

Private Memory, Public Records, and Contested Terrain: Weighing Oral Testimony in the Deportation of Germans from Latin America During World War II

by Max Paul Friedman

As World War II spread from Europe and Asia to the Western Hemisphere, the conflict between the United States and Germany for influence in Latin America took a peculiar turn. U.S. officials in embassies and consulates from Lima to Havana drew up lists of local residents of German and Japanese origin suspected of subversive or potentially subversive activity. Under pressure from Washington, fifteen Latin American nations eventually handed over some 4,000 German and 2,000 Japanese civilians to the U.S. military, to be deported and interned in camps in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Florida, and Tennessee. Of the Germans, two-thirds were sent on to Germany from 1942 to 1945, exchanged for Americans during the war.¹

The German deportees formed a motley crowd: in addition to some Nazi Party members, a handful of spies, and flag-waving German nationals, there were Spanish-speaking descendants of German immigrants, Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, and children of mixed marriages with one foot on either side of the Atlantic. Even those who held citizenship by birth or naturalization in a Latin American country were not exempt.²

“Enemy aliens” have often met a similar fate in wartime. During the Boer War, British authorities interned Afrikaner civil-

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¹ Memo to Lafoon, 30 January 1946, in folder “Statistics,” Subject Files 1939–1954, Box 70, Special War Problems (hereafter SWP), Department of State General Records, RG59, National Archives (hereafter NA), College Park, MD.

² Author analysis of 600 Alien Enemy Control Section internee reports from 1945–1947 in Name Files of Interned Enemy Aliens from Latin America, SWP, RG59, NA.

ians in what were the earliest so-called “concentration camps.” French citizens of German and Austrian origin were stripped of their citizenship and deported from France in the First World War.³ When British officials, facing an apparently unstoppable Nazi onslaught alone in 1940, moved to place German nationals including Jewish refugees in internment camps, they eschewed individual hearings in favor of rapid action and followed Churchill’s instructions to “Collar the lot!”⁴ Soviet officials likewise expelled whole communities of ethnic Germans living on the Volga in response to the German invasion of 1941. Allied citizens were rounded up and interned in Germany and Japan and the countries under their occupation. The WWII internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the United States was perhaps the largest such action, but during the war, “enemy aliens” were interned from China to Egypt, from Poland to the Philippines.⁵

What made the deportation of Germans from Latin America unusual was the extra-territorial reach of the United States government, which identified suspected “dangerous enemy aliens” in other countries (including neutral countries) and organized their removal to the USA. The fact that Germans and Italians, and not only Japanese, were interned in the United States has long been overlooked; that some of these internees came from Latin America is even less known.⁶

This obscure and complex story is only just beginning to receive the attention of scholars—but not for any lack of primary source material. Researchers can explore ample stores of docu-

³ Carl Joachim Friedrich, “Naturalization,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Edwin R.A. Seligman, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1930–1935), 309.

⁴ Peter and Leni Gillman, “Collar the Lot!” *How Britain Interned and Expelled its Wartime Refugees* (London: Quartet Books, 1980).

⁵ There is of course no comparison made here to the German treatment of Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. The records of the Special War Problems Division of the State Department contain internee lists and correspondence regarding wartime internment camps worldwide. For individual countries, see SWP finding aid, RG59, NA. Of the extensive literature on Japanese American internment, see especially Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); John Tateishi, ed., *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps* (New York: Random House, 1984); Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America’s Concentration Camps* (New York: William Morrow, 1976).

⁶ On German and Italian internment in the U.S., see Arnold Krammer, *Undue Process: The Untold Story of America’s German Alien Internees* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); and Steve Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans During World War II* (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

ments in government archives on three continents. And they are hurrying to take advantage of another key source before it vanishes: the living memories of the German deportees themselves.

