Fuhr Family Story

My Internment by the US Government
By Eberhard E. Fuhr

My parents, Carl and Anna Fuhr, immigrated to the U.S. in 1927 and 1928. My father came in 1927, and my mother, along with my older brother, Julius and me, immigrated in 1928. We settled in Cincinnati, Ohio. My father, a baker, had been sponsored to immigrate to the U.S. by several people. One sponsor was Frank Grammer, who owned and operated one of the finest German restaurants in the Midwest. Another sponsor was the Concordia Lutheran Church of Cincinnati. My mother was a housewife. On October 13, 1929, my younger brother, Gerhard, was born.

In 1940, my parents, my older brother, and I were told by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the FBI to go to the downtown post office and register as aliens.

On August 5, 1942, my parents were taken into custody by the FBI. Several weeks later at hearings by a so-called hearing board (not a court of law), where they were not given the opportunity to face their accusers, they were ordered into internment. My younger brother, Gerhard, was just 12 years old at that time and preparing to go into the 6th grade at the Heberle School in Cincinnati. He had just been assigned his seat, when he was told to go home and pack our parents' clothes. They were not permitted to return home and pack for themselves.

My 12-year-old brother was interned with my parents, even though he was an American citizen, having been born in Cincinnati. Had he not joined my parents, he would have been sent to an orphanage, a fate shared by other internee children. On September 12, 1942, carrying clothing and belongings for himself and our parents, he took a taxicab to the U.S. Post Office garage, which was located on John Street in Cincinnati. The following day, the three of them boarded a train and headed for Chicago, Illinois, where they changed trains, and along with many other families, headed to Dallas and ultimately to the Federal Women's Prison in Seagoville, Texas. At that time there were 700-800 family internees in this large facility which was run by the I.N.S. They remained there until early July of 1943, when they were transferred to a camp in southwestern Texas called Crystal City.

Meanwhile, my brother, Julius (18) and I (17) were allowed to stay home, but had to fend for ourselves. My brother soon left for an Ohio college where he had an athletic scholarship. I lived alone. I went back to Woodward High School in Cincinnati where we lived for my senior year. I was actively involved in student life. I lettered, belonged to student clubs and was even on the Civil Defense Bomb Squad.

I earned enough from my newspaper route to survive. Periodically, an FBI agent called to question me. Once they picked me up about 8 PM, took me to their offices and questioned me for two hours under bright lights while toying with their guns. Their questions concerned family friends, attitudes about relatives in Germany and my parents' internment, what some neighbors

(unnamed, of course) were saying about me, and the like. I clearly was being watched. In January 1943, my brother dropped out of college and went to work in a Cincinnati brewery.

On March 23, 1943, while in class at Woodward High School, two FBI agents arrested me. I was 17. When passing through the doorways, one would precede with a drawn pistol, while the other held my left arm. When we got outdoors, I was handcuffed. I never returned to school and did not graduate two short months later. I lost not only belongings in my school locker, but my dignity.

The FBI Agents then took me to my brother's place of employment where he was arrested. We were taken to the city police station where we were booked on suspicion, fingerprinted, and taken to the Hamilton County Prison. This was built in the mid-1800's and had a medieval look of turrets with very high walls. A 5-tiered cellblock dominated the interior. Each cell was about 5' x 10' with a metal bucket as a toilet, a bed hung from the wall by 2 chains, and walls about 2' thick. We were given prison clothes and locked into separate cells some distance apart.

Soon after the barred doors clanged shut, the prisoners, convicted criminals, began yelling vicious threats about Nazis, Krauts, Huns and what we could expect just as soon as the cells would open in the morning. We hardly slept. We were brought to the Federal Building for our hearings. No witnesses or counsel were permitted. While my brother had his hearing, I was given the Cincinnati Enquirer. In shock, I read: "Two brothers interned. They will have a hearing and they will be interned." We hadn't had our hearings yet, but the newspaper announced our arrest and internment.

After my brother, I had my hearing before the "Civilian Alien Hearing Board" to face the same people that interned my parents 7 months earlier. There were 5 or 6 members on the board. One question concerned a statement I supposedly made about Hitler when I was twelve. Another question concerned my attendance at Coney Island German American Day and German American picnics in 1939 and 1940. They even had glossy photos of me from the picnics. The high point was when they asked, "What would you say to your German cousin if he came to you for sanctuary after coming up the Ohio River in his German U-boat." I said a sub couldn't come up the Ohio River, it only drafts 4 feet. Of course, they didn't like that response. Then they went into raw data, which is the "evidence" people call in and requires no substantiation because the informant is guaranteed anonymity. Any answers I gave seemed totally unacceptable, and I already knew that we were to be sent to Chicago for internment. I'd read it in the paper.

