

19 March, 2009

To the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law

Re: the Wartime Treatment Study Act (HR 1425), specifically the Special War Problems Division in Latin America

From a moral standpoint ... every foreign policy or series of policies must be judged both by its intentions and its consequences at home and abroad.

—Ernest W. Lefever

Thank you for allowing me to speak for my family. As you read this, please think of all the other German Latin Americans who had similar, or much worse, experiences because of United States government policies in World War II.

—Irma G. and her children were taken from Costa Rica to the States, but officials left behind her youngest child. They weren't reunited for more than a year.

—Ted E., his sister, and his mother were from Panama. Released from internment in the U.S. eventually, they were not allowed to return home. Instead his mother ended up on welfare, and the children were placed in an orphanage.

—The daughter of Willem E. has spent her entire adult life searching for her father, who was taken from El Salvador in 1942. The family received one letter from him, from Camp Empire, Balboa, Canal Zone. He has never been heard from again.

—A young Nicaraguan, Carlos R., was able to wriggle free from a train taking him from Germany to a Russian prison. His sixteen-year-old brother did not get out of that train and was never seen again. His failure to save his younger brother still haunts him.

My name is Heidi Gurcke Donald. My father and uncle, Werner Gurcke and Karl Oskar Gurcke, were German citizens who had lived in Costa Rica since the 1920s. In the early 1930s, Karl Oskar married a Costa Rican woman, Paulina Carlotta Vargas de Gurcke (known as Pany) with one young daughter, Hermida Jinesta. In 1936, my father married an American—Starr Pait, my mother—and they made their home in the capital, San José, where my sister, Ingrid, and I were born.

Blacklisted by the British in August 1940 and the United States in 1941, my father and uncle were arrested as Nazis and dangerous enemy aliens in 1942 and held without charges for six months. Then both our families were deported to the United States and interned in a camp at Crystal City, Texas.

Was my father a Nazi? Absolutely not. A governmental review of my father's case in 1946 concluded there was no evidence he even tacitly sympathized with Hitler's aims. Our family's whole ordeal hinged on unsubstantiated allegations by anonymous informants—and one fact; my father was born in Germany. (Review enclosed.)

Because my uncle and his family chose to be sent to Germany, (rather than face indefinite imprisonment), no U.S. government review of his case was ever done.

From 1940, when my parents were blacklisted in Costa Rica, until the day my father became a citizen of the United States on April 21, 1952, my parents lived with uncertainty and fear. If they had realized that even naturalized U.S. citizenship would not have safeguarded my father during the war years, they would never have felt secure again.

My father had a small business in San José, Costa Rica, importing buttons, textile, umbrellas, and watches. He and my mother fully planned to live out their lives there. My mother's early letters are filled with their adventures—hiking, horseback riding, exploring what was then very much a primitive, wild country.

I was born three months before the British blacklist was published in August 1940. My sister was born on the day the U.S. Proclaimed List was declared, July 17, 1941. Both listed my father and uncle and their businesses.

When my mother, a United States citizen, born and raised in San José, California, tried to collect moneys owed my father's business, she was also blacklisted. Our home was searched and my father's camera and their radio were taken. My father was particularly hurt by the loss of the camera. There would be no more pictures of us children for years, except official ones.

My parents tried to cope; they bought a small piece of land in the (then) rural area of San Juan de Tibás, hoping to become farmers to ride out the war. My mother wrote to a friend; "I can't imagine myself as a lady farmer or Werner as a gentleman one for that matter. But we could always learn."

Our funds were frozen. In Costa Rica bribes had to be paid to get any money out, and exorbitant taxes drained the accounts. My parents never recovered almost \$8,000.00, their life savings.

On July 15, 1942, my father was arrested and taken to prison. Two days later my mother wrote to her brother and sister-in-law. (Copy enclosed)

July 17, [1942]

Dear Charles and Virginia,

Since day before yesterday Werner has been in the local Penitentiary [sic]. For a week before he had had house arrest and we were happy. We haven't the

remotest idea why they arrested him or what's going to happen to him and the many others there. And they won't let me see anyone to find out the charges against him or to do any explaining. Heidi wakes up at nite screaming, "Papi, Papi" and today is Ingrid's first birthday.