As part of the first full-scale investigation of the deportation program, the author conducted archival work in seven countries and interviewed fifteen deportees who returned after the war to their homes in Latin America. The selection process was simple: all those who could be located who were of sound mind were included. In addition, twenty-five family members, community members, and government officials were interviewed. The conversations took place in German, Spanish, or English, according to the preference of the interviewee.⁷

In some ways, the documents tell one story, the participants another. Records from the State and War Departments describe this as a vital security program that successfully broke up propaganda operations and subversive networks that otherwise would have left Latin American countries, the Panama Canal, and the United States itself vulnerable to German attack.⁸ These fears were not unfounded. In 1933, the Nazi Party had created a special unit for the recruitment of German expatriates, to be named the *Auslandsorganisation* (Foreign Organization), or AO. The unit met with disappointing results; according to Party documents captured at the end of the war, Nazi Party membership among the Germans living in Latin American countries ranged from three to eight percent.⁹ But by distributing Nazi propaganda, flying the swastika flag and occasionally being photographed in public in brownshirts, the members of the AO did create the impression of having united the German communities of Latin America solidly behind Hitler. The *Abwehr*, the German military espionage organization, and to a lesser extent the competing *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence service of the SS, both recruited agents from

⁷ The author's German-sounding name and slight accent in German led nearly every interviewee to assume that the author was the American child of German parents. This impression, always rectified but usually well into the conversation, helped to create a rapport that generally lasted beyond the point where the mistake was corrected.

⁸ "Memorandum regarding activities of the United States Government in removing from the other American Republics dangerous to subversive aliens," 3 November 1942, 3, Subject Files, Box 180, SWP, RG59, NA; *Axis Espionage and Propaganda in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Military Intelligence Division, War Department, 1946).

⁹ Senate Committee on Military Affairs, *Nazi Party Membership Records*, Senate Committee Prints 79/2/46, Part 2, March 1946, and Part 3, September 1946, S1535–S1538 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946).

among the German expatriates in Latin America; although their efforts yielded little of value, their activities were of obvious concern.¹⁰ And U.S. intelligence reports discussed the danger of a German paramilitary organization, composed of civilians with secret training, ready to launch an assault on the Canal. The organization did not exist, but in the early years of the war, with Germany and Japan scoring victory after victory, reports of this nature were taken seriously, and were played up by President Roosevelt in his effort to garner support for U.S. intervention.¹¹

In contrast, deportees recalling the events tend to emphasize the random nature of the arrests, their own innocence of any involvement in subversive activity, and the economic interests concealed behind U.S. rhetoric about protecting the hemisphere. They also blame Latin American governments for sending them out of the country in order to seize their property.

Where does the truth lie? Oral historians often privilege individual testimony because documents, especially government documents, are an elite form of record-keeping, and because documents, especially government documents, have no monopoly on truth. "Oral history . . . is no worse than written documents," writes Alice Hoffman. "Archives are replete with self-serving documents, with edited and doctored diaries and memoranda written 'for the record.'"¹²

Yet oral historians also are aware that personal memory is selective and subjective, and a willingness to accept all testimony at face value can sabotage the enterprise of writing accurate his-

¹⁰The story is thoroughly reported in Leslie B. Rout, Jr. and John F. Bratzel, *The Shadow War: German Espionage and United States Counterespionage in Latin America During World War II* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, Inc., 1986). The shallowness of German intelligence reporting from Latin America is made clear from a perusal of the SD reports contained in Fiche 2973, Südamerika: SD-Meldungen, Inland IIg. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (hereafter PAAA), Bonn, Germany. See also Stanley E. Hilton, *Hitler's Secret War in South America 1939-1945* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

¹¹FBI, *Colombia Today*, March 1942, in folder "FBI Reports-Colombia," Box 141, Harry Hopkins Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park, NY; and Braden to SecState, 15 December 1941, 862.20221/428, RG59, NA. Reference to the paramilitary organization disappeared from post-war FBI reporting. Hoover to Lyon, 17 July 1946, 862.20210/7-1746, RG59, NA. For FDR's comments, see, for example, Russell D. Buhite and David W. Levy, eds., *FDR's Fireside Chats* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 192.

