officials forcefully took these Japanese, German, and Italian nationals from their homes. Government agents seized many in the middle of the night, unannounced, their families left behind to fend for themselves. The U.S. Government arrested mostly men, leaving their wives and children baffled and vulnerable. These arrests continued throughout World War II; the U.S. government detained individuals through the last days of the war. Those arrested, the bulk of them law abiding persons, were incarcerated in Department of Justice internment camps throughout the continental U.S.

A significant amount of those detained were fathers with wives and children, and requests to preserve their family units arose. Early in the war, women requested to be interned with their children and husbands. This demand fueled the creation of the Crystal City Internment camp, the only INS camp that housed entire families. To remain at home without the head of their households became impossible for numerous women. Many families left at home endured the

gossip and cruelty of neighbors suspicious of foreign enemy aliens. Many families had no choice; they simply could not survive without the incarcerated family member's income.

The INS required a location for this camp that was far from the war production centers of the West and East coasts, and that had efficient water and electrical resources. Crystal City was also extremely far south, making it closer to Latin America, where many internees hailed from.³⁸ The area of Crystal City, Texas, met this criterion, and the U.S. government conveniently already owned it. The Farm Security Administration used this 240-acre plot to house migrant agricultural workers.³⁹

Daily Life at Crystal City

Crystal City Internment Camp was an anomaly in that its internees included residents of the United States as well as individuals from Latin and Central American countries, captured and relocated to Texas to be imprisoned on American soil. The U.S. State Department relocated 4,058 Germans from Latin and Central America to be interned in the United States.⁴⁰ The Latin American Germans in Crystal City were relocated from sixteen different countries due to the FBI's conviction that they presented a hazard to the United States.⁴¹ On most occasions the Latin American governments surrendered these citizens willfully due to self-serving ambitions, such as ridding themselves of political threats and acquiring attractive land owned by the future internees.⁴² Many of the German adults and children forcefully interned at Crystal City were born in the United States or in Latin America and had little or no command of the German language.⁴³

³⁸ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 45.

³⁹ McWhorter, "Crystal City," Texas Historical Commission.

³⁹ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴³ Max Paul Friedman, "Private Memory, Public Records, and Contested Terrain:

Families vehemently opposed their separation from the arrested party and chose to join the imprisoned family member at Crystal City. The INS created Crystal City Internment Camp for this purpose, so families of arrested parties could remain together. In order to maintain family structure and unity, families forfeited their autonomy as free individuals. After Art Jacob's father was arrested and taken to Ellis Island for holding, before he was eventually interned in Crystal City, his wife was left with "about two dollars and she has two growing boys to feed."⁴⁴ After three months, with no other reasonable alternatives, she brought her two children from their home in Brooklyn to Ellis Island where their father was being held:

My mother decided she had enough of this and she just decided to pack up our belongings, give our stuff away to relatives hopefully to hold for us for the future, and took some suitcases and the clothes on our back and went to Ellis Island. When we got there, the officials were stunned, and then they decided, Okay, we'll lock them up here. So my mother was locked up upstairs in the great hall, and my brother and I were downstairs in a big open bay with men and my father.⁴⁵

From Ellis Island, the family was transported to Crystal City Internment Camp.

Although the camp officials allowed the internees to see visitors, for many families this was inadequate. The war was a turbulent period, and the free family members preferred to be with the male head of the family for stability. Thornton describes the devastation she felt behind Crystal City's barbed wire, as she and her father mourned the death her grandmother, who passed away in Germany:

Oh, there was no doubt about it. I knew we were incarcerated. There were guards with guns and we were behind, behind barbed wire fences. And every now and then there were guard stations with guns. I remember my, my grandmother in Germany died... We were, my father and I, were standing under a guard station

Weighing Oral Testimony in the Deportation of Germans from Latin America During World War II," *Oral History Review* 27, No. 1 (2000): 5.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, interview by William McWhorter.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and that was the first time I ever saw my father cry. And I can remember the barbed wire I was hanging on to.⁴⁶

The union of families in Crystal City Camp allowed for typical facets of life, like bereavement, to be practiced together.

Although the INS conceived Crystal City Internment Camp as a space to detain those classified as enemies, the camp officials took abundant measures to create a comfortable environment. Camp leaders encouraged the internees to engage in leisure activities. The camp allowed visitors, and Seiji Aisawa, a U.S. citizen born to Nisei parents interned at Crystal City, was able to visit and stay with them on the camp grounds while he completed his college education.⁴⁷ Life at Crystal City was meant to be tolerable and content for those who abided by the rules.

In order to comply with the Third Geneva Convention's guidelines on the treatment of prisoner's of war, which also applied to internees in the INS internment camps, the Red Cross initiated regular inspections.⁴⁸ Representatives from neutral Spain and Switzerland carried out yearly inspections of Crystal City Internment Camp in order to glean the overall condition of the camp. These representatives could also carry out correspondence with internees, hold mass meetings with internees, and had the option of seeing them privately with no camp representative present.⁴⁹ Representatives of the State Department visited the camp as well, and on February 14

⁴⁶ Audrey Moonyeen Thornton, interview by William McWhorter, Tape recording, Dallas, Texas, February 16th 2011. Texas Historical Commission, Military Sites Program, Texas in World War II Initiative files, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, Texas 78711-2276.