After questioning, my brother and I were again handcuffed and taken home. We were advised to take only enough clothes for about 2 days and to make sure all doors and windows were locked. This was the last time we ever saw the house. The contents were later looted: pictures stamp collection, violin, piano, furniture, keepsakes, irreplaceable family memorabilia—all treasured by my mother and gone forever. The house was lost to foreclosure. My parents could not afford to make the mortgage payments because they were interned. This was not unusual. Many homes were lost during internment. The government was not concerned about such matters. Incredibly, the elders of our church even stopped by after my parents were interned to demand their pledge. When we couldn't make payment, my parents were dropped from the rolls of the church.

We were taken back to the County prison and immediately locked into our cells. The next morning, Federal Marshals picked us for an auto trip to Chicago. This time we were each handcuffed to a front ring in a belt buckled in the belt. Additionally, we were handcuffed to each other, and, when we stopped for the usual offices, one of the marshals cuffed himself to one of us. These were needlessly intimate, embarrassing experiences. We were cuffed to a belt and cuffed to each other, which required us to almost face each other to move in any direction, never mind take care of necessities.

We arrived late at night at 4800 South Ellis Avenue in Chicago, but the other internees gave us a heartfelt welcome. We were there approximately three months. There were about 20 inmates. This number stayed fairly consistent as internees were periodically sent to camps in North Dakota and Texas, occasionally released, or newly interned. Definitely no longer luxurious, the building was formerly a small mansion complete with turrets, an 8' wrought iron fence, and a garage that formerly was a stable.

Ten days after my arrival, I turned 18. I knew by law that I was required to register for the draft and I was anxious to do my duty. The internment facility director disputed this. The Department of Justice advised him, however, not only that I had the right to register, but also that all males of 18, regardless of circumstances, were required to do so. Thus I registered at the Cook County Jail, which became my draft board during WWII.

In July 1943, we were sent to Crystal City, Texas, close to the Mexican border, on a heavily guarded train with about another 1,000 internees. The good news was that we were finally reunited with our parents and our younger brother. The bad news was that the fences were 12 feet high, with guard towers every 50 yards, and, except where irrigated, this was a harsh desert environment. Temperatures were often well over 100 degrees and the camp was filled with insects and scorpions. We received letters from friends and relatives, but these were heavily censored with much information cut out. Living conditions were tolerable at best.

In Crystal City I met Japanese for the very first time. The internee population was almost equally German and Japanese. Although the Japanese had their own cultural affairs, and events, we did compete in some sports. We generally had mutual access to all facilities. People came and went from the camp constantly, including Latin American Germans and Japanese who were brought from their countries primarily for exchange for American prisoners held by Axis countries. Many Germans and Japanese interned from America were also exchanged for American prisoners and suffered untold difficulties after the exchange. A marker commemorates only the internment of the Japanese at the camp. In general, the internment of German Americans is ignored, although at least 11,000 were interned, as well as a few thousand German Latin Americans.

After VE Day, we thought we would be released, but after VJ Day we were sure it would happen. It was not to be. President Harry Truman decided that those still interned at the end of the war were probably still "dangerous" and should be sent back to Germany. To my knowledge, this affected only the remaining several hundred persons of German ancestry still in custody. Everyone but internees of German descent left Crystal City by 1946. Those remaining, including my family, actually helped disassemble and close down the camp. Finally, in 1947, we were shipped to Ellis Island. The conditions were cramped, dirty and stultifying. Although we were

never deported, we continually felt threatened by such a possibility. I would never go back to Ellis Island. I spent too much time facing the back of the Statue of Liberty. I always felt that even though she had welcomed immigrants promising the American dream, she turned her back on us just because of our ancestry.

Finally, after a great deal of legal wrangling and a Congressional hearing, the Attorney General granted release to those remaining in custody in September 1947, two and a half years after the cessation of hostilities with Germany. My family had to start from scratch, burdened with the stigma of internment. My parents both died in 1965. They never really recovered emotionally or economically from what had happened to them. For me, although not an even exchange, old friends were replaced with new friends. I met my wonderful wife, Barbara, in Crystal City. We were married for almost 56 years before she died on May 28, 2004. Lost time and opportunity was supplanted by an obsession not to waste either one. I completed high school and graduated from Ohio University with highest honors. After 12 years with Shell Oil, I earned an MBA from the University of Wisconsin, and held responsible jobs until retirement.