¹²Alice Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History," in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 72.

tory. Thus David Henige urges us to “mistrust” even eyewitness accounts for fear of the speaker’s “out-and-out bias.”¹³

This dilemma was made clear during the interview process. Gerardo Bohnenberger was nineteen years old when he was deported to a U.S. Army base in Florida along with his father, owner of the largest hardware store in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala’s second-largest city. Born in Guatemala to German parents, the younger Bohnenberger considered himself a Guatemalan, held Guatemalan citizenship, and grew up speaking Spanish. His name appeared, along with his father’s, on a 1942 U.S. embassy list of suspected “dangerous enemy aliens.” Bohnenberger was fingered as “second-in-command of the Nazi Party in Quetzaltenango,” and his father as “district chief.”¹⁴

I was skeptical of these labels going into the interview. I knew that U.S. intelligence agents drawing up lists of subversives had very little hard evidence to work with, relying instead on local informants and denunciations. Many of the FBI and military intelligence officers rushed to embassies in Latin American capitals spoke neither Spanish nor German. Their work resulted in the round-up of a fair number of Nazi organizers, but it also swept up Communists, anti-Nazi *Freie Deutschen*, simple farmers, vagrants, and some eighty Jewish refugees in the hunt for dangerous Germans. All were placed in the camps together, and the many mistakes not sorted out until after the war had ended.¹⁵

In the interview, I asked Bohnenberger why he thought he had been selected for deportation. He told me he had wondered the same thing, and asked his American captors during an interrogation in the camp. “We are waging a commercial war,” they told him. “What good would it do to have deported your father and leave you behind? You would have taken over the business.”¹⁶

This explanation is not implausible. It is the interpretation favored by the only major journalistic investigation of the program thus far,¹⁷ as well as the first oral history work by a U.S.

¹³ David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982), 111–112.

¹⁴ AmEmbGuatemala to DoS, 22 December 1942, in folder “Important Papers,” Name Files of Enemy Aliens 1942–1948, Box 31, SWP, RG59, NA.

¹⁵ Author analysis of 600 Alien Enemy Control Section internee reports from 1945–1947 in Name Files of Interned Enemy Aliens from Latin America, SWP, RG59, NA.

¹⁶ Interview, Gerardo Bohnenberger, Guatemala City, 18 May 1996. All English translations of interviews and documents by the author.

¹⁷ Lea Thompson, “Round-up,” *Dateline NBC*, 30 November 1994.

scholar.¹⁸ U.S. officials since 1940 had been blacklisting German companies and individuals, as they had done in World War I, but far more extensively and more successfully.¹⁹ Throughout the war, U.S. diplomats continued to press Latin American governments to expropriate German holdings. The stated rationale was to deny funds to local pro-German activities, since it was a standard Nazi tactic to encourage or extort contributions from German businesses.²⁰ A welcome side effect of this blacklisting campaign was to shore up the dominant U.S. economic position in the hemisphere: Germans were the primary or secondary U.S. competitors in nearly every Latin American country. As Washington saw it, defending national security in a world war meant weakening the enemy wherever possible, and if that brought advantages to the United States, so much the better.²¹

Still, if the Bohnenbergers were taken from their home and placed in a prison camp without hearings, then shipped to Germany at the height of the war (where Gerardo's father would be killed in an Allied air raid), simply to enhance the U.S. economic position in Latin America, that might have been stretching the notion of fair play farther than many people would accept.

Bohnenberger read down the U.S. embassy list until he came to his own name. And he read it again.

"Incredible," he said. "My father and I, chiefs of the Nazi Party? Never. We were against them," he said heatedly. "This is a pure lie." Bohnenberger went on to explain that his father had been thrown out of the German Club for opposing the Nazis, and that it must have been an informant, perhaps a business rival, who denounced them to the U.S. embassy.²²

¹⁸ Stephen Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag: A Biography of German Internment in World War II—An Oral and Documentary History*. <http://sorrel.humboldt.edu/~scf1/draft.shtml>, 1997.