⁴⁷ Seiji Aizawa, interview by William McWhorter, Telephone interview, Austin, Texas. December 15th, 2010. Texas Historical Commission, Military Sites Program, Texas in World War II Initiative files, P.O. Box 12276, Austin, Texas 78711-2276.

⁴⁸ McWhorter, "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission.

⁴⁹ "A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment Accorded Them in the Crystal City Internment Camp, the Gila River War Relocation Project as compared with those offered at the Civilian Assembly Center in Welshiem, Shatung, China" General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special

and 15 of 1946, a State Department representative accompanied a Red Cross delegate on an inspection. Paul Schnyder of the International Committee of the Red Cross joined Van Arsdale Turner of the Special Projects Division of the State Department who recorded the event. These representatives fielded a plethora of questions from both Japanese and German internees during this visit. For example, the Japanese internees inquired about the status of their letters from Japan, they had not received any since March of 1945. Both the Germans and the Japanese internees had a representative from their group that voiced their concerns to both camp officials and exterior, visiting representatives. When Turner and Schnyder arrived, they met with the Japanese spokesman, Teikichi Hamaguchi, and the German spokesman, Erich Kirschling.

The internees asked dozens of questions, the report claims, and the representatives did their best to answer. In regards to the answers they didn't know, Turner stated that Schnyder:

To all of them the explanation was given that they might expect to receive the answers in due course through the Officer in Charge of the camp. Your representative gave assurance, however, that upon his return to Washington he would urge a continuation of efforts to arrive at early decisions with regard to those questions with which this Department is concerned...your representative was of necessity non-committal in his statements.⁵⁰

Arsdale Turner, in his lengthy report on the visit, also mentions that Pastor Karl Gustaf Olmquist, a representative of the War Prisoners Aid section of the International Y.M.C.A., was visiting on the same day.⁵¹

Visiting representatives from various organizations also reported the overall condition of the camp, as well as improvements that had occurred since their last visits. These reports exposed the daily life and condition of Crystal City in terms of recreation and daily comforts. On

War Problems Division, Record Group 59, Box 19, "Inspection Reports on War Relocation Centers", The National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁵⁰ "Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas", February 1946 Report, pg.4, Box 119 "Santa Fe. New Mexico to Civilian Alien Enemies in Custody," General Records of the Department of State, Special War Problems Division, Subject Files 1939-1955, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵¹ Ibid.,3.

October 30 1944, Kurt Ritter of Switzerland listed the following improvements he observed during one of these inspections:

1. The swimming pool has been completed and is in operation
2. The surfacing of the roads has been completed
3. Running water has been installed in the shelter area
4. The canteen of the German internees has been enlarged
5. A camp beautification program has been started.
6. Cottages have been insulated against heat and cold.
7. Clothing is now being distributed through the medium of the clothing store.
8. Additional fire protection has been provided, including a fire engine and equipment.
9. Part of the hospital proper has been air conditioned, including the surgical room, the delivery room, and dental clinic.⁵²

In this report, camp recreation, in the form of a swimming pool, is illustrated, as well as various other measures taken to enhance the internees' experience, including safety and comfort precautions.

Reports conducted by other sources also reveal the atmosphere of the Crystal City Internment Camp. On a camp visit between December 15 and 22, 1944, Augusta Wagner, professor of economics at Yenching University in Peking China, prepared a report and presented it to the State Department. She used this report to compare Crystal City Internment Camp to an internment camp in China, called the Civilian Assembly Center in Weihsien, Shantung, China. This report also compared Crystal City to the Gila River War Relocation Project and the Colorado River War Relocation project, both relocation centers for Japanese. The Gila River Relocation Center was located in Southern Arizona, about 40 miles outside Phoenix, and the Colorado River Relocation center was located in Poston, Arizona. The amenities of the three camps compared in the report include "general description," "housing," "washing, toilet, and

⁵² "A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment" General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

laundry facilities,” “food, cooking, and dining halls,” “labor,” “general consent,” “recreation,” “worship,” “clothing,” “canteen,” “communications,” and “medical facilities.”⁵³ This report not only created a comparison of Crystal City to two other relocation centers, but also provided an in-depth description of Crystal City’s facilities.

The report described Crystal City’s climate as “significantly mild”, but with summers that were uncomfortable and hot due to its desert environment. The appearance of the camp itself, the report claimed, was “barren due to lack of trees and shrubbery,” but that the director stated that would change soon. By comparison, the Gila River Camp is described as “desert country, clear bright sunshine, invigorating air.... Landscaping already undertaken by authorities.” The report also claims that internees were able to receive and send out mail regularly, have visitors, and go out on special business.

The housing circumstances at Crystal City comprised of cottages, shelters, and duplexes. The cottages were one story, one or two-bedroom cottages, 26’6” x 18’6,” with a “combination living, dining and kitchen room; a bathroom with shower and wash basin with hot and cold running water.” The cottages were for larger families, and were the only homes with private bathrooms. Duplexes contained two separate apartments and at 20’ x 18’ were for smaller families. Both families shared the bathroom. The shelters were the smallest living space at 18’x12,’ and at the time of the report no running water was available, but was in the process of being installed. The internment camp had one toilet for every twelve persons, and one shower for every fifteen persons. Curtains, shower curtains, and drapery were also supplied in order to offer the living spaces a domestic, comfortable atmosphere. A central facility handled laundry for

⁵³“A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

sheets, work clothes, and pillowcases. Internees washed their personal clothing in their own stationary tubs.