Thank God, the kids are well, and I have a wonderful older woman to help me and leave them with when I drive to San José to spend a short 15 minutes with Werner and do all the chores.

As you see, my heart is breaking—
with all my love, Starr

Historian Max Friedman paints a grim picture of these prisons. The first was filled to overflowing, necessitating the construction of a new "concentration camp" to house more inmates. The prisoners themselves threw out filthy, vermin-infested bedding, voluntarily whitewashed the building, and sprayed cells with insecticide. Families brought in food whenever possible, since meals were of poor quality and insufficient quantity. Special services at the prison, like private rooms for conjugal visits or better food, could be had by bribing the guards.

German prisoners were interrogated in the office of the director of the secret police; they were offered more lenient treatment in exchange for cash or sex. No one was released from the prison without U.S. assent. (Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: the United States Campaign Against the Germans of Latin America in World War II*, 149.)

My father desperately wrote to United States officials:

8 September

In a last effort to solve the situation of my family, I, Werner Gurcke, now interned in the Concentration Camp in San José, Costa Rica, sincerely ask to consider the following points:

There does not exist a real motive for my internment otherwise than that I am a German, ... Even if you do think otherwise, there must be a mistake and I am sure to convince you to it, if you will have the kindness to present to me the reasons...

There was no response, no hearing, no legal procedures, nothing.

By the time of our deportation, the U.S. had decided that women and children remaining behind in Latin America, after their men were taken, were creating "a very dangerous focus of anti-United States propaganda" and should be removed, too. ("Memorandum Regarding the Activities of the United States Government in Removing from the Other American Republics Dangerous Subversive Aliens," 3 November 1942-enclosed)

When my mother, at age 83, told me about our actual deportation she broke down completely. It took more than a month for me to piece together the story, because she

often dissolved in tears after a sentence or two. She, my sister, and I were picked up in December 1942 and taken to the German Club, along with many other women and children. Sanitation was “indescribable,” according to my mother. Diapers had to be washed in the swimming pool. We children soon began to sicken. We were kept for about a week, then sent home, only to be re-arrested in early January.

Nothing had been done to clean between our stays. The pool was a festering sewer. Reunited with our husbands and fathers after another week at the Club, we were put on a train taking us to Puntarenas, the western port. There we were loaded onto the U.S.A.T. *Puebla*. For a week we sat in port, in blackout conditions. If any of you have visited the coasts of any Central American country, you’ll know how hot and humid it can be. Imagine being stuck below decks in a confined space with sick children and inadequate washing facilities. Try to visualize, as I often have, what my father and the other prisoners in the hold must have experienced.

We sailed on January 26. When we arrived at San Pedro, California, on February 6, many more of us were sick. At the holding facility there, on Terminal Island, we had hearings to determine our *right* to enter the United States. Visas and passports had been taken from us on shipboard, so we were declared to be in the U.S. illegally; that way we could be jailed indefinitely and/or deported to Germany. (Enclosed, one page of the manifest of the S.S. *Atlantida*, sailing from Nicaragua June 1942. There is a note on line 12: “Not provided with visas under instruction of Department of State.”)

I’ll skip to Crystal City, Texas, where we finally received adequate medical attention. Fifty-five children in our group of one hundred and thirty-one people were ill with whooping cough, according to a report on health care for interned enemy aliens published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2003. (See Louis Fiset, DDS, BA, “Medical Care for Interned Enemy Aliens: a Role for the US Health Service in World War II,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 2003 October; 93 (10): 1644-1654
<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1448029>).

“Two children arrived with acute medical needs requiring immediate, outside hospitalization. Most of the adults suffered from severe respiratory ailments. In all, 66 needed immediate medical attention, and it was feared that others who manifested symptoms of simple colds might turn into medical cases.” Medical personnel examined us on February 13. Both my sister and I had whooping cough, while my mother was treated for bronchitis and possible whooping cough.

Our ship was not the only one with abominable sanitary conditions. “The *Acadia*, with cabin space for 200 passengers, took on board a total of 675 Axis nationals from Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia...resulting in ‘unimaginable overcrowding,’ food shortages, and a lack of bathing facilities.” (Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbor*, 116)

When the *Frederick C. Johnson* sailed from Peru, women and children were assigned bunks, without guardrails, in tiers of four. There was one latrine for use by all prisoners.