¹⁹ Acheson, *Action Taken by the United States Government in the Economic Field to Eliminate Axis Influence from the Other American Republics*, 2 June 1942, in folder "711 1942," Colombia: Bogota Embassy, Security-Segregated General Records, 1938–1949, Box 23, RG84, NA.

²⁰ Zinsser, Christian, December 1942, in folder "Zinsser, Christian," Box 45, Office of Naval Intelligence, RG38, NA; see also Alton Frye, *Nazi Germany and the American Hemisphere* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 70.

²¹ Quotations to this effect from Roosevelt administration officials are collected in Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 111, 126, 128.

²² Bohnenberger interview.



Hugo Droege, here at age 92. Droege was deported from Guatemala to the United States in 1943. Photo by Christoph Blohm.

The second interviewee was a much older deportee named Hugo Droege. Ninety-six years old at the time of the interview, Droege was nearly blind but still walked without a cane, ate heartily, and told vivid stories from fifty years ago as if no time had passed at all. Droege had fled unemployment in Weimar Germany and came to Guatemala in 1920. He worked and saved a little capital, carved a small plantation out of malarial jungle in the highlands, and soon prospered growing coffee and cardamom. Isolated on his remote farm with his family, Droege was left alone until 1943, when he was arrested by Guatemalan security forces in the middle of the night, placed in the hold of a ship, and disembarked at New Orleans. After a year in a Texas camp he was sent, against his will, to the Third Reich. Droege survived the war,

Russian occupation, and the deadly winter of 1946. Returning to Guatemala after four years separation from his family, he discovered that his farm had been expropriated in his absence.²³

Why was Hugo Droege deported? He gave the same reason as other deportees: Before the war, Germans grew forty percent, and exported seventy percent, of Guatemala's coffee—a powerful economic position. Deportations and expropriations urged by Washington devastated the German holdings.²⁴

I read to Droege from a copy of his camp registration form. Along with his photograph, fingerprint, and biographical details, the form—filled out by a U.S. official—noted that he had joined the Nazi Party in 1934.²⁵ “That wasn't a real membership,” said Droege. “When I got to Germany, they asked me if I was a member, because you couldn't even get bicycle tires if you weren't a member then, and I didn't get anything because I wasn't. This is the first I've heard that I was signed up.”²⁶

The U.S. did not take all the Germans away, he said. “Only the ones with money got taken.” Hugo Droege, like Gerardo Bohnenberger, had no doubt that his deportation was influenced by economic factors. In his case, too, the documents told one story, the testimony another.

Alice Hoffman suggests that oral historians who encounter conflicts between the documentary record and the testimony of informants ask the informant to explain the difference.²⁷ Droege and Bohnenberger had considered my photocopies and offered plausible explanations. Was my task completed?

Documents, of course, can lie. The quality of U.S. intelligence in Latin America was notoriously inconsistent in this period, and some reports seem laughable today, such as the FBI's warning of the grave threat posed by the German community of Bolivia, 12,000 strong—of whom 8,500 were Jewish refugees with no particular love for Nazism.²⁸

²³ Hugo Droege, interview with author, Guatemala City, 22 May 1996.

²⁴ *German Coffee Growers in Guatemala*, 17 November 1941, R&A 146, in Office of Strategic Services Intelligence Reports, RG59, NA; Kenneth J. Grieb, “Guatemala and the Second World War,” *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* 3, no. 4 (1977).

²⁵ “Information re persons proceeding to U.S. internment camp,” form for Hugo Droege, in folder “Dr,” Reports on Interned Enemy Aliens 1942–1947, Box 53, SWP, RG59, NA.

²⁶ Droege interview.

²⁷ Hoffman, “Reliability and Validity,” 71.

²⁸ FBI, *Bolivia Today*, June 1942, in folder “FBI Reports—Bolivia,” Box 141, Harry Hopkins Papers, FDR Library.