The report characterizes the oil stoves and electric refrigerator equipped in each Crystal City home as being of “nice quality and attractive.” The homes were also equipped with kitchen utensils and china, and food could be purchased at the camp store with the camp currency. The camp gave allotted internees four dollars a week, an amount that increased with the number of children in the household. The food offered, the report explains, was of excellent quality, and the following was a list of what adults could collect for their household per week:

5 lbs, Meat and Fish, 7 Eggs
7 lbs .10 oz. Milk and Cheese
1 lb 1 ½ oz oils and fat
5 lb 8 oz cereals and flour
3 ½ oz dry beans
1 lbs 1 oz Sugar 1 oz syrup
3 lbs. 1oz. leafy vegetable
2 lbs. 3 oz. citrus fruit
and tomatoes
3 lb. 8 oz potato
7 lb .6 oz. other vegetable, fruits dry fruits
11 oz. miscellaneous
11 oz. beverages⁵⁴

The food was available at the camp canteen, run by the internees. The representative expressed that the food at the canteen was “well-stocked... carrying everything that stores in town do.”⁵⁵

Paid jobs obtainable at the camp included the manufacturing of furniture and mattresses, construction work, hospital work, laundry, janitors, beauticians or barbers, and general store work. Internees worked at the INS administrative offices, and others with experience in farming labored at the camp’s internal orange orchard, external agricultural fields utilized by the camp,

⁵⁴ “A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment,” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

and vegetable garden. The law did not require internees to work physical labor. Paid jobs allowed families to buy extra rations of food and clothing, as well as augment their morale. Turner's report stated that many internees spent their earned money at a rapid pace, and had fiscal issues at their release.⁵⁶ All internees that desired a paying job were able to gain employment. Even children could have jobs; Thornton describes her employment at the camp:

My job was, I had a little cart with wheels. We used to use kerosene, and we had the kerosene jugs, and I had a bunch of people and I used to go and collect the empty kerosene things, go and fill them, and bring them back, and they would pay me 10 cents each.⁵⁷

Non-paying jobs included garbage and trash collectors, grounds keepers, cleaners of the bathrooms and washrooms.

The internees were rationed clothing items as needed. The camp provided them with "strong, durable work clothes," and shoes with free repairs. They also presented the internees with "overcoats, slickers, and rubber boots."⁵⁸ Special layettes were supplied for babies and each internee received a clothing allowance. Wagner's report mentioned a sewing room, equipped with threads and materials for repairs.

Leisure activities offered to entertain the internees and keep them physically and mentally healthy included: "playgrounds, basket-ball, baseball, pianos, long wave radios, Movies twice a week. Vocational projects of all kinds. Swimming pool. Talk of a golf course in the park. All provided by the authorities."⁵⁹ Camp officials also supplied internees with seeds to plant plants

⁵⁶ "Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas," General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁵⁷ Thornton, interview by William McWhorter.

⁵⁸ "A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment," General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁵⁹ "Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas," General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

and built their own screen porches as “morale building” activities.⁶⁰ When Turner visited the camp in February of 1946, despite the dwindling amount of internees and the large areas of the compound that were unoccupied, he encountered the following recreational additions: “... an extension of the recreation area has been arranged for and six tennis courts, as well as additional baseball and football fields, and basketball courts have made available.”⁶¹

In accord with this report, Thornton recalled a specific movie she saw at the movie theater, as well as a specific game she would play at the swimming pool, “We had a movie theater we went to, because I saw “The Life of Dorian Gray” there. And it scared me for years... And, um, I remember swimming in the pool. Those were happy times, because we made believe we were mermaids.”⁶² Her recount reflects the carefree naïveté of childhood, despite its occurrence behind a fence.

The pool in particular became a popular commodity, especially amongst the children, as a reprieve from the intense Texas heat. Built by German internees, it was the largest defining feature of the camp, and included separate bathhouses for Japanese internees and the German and Italian internees. Death was not a common occurrence at the camp, and in 1944, the drowning of two Japanese Peruvian girls in the pool shocked the internees. Both Bessie Masuda and Seiji Aizawa recall their impressions of this tragedy:

Aizawa:

... I just talked to my sister recently...and I mentioned the two girls that drowned. And she said, ‘I nearly drowned too,’ and she was saved by a person and she was taken- ran home and told the parents what happened. So the parents took the time out to go to that person’s quarters and thanked him for his saving my sister’s life.⁶³

⁶⁰ “Crystal City Internment Camp, 1945.” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRfSHgdh2UA>.

⁶¹ “Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas,” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁶² Thornton, interview by William McWhorter.

⁶³ Aizawa, interview by William McWhorter.

This instance conveys the respect and relationships that could flourish between internees.