Inadequate water supplies meant no bathing or washing, and drinking water was unavailable for much of the night. (*Pawns in a Triangle of Hate*; C. Harvey Gardiner)

My father was released from Crystal City on May 22, 1944, designated an “internee-at-large.” In 1946 he was no longer an “alien enemy” but the day he received that notice, an arrest warrant was issued because he’d entered the U.S. “illegally.” Eighteen neighbors signed a petition urging the State Department not to send him to Germany. Several more years of uncertainty and struggle followed. He became a U.S. citizen in 1952. (Arrest warrant enclosed.)

My parents suffered so much because of the United States’ sweeping indictment of citizens of enemy nations during the War. It is nonsense to assert, as a 1942 memo did, written and distributed to all U.S. diplomatic posts in Latin America, that, “all German nationals without exception, all Japanese nationals, a small proportion of Italian nationals, ... are all dangerous.” (See “Memorandum Regarding the Activities of the United States Government in Removing from the Other American Republics Dangerous Subversive Aliens,” 3 November 1942-enclosed)

At least 8,500 German nationals and numerous other Axis residents in Latin-American countries were indiscriminately rounded-up in local detention centers. An unknown number were sent by the United States directly to Germany, while 4,058 Germans were forcibly brought to U.S. detention facilities, often euphemistically called “camps.” 3317 German Latin Americans were shipped through the U.S. to Germany, many exchanged for civilians being held there. (White to Lafoon memo enclosed)

(Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors*, 3, 120. In total, 10,905 Germans were interned, including those brought to the United States and voluntary internees, White to Lafoon, January 1946, “Statistics,” Subject Files 1939–54, Box 70, Special War Problems Division, RG 59 (National Archives, College Park, Maryland). German Nationals Deported by the Other American Republics Who Were Deported Via the United States,” 25 Apr 1946, folder “711.5,” Ecuador: Quito Embassy Confidential File, Box 35, RG84, NA.

In 1942 my father wrote to U.S. officials; “When I wrote you last, ...I thought the fate [of my family] cannot be indifferent to you. ...It is therefore my duty to recall to your mind that the prolongation of my internment will inevitable lead to disaster...”

No one in the United States government seemed to care at the time. *I can only hope that you are not indifferent now.* It is time—it is past time—to form a Commission to study the Alien Enemy Control Program and the Special War Problems Division, before we are written out of history.

The Special War Problems Division in Latin America and the Alien Enemy Control Program in the United States damaged enormous amounts of people, cost enormous amounts of money, and did little to make the U.S. safer. My parents, along with thousands of others, lost their livelihoods, their homes and personal property, their countries and their freedom. Some lost their lives when they were exchanged for civilians being held in war-torn countries. (12 Dec 1942 Marshall memo enclosed)

I think we as a people can—and should—do better than that.

(I will hand-deliver a copy of my book, *We Were Not the Enemy: Remembering the United States' Latin American Civilian Internment Program of World War II*)

Enclosures:

21 Jan 1946 review of allegations against Werner Gurcke (3 pages)

June 1942 newspaper copy of U.S. Proclaimed List in Costa Rica

17 July 1942 letter from Starr Pait Gurcke

3 Nov 1942 "Memorandum Regarding the Activities of the United States Government in Removing from the Other American Republics Dangerous Subversive Aliens" (4 pages)

12 Dec 1942 Marshall memo (2 pages)

1943 Crystal City, TX envelope

1943 Gurcke family mug shot, Crystal City, TX Internment Camp

photo of our baggage tags, dating from 1943

photo of Crystal City Internment Camp "coins"

12 Feb 1946 arrest warrant for Werner Gurcke

21 Feb 1944-German memo of repatriate numbers from *Gripsholm* voyage my uncle, aunt, and cousin were on

30 Jan 1946 White/Lafoon memo (3 pages)

I've also enclosed a few other documents:

Page of the manifest of the S.S. *Atlantida*, sailing from Nicaragua June 1942. There is a note on line 12: "Not provided with visas under instruction of Department of State."

Nov 1943 Cabot/Knapp memos (3 pages)

For the history of the overall German Latin American experience and more families' stories, see www.gaic.info. *Nazis and Good Neighbors: the United States Campaign Against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* by Max Paul Friedman, Cambridge University Press, 2003, is a great source of information.