But not all documents are created equal. Nazi Party cards for members living in foreign countries, collected in Germany, were saved from being pulped at the end of the war when the owner of a paper mill turned them over to U.S. occupation authorities.²⁹ These are not unconfirmed reports by unreliable informants. They are hard evidence. There are membership cards in the German Nazi Party files of the Berlin Documents Center for both Droege and Bohnenberger's father.³⁰

One standard of oral history, expressed by William Lang and Laurie Mercier, holds that "Reliability in oral history refers to the fundamental reliability of the product." That is, not whether the facts as stated are true, but whether the narration faithfully represents the opinions and viewpoints of the speaker.³¹ Fair enough. But, we might ask, how useful is that standard when we are dealing with a controversial episode for which there is practically no existing literature against which to assess the testimony?

In this case the point is not that Droege and the elder Bohnenberger were Party members and therefore necessarily dangerous. Germans at home and abroad joined the Party for reasons ranging from ideological fanaticism to opportunism, peer pressure, and simple patriotism. For those living in Latin America, with limited access to information about events in Germany and little or no direct experience of Nazi repression and violence, it was even easier to overlook the virulence of Nazism's methods and goals.³² Hugo Droege kept to himself, lived a full day's ride from the nearest town, and very rarely attended German community events.³³

²⁹ Senate Committee on Military Affairs, *Nazi Party Membership Records*.

³⁰ Ortsgruppenkartei, reels B0072 [Bohnenberger] and D0084 [Droege], Berlin Documents Center, NA.

³¹ William L. Lang and Laurie K. Mercier, "Getting it Down Right: Oral History's Reliability in Local History Research," *Oral History Review* 12 (1984): 81–99. Alice Hoffman distinguishes between reliability, meaning whether a source tells the story consistently with each telling, and validity, meaning whether the story is true, as measured against other evidence. Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity," 69.

³² See Jean-Pierre Blancpain, "Des visées pangermanistes au noyautage hitlérien: Le nationalisme allemand et l'Amérique latine (1890–1945)," in *Revue historique*, 281, no. 2 (1990): 473–477; Reiner Pommerin, *Das Dritte Reich und Lateinamerika: Die deutsche Politik gegenüber Süd- und Mittelamerika 1939–1942* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1977), 35, 41–42; Patrik von zur Mühlen, *Fluchtziel Lateinamerika. Die deutsche Emigration 1933–1945: politische Aktivitäten und soziokulturelle Integration* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1988), 60–61.

³³ Anonymous leading member of Jewish community, interview with author, Guatemala City, 29 April 1996; Droege interview. Hugo Droege, although he has lived in Guatemala

The unadorned fact of his Party membership, as reflected in the documents, leaves an impression that probably does not truly reflect the kind of person he was sixty years ago, since nowadays we can imagine only one kind of fervent Nazi Party member. Droege's equivocal response to the question of his Party membership may, in fact, more fully represent his generally apolitical, go-it-alone outlook as a younger man.

With the luxury of hindsight, a good case can be made that such people did not actually pose a security threat, and that Nazism meant something different to them, then, from what it means to us today. But at the time, U.S. officials believed that Party members, who swore an oath of loyalty to Hitler, were ready to follow any order sent from Berlin.³⁴ "Membership in the Party was sufficient [grounds for deportation] because it was assumed that they would be of sympathies or persuasions so that that individual would do anything he could to further the Party's interest," explained Justice Department official Raymond Ickes. "I knew two or three . . . [who were] members of the Nazi Party almost from its inception and they were absolutely apolitical. I'm sure they joined because some nice German came along and said 'Here, won't you join in and come and have a beer with us.' This was not an unknown situation. But we weren't going to take a chance on it."³⁵ Historians need not make a judgment about the deportees' degree of participation in the German war effort, non-existent in most cases, much less ascribe guilt or responsibility to individuals thousands of miles away from the conflict, to realize that their Party affiliation must have loomed large in the eyes of U.S. officials. By playing down or denying their connections to the Nazi organization, the deportees may be trying to cast themselves in the best possible light, or they may wish in this way to depict themselves as they believe they were, not as what we think of today as "Nazis." But by evading the fact of their membership, they present an incomplete account of events.

for seventy-nine years, was unknown to most of the members of the tightly-knit German community interviewed for this study. Droege's name appears exactly twice in Regina Wagner's exhaustive and minutely detailed *Los Alemanes en Guatemala, 1828-1944* (Guatemala City: Afanes, 1996), both times in lists of coffee plantation owners.