Masuda:

The deep end is roped off, but if you go near it, it's very slimy. It slopes, to a point where if you did go down, you would slip and go to the deep end. We were playing and somehow this friend of mine decided- she was going to go to the deep side, but I guess she wanted to know what it was like. And, so, naturally, she – slipped and started splashing around and yelling. So, I thought, “Oh my God, she might be drowning.” I got all my friends – because there were like, I don't know how many, maybe six, seven of us. We held hands, – tried to reach out to her, but it wasn't easy because we're slipping, too... Finally, I just gave up. I said, No, no, no – pull me back, I said to them. I can't reach her, so. By that time someone had called for help. It was too late... I mean, – the first time I've experienced something like that. It just – I don't know – I had nightmares for the longest time.⁶⁴

This was a traumatic event for children and adults alike.

Despite the hardships of incarceration, the staff at Crystal City made a conscious effort to create an environment at the camp that was as comfortable and accommodating as possible.

Wagner's report expressed that the men in charge of the camp were of “large caliber” and sympathetic. “They had a humane feeling for their difficulties and aimed to make their life under the abnormal conditions of camp as wholesome and pleasant as possible.”⁶⁵ Thornton provides an example of an exceptional trip outside the camp she took with Joseph O'Rourke, camp commander as well as a description of his overall temperament:

Well, somehow, I used to go to his office a lot, and he was always so kind to me. And one day he said to me, “Would you like to go into town with me. I'm going into town.” And I, of course, said yes. And, it's funny, I remember getting in the truck with him. I think it was a truck, and we went to town, and we stopped in front of Popeye's statue. And he told me the whole story, which I don't remember much except that it's the spinach capitol of the world. And he bought me a soda. And that's what I remember of Mr. O'Rourke. He was a gentle, kind person to me.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Bessie Masuda, Interview by Lara Newcomber. Telephone interview. Austin, Texas. July 22nd, 2011.

⁶⁵ “Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas,” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁶⁶ Thornton, Interview by William McWhorter.

O'Rourke maintained a positive reputation amongst the internees, and was particularly caring toward children. His staff referred to him as a "jolly Irishman."⁶⁷

Crystal City Internment Camp had a Japanese school, an English (called the Federal school) school, and German school; each with elementary, junior, and high school levels. These schools were fully accredited and monitored by the Texas State Board of Education. Robert Clyde Tate, former principal of Crystal City High School, became head of the education program at Crystal City. Due to its isolated location and the lack of job security caused by war, it was difficult to recruit teachers. Internees taught at the German and Japanese schools, where the students learned the cultures and traditions of their ancestors. The Federal schools strived to meet Texas educational standards, and the high school even had sports teams as well as a prom. Masuda explained her time at the Japanese school:

Japanese school was okay, but- like I said, I studied hard and they- and the teachers were so strict. The teachers were very, very strict- especially with boys. If they didn't hold the book right to read, if they didn't stand straight, if they didn't hold their arms out straight to hold the book, the teacher would come around and hit their hand with a ruler.⁶⁸

Masuda described her diverse experience and interaction with ethnically Japanese children from Peru at the Japanese school:

I spoke English and [the children from Peru] spoke Spanish (laughter), [but in Japanese school] we had to speak Japanese. But, they [would] speak [Japanese] with a Spanish accent. (laughter) They would laugh at me and I would laugh at them. Some of them were from South America- they were very good at speaking Japanese and reading Japanese books.⁶⁹

Many of the children could not speak the languages of the enemy countries their parents hailed from. Many were U.S. citizens and had spent the majority of their lives immersed in American culture, maintaining ignorance about the cultures of Japan, Germany, or Italy. Masuda explained:

⁶⁷ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 57.

⁶⁸ Masuda, Interview by Lara Newcomber.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

I wanted to go to English school! (laughter) I had to go to Japanese school because my dad says(sic) we're going back to Japan. That's all there is to it [we]- had to learn the language, the culture. In Crystal City they had professional teachers and ministers, in the camp. So, we had regular school- Japanese school.⁷⁰

Masuda's parents used the internment as an opportunity for their Americanized children to learn the language and culture of the Japanese, in the possibility that they might have returned after the war. This was not rare, as many internees from Crystal City either voluntarily or involuntarily returned to their countries of origin. Other graduates of these high schools went on to go to college following their release.

Crystal City Internment camp also maintained the freedom of worship.⁷¹ The German group of internees held Protestant services, but stopped in November of 1945, due to the large number of German internees that had left the camp.⁷² At the time of Turner's report, in February of 1946, a Guatemalan priest internee conducted the Catholic services. Turner also mentions the attempt to have a San Antonio clergyman visit the camp to hold a service at least every second Sunday.⁷³

The internees also wrote camp newspapers, one in English, *Los Andes* was Spanish, *Jiji Kai* was the Japanese newspaper, and *Das Lager* was written in German. There was a German beer garden as well as a Japanese Sumo Wrestling ring.⁷⁴ Diversity was plentiful within the camp, and was tolerated by the camp officials. The internees maintained their cultural traditions in the camp in an effort to uphold a sense of normalcy.

⁷⁰ Masuda, Interview by Lara Newcomber.

⁷¹ "A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment" General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁷² "Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas," General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ McWhorter, "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission.