My younger brother, Gerhard, was 17 years old when we were released and barely had an 8th grade education. He managed to find several jobs to tide him over in Cincinnati until, on November 4, 1947, in Fort Knox, Kentucky; he was sworn into the U.S. Army.

After basic training, he was sent to the European command in Germany. As a member of the 16th Regiment of the 1st U.S. Infantry Division, he helped protect borders in occupied Germany. In June of 1950, when North Korea attacked our troops in South Korea, President Truman extended his enlistment by one year. He was discharged after serving 4 years as a volunteer, 43 months of which were with the 1st division. He received 3 years of college education from the Korean GI Bill. Gerhard died on April 28, 2002.

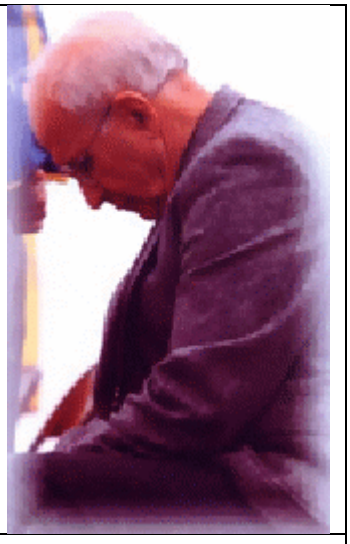
I was interned when I was 17 and released when I was 22. I did over 4 years of time for being German. Without experiencing internment, no one can appreciate the intense terror of government power and the despair of hopelessness and endless time one feels. In addition, an internee must suffer humiliation, stigmatization, and suspect "friends" who may have given damning "evidence" to the FBI, like whether one said something about Hitler at age 12. Understandably, many bear the psychological scars throughout their lives. Many have gone to their graves never speaking of their internment to their families, including my older brother, Julius, who died in 1999. A large majority of internees still do not speak out. We in the German American community must support and encourage these people to tell their stories at last without fear of recrimination. They are not criminals, but persons caught in a web of wartime hysteria. German Americans must support their people like the Japanese and Italian Americans before them.

A government has the right and duty to protect itself. But in America, civil liberties should not be cast aside so freely, even in times of war. Frequently, as a result of rumor and innuendo, families were torn apart and homes lost. Those who were a real threat to the US could have been controlled by means which did not violate civil liberties so severely. No internee was ever convicted of a crime. Spies and saboteurs were not interned. They were executed after receiving due process, the same due process internees, who were here legally, never received. The tragedy of Japanese American relocation is well known primarily because of the tremendous effort of their people. Are our people less deserving of recognition? German

Americans and our organizations must insist that our government finally acknowledge the wrongs committed against our people because of our ethnicity. No one will do it for us. Likewise, we remaining internees, much as we would like to keep these experiences locked away in a dark corner, owe it to others to publicize the whole story so that what we suffered never happens again.

In November of 2002, I attended a reunion at Crystal City. The reunion was a very special event, which evoked long depressed feelings in a place where I matured from a teenager into an adult. Because I was forced to go there in 1943 at the age of 18, I had lost every friend I had in high school from the football team, the baseball team, Spanish Club, as well as a girl friend. I had been vilified in the newspapers as a Nazi, ungrateful resident. At the Reunion I relived that, somewhat painfully, but meeting again some I was interned with, I realized how much internment contributed to my growth and helped me set goals. While at Crystal City, I replaced my high school friends with new ones like Millie Kesselring who was at the reunion, happily married and accompanied by her husband, Llewellyn. The reunion increased my resolve to get the internment story out, encouraged by the turnout of the formerly interned as well as the dedication of Richard Santos, Karen Ebel and others who had worked hard to make the reunion a success.

Eb Fuhr,
Crystal City,
Texas reunion speech



Eb Fuhr, Remembrance

	
Woodward High	4800 South Ellis Avenue in Chicago

The Fuhr Family
Standing: Gerhard, Anna, Eberhard, Julius
Seated: Carl

All images courtesy of Eberhard Fuhr.

Crystal City softball team, 1947

Crystal City basketball team, 1946

Ellis Island, 1947

GERMAN AMERICAN
Internee Coalition