³⁴ Ickes to Nester, 18 March 1943, in folder "711," Ecuador: Quito Embassy Confidential File, Box 10, RG84, NA.

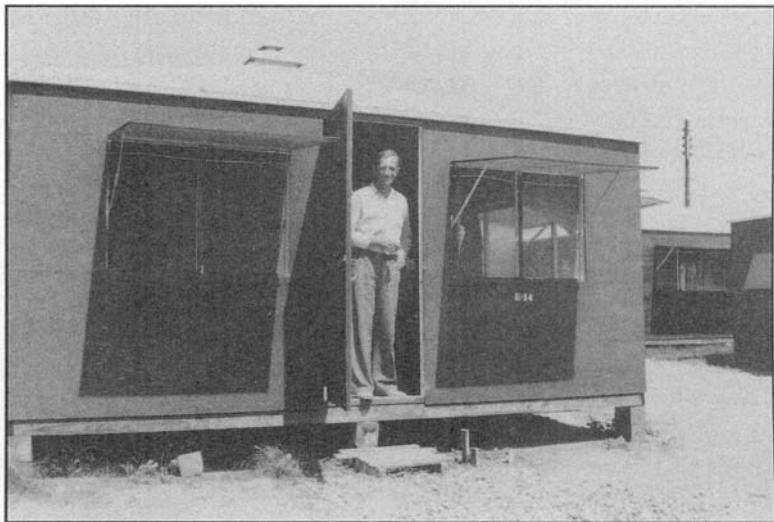
³⁵ Interview, Raymond Ickes, Berkeley, CA, 18 September 1997.

One school of thought in oral history holds that the value of an interview is to help us understand the contemporary perspective of the speaker, the “creation of meaning.”³⁶ This is, indeed, a worthwhile project, but it is a different one. While it can be interesting to learn the present sympathies and feelings of these elderly Germans, and to know that they are no longer comfortable admitting their former Party membership (a pattern repeated in several other interviews), that does not necessarily help us understand their sympathies and ideological leanings and actions at the time of the war—and, more to the point, it does not help us better comprehend the nature of the deportation program. We want to know what happened, and why. Gaining insight into present-day attitudes when we are investigating the past is not worthless, but it is at best a consolation prize.

The interviews conducted in Latin America yielded plenty of useful material as well. The Germans corroborated one another’s accounts of the conditions in the camps, which were further confirmed by inspection reports of the International Red Cross and Swiss Embassy representatives and by letters internees wrote home. These various sources showed that the main internment site for men, Camp Kenedy, was not finished when the first transports arrived. The two hundred prefabricated “Victory Huts” leaked when it rained and provided little warmth against cold desert nights, and little protection from stinging bugs and poisonous centipedes. Morale was low among the bewildering assortment of Germans, Japanese, and a few Italians and other nationalities, many of whom did not know why they had been deported. The group was divided into factions, with committed Nazis threatening and occasionally beating those internees who cooperated with camp authorities, and German Jews segregated into separate quarters at one end of the camp.³⁷ Interviews and records concur that conditions improved considerably after mid-1942, when camp officials and internees both started investing their time in planting gardens and repairing buildings. But the divisions

³⁶ See, for example, Ronald J. Grele, “On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction,” *Journal of American History* 74 (September 1985): 570.