A film produced by the INS in 1945 claimed to “show how men, women, and children detainees of World War II lived, worked, and played under traditional American standards of decent and human treatment.”⁷⁵ The film portrays the camp in a positive perspective, and is an apt tool for gauging the image the INS was trying to project of Crystal City Internment Camp. The narrator describes the notoriously hot weather in Crystal City as “the sun shines practically every day, with a cool breeze from the gulf in the evening.” The video continues to describe the composition of the camp. Initially the migrant camp had 100 housing units, but was extended to 500 to become Crystal City Internment Camp. The added buildings included a hospital, and administrative and maintenance buildings. The administration buildings supervised repatriation movement, investigations, releases and paroles. The supply and procurement building rationed goods and food to families depending on their needs and size. They were then given round plastic and paper tokens as tender, which the narrator deemed “economical and practical.” The hospital building treated as many as sixty patients daily, by a group of doctors that included five detainee doctors. One hundred and fifty-three children were born in the hospital at Crystal City Internment Camp. The camp also offered dental procedures, and provided dentures (as well as eye glasses.)⁷⁶ The narrator claims those treated at the hospital had “ills often imaginary, traceable to detention and loss of freedom.” INS wanted the camp to appear to the audience as reasonable and comfortable. Although internment was not comparable to freedom, records indicate Crystal City Camp was well run, and, under the circumstances, sensitive to the internees’ needs. For the most part, camp officials treated the internees equally, even though some of the internees were not U.S. residents. Some of these individuals could not speak

⁷⁵ Crystal City Internment Camp, 1945." YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRfSHgdh2UA>.

⁷⁶ “A Report of the Facilities Provided for Internees and the Treatment,” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

English, German, Japanese, or Italian. A number of internees at Crystal City Internment Camp were Spanish speakers, and came from countries in Latin and Central America.

Latin Americans

Crystal City camp held German, Japanese, and American individuals from Latin American countries, in addition to those interned from the United States. This State Department program was the result of a clandestine agreement between the U.S. and the governments of numerous Latin American countries, including Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Peru and Panama. These countries arrested and deported Axis nationals living the United States. On December 8 1941, after the U.S. joined the war, Guatemala restricted the travel of Germans, Japanese, and Italians and froze their assets.⁷⁷ The countries of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile were not involved in the deportation of their German citizens.⁷⁸ Democracies in Latin America were the least receptive to the United States' demand to turn over the individuals, and those countries with dictators were more likely to give up their residents for their own personal gain. The United States was the only major power to remove enemy aliens from foreign countries not under occupation for internment.⁷⁹

Child internee Thornton's family was taken from Costa Rica to be interned at Crystal City. They were Venezuelan citizens, her father originally from Breslau, Germany, and her mother from England. They both moved to Venezuela to pursue careers with the Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company. They lead a comfortable, wealthy lifestyle with maids and a nanny. When World War II began, however, life began to deteriorate for the family:

My father and all the Germans were temporarily let go and we had to move to a neutral country, which we chose, Costa Rica....because Shell thought it was going to be just a few months war. So, we moved to Costa Rica. My father had a friend who owned a

⁷⁷ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 39.

⁷⁸ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

coffee plantation. And we lived there for a few years and, you know, just a normal, nice lifestyle⁸⁰

Soon after, officials of the Costa Rican government apprehended her father:

And the next thing I remember, of Costa Rica, was, we were in our apartment and these men came in. I remember clearly. I don't know how many, but there were more than one. And I remember specifically, them taking all the pictures off the walls and then they took my father and pulled him and as they were pulling him he fell and he tore his Achilles tendon because he fell off the sidewalk and they imprisoned him.⁸¹

She and her mother were taken to a holding facility for women and children, and eventually their journey to interment reunited the family. The U.S. government transported by ship to California, and then flew them to Texas.⁸²

In *Nazi Or Good Neighbors*, Friedman claimed U.S. policy makers defended the interment of Latin Americans by focusing on the threat of Germans living in Latin America, using their means to spread propaganda on behalf of Nazi Germany in order to convince Latin American countries to join the Axis cause. Friedman explained that policy makers also blamed the danger of Latin Americans on their sheer proximity to the United States and ability to attack the country.⁸³

U.S. government officials first brought the Latin Americans at Crystal City to ports in New Orleans or California, arrested for “illegal entry,” and they transported the Latin Americans to the internment camp by train.⁸⁴ The geographical location of Crystal City made it convenient for those taken from central and Latin America to be transported there. Many of the Latin

⁸⁰ Thornton, Interview by William McWhorter.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 3.

⁸⁴ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 39.

American internees could only speak Spanish and had a difficult time communicating with the other internees.⁸⁵

The U.S. government interned more German nationals from Latin America than German nationals that lived in the United States. The U.S. government interned one percent of all German citizens that lived in the United States, but Costa Rica sent twenty-five percent to be interned, Colombia twenty percent. In Honduras, the government sent more than half of the Germans living there to be interned.⁸⁶ Friedman expressed the absurdity of the fact that Germans that lived in mainland America, who had the proximity to be more of a threat, were treated more reasonably than those exponentially farther away in Latin America. He attributed the United States' ease in the deportation and internment a larger amount of Latin American German nationals than American-German nationals to the U.S.'s view of Latin Americans as inferior and incompetent, and the fact that constant political unrest fueled fears of fifth column Nazi conspiracy in the Americas.⁸⁷ Friedman expressed that this deportation and internment phenomenon should be the crux of the discourse on Latin America's World War II experience, but is not. Relations between Latin America the U.S. at the time are continuously ignored. In interning enemy aliens from foreign countries not under U.S. occupation, the U.S. broke national and international laws. The internment of German nationals that lived in Latin America was the result of a misinformed U.S. government who misdirected security fears and did not understand the local environments of the Latin American countries. This greatly damaged the trust between the U.S. and Latin America impacted their relationship into the Cold War.⁸⁸

Repatriation

⁸⁵ McWhorter, "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission.

⁸⁶ Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

Repatriation, or “to restore or return to the country of birth, citizenship, or origin,” was an option that many internees chose; yet some were forced to repatriate.⁸⁹ At Crystal City Internment Camp, six exchanges occurred in which the U.S. government repatriated internees in return for American prisoners and civilians stuck in Axis countries. By 1945, the United States government had exchanged 4,500 German nationals and 124 Italian nationals interned in U.S. camps, including Crystal City, for 2,361 Americans in Europe.⁹⁰ Around 8,000 Japanese expatriated or repatriated to Japan during the course of the war.⁹¹ Turner reported that the number of internees present at Crystal City in February of 1946 had dropped drastically due to three evacuations of repatriated internees in December of 1945. At that point the camp held 971 Japanese internees and 485 German internees. Of 1,454 internees, 455 of the Japanese were adults and 305 of the Germans were adults.⁹² 1,236 Japanese internees had been repatriated to Japan, 160 Japanese to Hawaii, and 102 Germans to Ellis Island for return to Germany.⁹³

In some cases, the United States government repatriated U.S. citizen children with their alien parents. The U.S. government forced several internees to repatriate due to their perceived threat to U.S. national security. Many internees who chose repatriation preferred this option over internment, despite their home countries were at war; dangerous and lacking in resources. For those who chose repatriation, this was preferable to life behind the fences of an American interment camp.

A number of German internees that desired repatriation were loyal to the Nazi cause. They desired to return to Germany in order to lend their support to the Third Reich. Karl

⁸⁹ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 184.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁹¹ Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front*, 15.

⁹² “Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas,” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Heinrich Brandt of Chicago, for example, was to be repatriated to Germany because he was an admitted Nazi party member. When searched, Mein Kampf and a picture of the Adolf Hitler were found in his home. He was reported to have said, “Ach, we blow up munitions factories in the United States. Americans are too dumb to know what is going on,” as well as “(America) is the lousiest country any one could get into.”⁹⁴ Brandt in all probability expressed these thoughts, as he was a Nazi sympathizer. But many German, Japanese, and Italian nationals were condemned due to false statements. Neighbors, colleagues, and other acquaintances turned in innocents, sometime for personal gain, or due to petty disagreements. Many Americans exploited the hysteria, and the U.S. government branded innocent people Nazis and arrested them. Many of these blameless individuals were later repatriated against their will into dire circumstances abroad.

In Turner’s report on his visit to Crystal City, he mentions two German internees, Josef Gries and Herman Koetter. Both had at least one son serving in the U.S. military, but were to be repatriated against their will. Gries’ two sons served in the Merchant Marine. Koetter asked the Turner and Schnyder the following questions about his pending repatriation:

- 1) whether upon his arrival in Germany he would be allowed to file an application to return—without prejudice. In other words, would the merits or demerits of his previous record be taken into consideration in connection with such an application.
- (2) In case he should deed his property over to his sons, would the deed be held to be legal.
- (3) Having deeded his property, would he subsequently be able to take advantage of the Pauper Act and as such proceed to fight the case of his deportation in the courts.⁹⁵

In his report, Turner expressed the following in response:

⁹⁴ “Karl Heinrich Brandt, No. 8, Chicago, Illinois,” Box 1, Folder “FBI- Informational Material- NOT objections- Lists 6 thru 9,” General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁹⁵ “Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas”, General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

In order to mollify the rather excitable internee and get on to other cases, your representative assured him that an effort would be made to obtain definite answers which might be passed on to his through the officer in charge of the Internment Camp.⁹⁶

Japanese internees to be repatriated by the U.S. government presented similar questions to the State Department official. They inquired about when the money that was confiscated from them upon their entrance to the camp would be returned, if their families native towns in Japan had been destroyed would they be able to live with relatives on the mainland U.S. or in Hawaii, as well as if those Japanese of American birth who repatriated would be allowed to return to the United States. The Department of Justice told first and second generation Japanese repatriates to sign a form saying they were leaving voluntarily. These Japanese internees wanted to know if that were used against them in case they wish to return.⁹⁷ Many internees wanted to know whether the government would cover the price of the cost to ship their excess baggage to their home countries. The internees had to surrender the money they had upon entering the camp, and wondered if they'd be given that back. Many had heard a rumor that this money would be kept by the government in order to cover repatriation costs.⁹⁸ As they were returning to participate in society again, many were concerned with having enough materials to survive and start back on their feet.