³⁷ Skowronski to Auswärtiges Amt, 29 May 1942, R41557, Zivilgefangenen-Austausch-Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, Rechtsabteilung, PAAA; Hermann Egner to Swiss Legation Washington, *Alien Detention Camp Kenedy-Texas*, 27 June 1942, R41562, Zivilgefangenen-Austausch-Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, Rechtsabteilung, PAAA.



A German internee in his prefabricated “Victory Hut” at Camp Kenedy, Texas. Source: Habicht inspection report, 18 August 1942, Band 1, E2200 Washington/15, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bern, Switzerland.

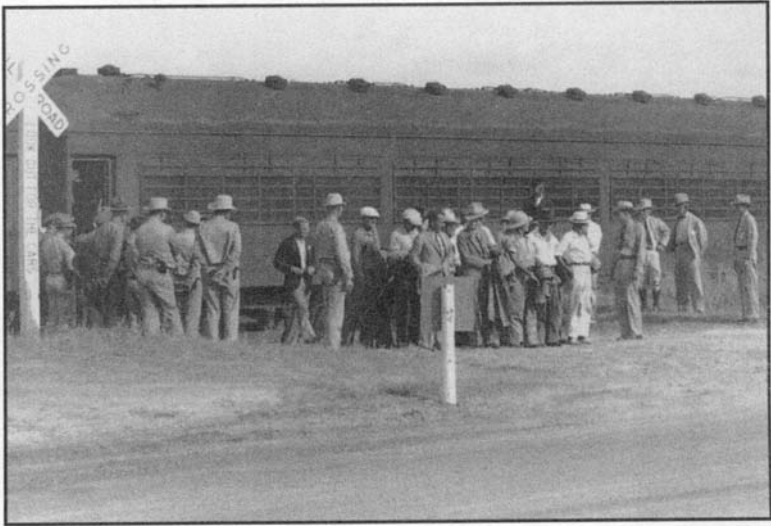
remained. When twenty-nine-year-old Gunter Lisken arrived at Camp Crystal City from Ecuador in 1944, a big German-American man came up to him and growled, “Listen up, kid. In this camp we’re all Nazis and whoever doesn’t go along, we’ll break his skull.” Nothing happened to Lisken, but he witnessed attacks against other non-Nazis.³⁸

For the duration of the war, most camps offered ample meals, decent housing, schools, sports fields, even a swimming pool. Every child got a liter of milk a day, and so did every couple. “Arturo Contag had eight kids, so every morning there were nine liters of milk on his porch,” remembered Lisken. “He always said, ‘I never had it this good in Ecuador.’”³⁹ Most of the interviewees described their overall treatment in the U.S.—the basic facts of deportation and deprivation of liberty aside—as excellent.⁴⁰

³⁸ Interview, Gunter Lisken, Guayaquil, 17 February 1998.

³⁹ Lisken interview.

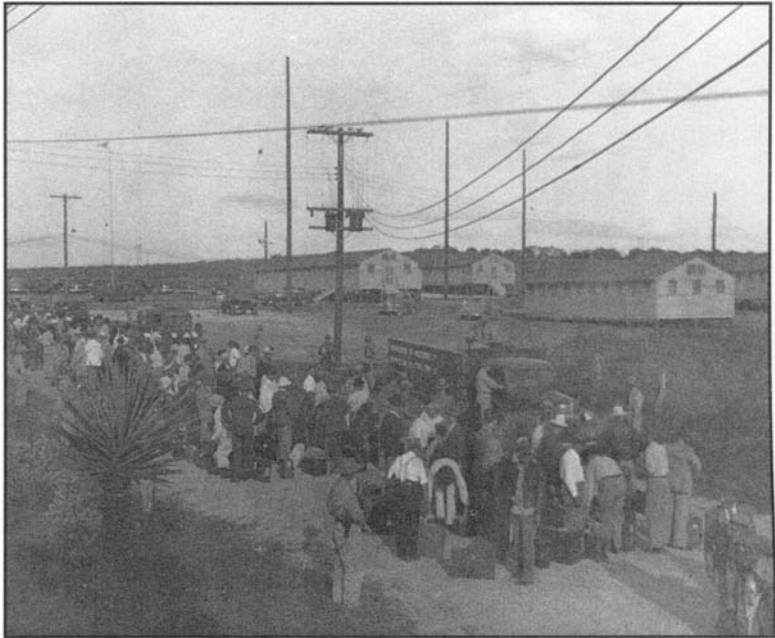
⁴⁰ Karl-Albrecht Engel, *Zusammenfassender Bericht über die Zeit von 1942–1945 (Guatemala—Internierung USA)*, 18 June 1945, R 64 III/6, Heimkehrerberichte über Südamerika, Lateinamerikanischer Verein, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Germany; Max Habicht to Swiss Foreign Ministry, *Report on the Visit to Detention Stations for Civilian Internees*