In some instances, internees requested to be repatriated and then later changed their minds. Officials held hearings to make the decision on whether or not they would remain or go back to their homelands. In Turner's report, thirty-six individuals at Crystal City had applied for repatriation and then wished to remain in the United States. Of these thirty-six, seven had not had a rehearing despite notification of one pending. Thirteen families had submitted their desire to

⁹⁶ "Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas," General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

have rehearings. These internees asked Turner if a decision regarding the re-hearings could be expedited.⁹⁹ Each applicant for repatriation was considered before the U.S. government, who made the decision to let them leave.

State Department files show that the British government was involved in these repatriation decisions as well. A letter from the U.S. Embassy in London to the United States Embassy in Washington D.C. attached lists their objections to the U.S. proposed repatriation candidates. Reasons the British list for rejection include the possession of skills such as radio expert and cryptographer, mechanic, espionage, photographer and laboratory technician, machinist, research chemist, and aviation expert.¹⁰⁰ Individuals with these backgrounds were seen as a threat to Great Britain, and it was considered safer to keep them imprisoned in the United States. This collaboration reflects the United States' compliance with their allies' wishes, as well as the potential danger repatriated Germans posed to Great Britain, due to Germany's proximity to England.

Art Jacob's father, a German living in Brooklyn with his family at the time of his arrest, was even registered for the Draft. He was never drafted, and was arrested by the FBI in 1944. He was put on parole, and was put before a hearing board. Jacobs describes his father's hearing:

... at the hearing board...you're not entitled to a lawyer. Lawyers are forbidden, but you are entitled to three witnesses, and my father had three witnesses. One was my mother; one was a Russian Jew named Dan Lipinski, very good friends of ours; and another was our aunt through marriage who was an American citizen. But those were my father's three witnesses. And of course, three of them said that he doesn't deserve to be interned, he has no Nazi tendencies, et cetera, et cetera. So from that hearing they released him and he was on parole.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ "Alien Internment Camp Crystal City, Texas," General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division.

¹⁰⁰ General Records of the Department of State, Records of the Special War Problems Division, Record Group 59, Box 1, Folder "British Objections- Lists I through 60 (our numbers)," National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰¹ Art Jacobs, Interview by William McWhorter.

This occurred in March of 1944, and in November, his father was arrested again. In April of 1945, his family headed to Crystal City on a guarded train from New York to Crystal City. They stayed at Crystal City until December 1, 1945. The war had ended on September 2, 1945. They were detained at Ellis Island until January 17, 1946, when they repatriated, by choice, back to Germany by ship. Art Jacobs spent twenty-two months in Germany, a place he had never been before. He describes his arrival in Bremerhaven:

And we were greeted¹⁰² as we got off the ship by machineguns, rifles, pistols, told to—spoken to in German, like “Mach schnell” which means hurry up, and down the gangplank under armed guard... Got out there—I mean, it was cold—got out there, was thrown into boxcars. The boxcars were shut and sealed, no facilities, no heat, no nothing, and taken to Ludwigsburg, Germany. My mom went once place and my dad and I and my brother went to this prison called Hohenasperg.¹⁰³

Art and his brother were released a few days later, after continuously explaining to the soldiers that they were also Americans:

I kept telling them, “I’m an American,” the guy would say, “Shut up! If you—see that hangman’s tree down there, if you’re not good, we’ll hang you from it. If that doesn’t work, we’ll shoot you.” So that was my greetings by my fellow Americans. I don’t hold that against them. They were just following orders. And we ate standing up, we walked with our hands on our head. It’s a miserable place.¹⁰⁴

The two Jacobs brothers, United States citizens, had never been to their parent’s native country and were shocked by the devastation the war had wrecked:

All I seen was shells of buildings, just everything was demolished. See little old ladies picking up bricks—there were no men to speak of—and everything was demolished. I mean, the roads were demolished, the buildings, there were nothing standing, just all shells.¹⁰⁵

The Jacobs family lived with their grandparents, and for twenty-two months, Art Jacobs attempted to return to the United States. He unsuccessfully attempted to stow away on ships headed for the U.S. Finally, he and his brother were able return, due to a sponsorship from a

¹⁰² By American soldiers

¹⁰³ Jacobs, Interview by William McWhorter.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

family in Kansas they had never met, that had heard of their plight. Their parents never returned to the United States, but the Jacobs boys lived with this generous family throughout their teenage years.¹⁰⁶ The Jacobs case demonstrates that repatriation was not simply a matter of numbers, but an immense struggle for many families. This is also true of the internment of the Japanese, interned in the highest volumes by the U.S. government.

The Japanese Internment

Due to a perceived imminent threat, the U.S. government interned individuals of Japanese descent in much larger numbers than Germans and Italians. The U.S. government interned Italian-Americans in significantly smaller capacity than Japanese and Germans, due to their considerable numbers and influence in the U.S. populace. By the end of 1943, after Fascist Italy surrendered, most Italians interned were either paroled or released.¹⁰⁷ After Pearl Harbor the U.S. government arrested thousands of prominent members of the West Coast Japanese community, held them in temporary holding centers, and eventually transported them to internment camps. Both Nisei, American citizens of Japanese descent and Issei, Japanese aliens, were amongst the arrested.¹⁰⁸ The U.S. army viewed the West Coast as the most vulnerable location to Japanese attack, and it had the highest number of Japanese citizens residing there. The U.S. Army placed the West Coast Japanese individuals in holding centers until WRA had completed the internment camps. Aizawa's family was sent to a relocation center in the San Francisco area with his family, and then to another in Utah, before they joined their father in Crystal City. He describes the experience as follows:

The assembly center was at the Tanforan Racetrack, where many of the families were housed in the horses' stalls, which stunk like heck because of the urine and the feces of the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ McWhorter, "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission.

¹⁰⁸ Davis, *Behind Barbed Wire*, 29.

animals, and they couldn't get rid of the smell even though they whitewashed it. We were lucky. We got into the barracks built in the center portion of the racetrack, and that was put together hastily and many families had to double up because of the shortage of space, and we had another family with us. But of course, families [were] cramped, so there were my mother, brother and sister, and myself plus the woman and her daughter joining us.¹⁰⁹

The focus on the incarceration of the Japanese Americans not only in scholarship but also by the U.S. government is also reflected in postwar reparation payments to the internees. In the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, the U.S. government formally recognized and apologized for the injustice of the relocation and internment of citizens and aliens of Japanese decent. The act also promised to fund an education incentive to enlighten the public on the internment of the Japanese, as well as to give each of the internees' monetary restitution amounting \$20,000.¹¹⁰ In *The Train to Crystal City* Russell explained that no bill comparable to the Japanese reparations has passed in Congress to review the treatment of Germans and German-Americans interned. This is because they were not only interned in significantly lower numbers, but also were detained on their potential as security risks during a period of war. Their internment was not based on their race, like the Japanese internment.¹¹¹ Crystal City Internment Camp treated all three ethnicities within the camp equally, and all had equal access to the facilities.

Conclusion

So they went and had gotten my father and they arrested him, and unbeknownst to my mother or my brother or I, he was picked up on, like, a Friday at his work, arrested in front of God and everybody, and taken away to Ellis Island. And that's how it all started and really was the destruction of our family as we knew it and our family life.¹¹²

Art Jacob was victim of the harshest realities of the Crystal City Internment camp experience; confusion and worry about the whereabouts of his father, voluntary internment with

¹⁰⁹ Aizawa, Interview by William McWhorter.

¹¹⁰ Donald, *We Were Not the Enemy*, xcii.

¹¹¹ Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*, 325.

¹¹² Art Jacobs, Interview by William McWhorter.

his family, and eventually repatriation to a devastated Germany. As a child, despite his status as a U.S. citizen, Jacobs had to remain with his family. He admitted to the trauma and strain that these events caused his family. At a period of complete upheaval for those deemed alien enemies and interned, daily life at Crystal City Internment Camp was benign.

The INS conceived Crystal City as a family friendly facility to intern those deemed enemy aliens. From its inception, The INS wanted Crystal City Internment camp to provide a more comfortable, bearable experience with the allowance of family members. The journey to Crystal City was traumatic for the majority of the internees. Shocked individuals were arrested with no explanation. Latin Americans were brought to a foreign continent. Families left the comfort and stability of their homes to join their arrested family member in the internment camp. Once these individuals arrived at Crystal City, the attending officials attempted to create an experience as comfortable as possible. According to official reports, camp officials did their best to respect the needs of the internees, as well as to treat them in a compassionate manner. The camp administrator Joseph O'Rourke in particular empathized with the plight of the internees and went out of his way to treat them humanely.

Daily life at the camp proved to be mild; internees were fed a healthy amount, children played in a pool, and anyone could become gainfully employed. The internees were provided entertainment and recreation activities, as well as reasonable clothing stipends and medical care. Camp officials gave internees the opportunity to practice different cultural aspects of their lives freely, as well as to meet with outside representatives from different organizations. Despite the obvious hardships loss of freedom brought, many of the internees, especially children, viewed the internment as tolerable.

Crystal City Internment Camp interned diverse individuals of a variety of

circumstances throughout World War II. U.S. citizen children, who had spent their lives immersed in American culture, joined their alien parents as prisoners in the isolated but reasonably comfortable interment camp. Latin American governments surrendered their citizens to the United States government for imprisonment. Many of the Latin Americans could not speak any of the languages spoken at the camp. Individuals of German, Japanese, and Italian descent joined one another in the only internment camp to hold all three Axis nationalities.

A number of the internees were repatriated to their countries of origin. Internees sent to war-torn Germany and Japan encountered harsh, shocking circumstances. The U.S. government repatriated many internees against their will, but a number willingly did so. Regardless, the internees encountered dire circumstances once they arrived; the war had decimated the economies and destroyed much of the food supplies, as well as entire cities.

The chief connection between the diverse internees held at Crystal City Internment Camp during World War II became mutual feelings of confusion and helplessness; not hostility and ill will toward the United States. Under the Department of Justice Alien Enemy Control Unit Program, thousands of innocent individuals of Japanese, German, and Italian descent were interned on American soil. Despite their loss of freedom, the officials running Crystal City attempted to make the experience of these individuals as comfortable as possible. Crystal City stayed open until February of 1948, over two years after the war was over. Crystal City Internment Camp reported no escape attempts.¹¹³

¹¹³ McWhorter, "Crystal City." Texas Historical Commission.

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Vita

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