German deportees from Latin America arriving for internment at Camp Kenedy, Texas, 1943–1944. Source: RG59-RAG, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Raymond Ickes, the Justice Department official quoted earlier, is one of the last U.S. officials still living who was intimately involved in the deportation program. The son of Roosevelt's Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, he was a young assistant district attorney given a special assignment in 1943. The liberals at Justice, including Attorney General Francis Biddle and the director of the Alien Enemy Control Unit, Edward Ennis, were concerned at the number of innocuous individuals from Latin America who were filling up camps intended for "dangerous enemy aliens." They sent Ickes, who spoke fluent Spanish, on a tour of fifteen Latin American countries to inspect future deportation lists. He wound up cutting most of them by half or more, reject-

in the United States of America, 18 August 1942, Band 1, E2200 Washington/15, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (hereafter SBA), Bern, Switzerland; Swiss Legation Washington to DoS, 14 January 1944, Band 10, Noten an Staatsdepartment, January–June 1944, E2200 Washington/15, SBA; Gufler and Herrick, "Report on Civilian Detention Station, Camp Kenedy," 22 May 1942, 740.00115EW1939/4715, RG59, NA; interviews with Droege, Bohnenberger, Hans Kolter, Hans Niemann, and Walter Maul, Guatemala City, May 1996; with Gunter Beckmann, Quito, 21 January 1998; Alfredo Brauer, Quito, 5 February 1998; Eva Block, Guayaquil, 18 February 1998, Gunter Liskén, Guayaquil, 17 February 1998; Walter Sommer, Bogotá, 13 March 1998; Hans Joachim Schaer, San José, 26 March 1998.



Internees from Latin America held at Camp Kenedy, Texas, assemble for repatriation to Germany, 1943–1944. Source: RG59-RAG, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

ing cases where there was no credible evidence of any potential threat.⁴¹

During his tour, Ickes wrote angry memoranda complaining that Latin American leaders were demanding the deportation of Germans whose only crime was to have joined the domestic political opposition or to own an attractive piece of land.⁴² Interviewed fifty-five years later, Ickes was still angry. “Lots of them were being railroaded up here not because they were dangerous Axis nationals, but because they owned a *finca* [farm] next to someone else’s property and the most convenient way to get the *finca* was to get them interned in the United States,” he recalled. It was “a complete abrogation of human rights,” he said, and

⁴¹ Ickes to Boal, 9 March 1943, in folder “711.5 Civil Prisoners—Enemy Non-Combatants,” Bolivia—La Paz Embassy—General Records, Box 74, RG84, NA; Ickes interview.

⁴² Raymond W. Ickes, *Memorandum to the Minister*, 30 March 1943, in folder “711.5,” Costa Rica: San José Embassy Confidential File, Box 26, RG84, NA.

insisted that the deportation program never caught anyone of importance.⁴³

In this case, Ickes' testimony and his letters at the time provide a corrective to certain other documents—the wildly speculative reports of FBI agents in the field. He elaborated on their incompetence and remembered specific episodes. But Ickes, too, needs correcting. “The whole operation, if once in a great while it caught someone who was actually, or potentially involved, I just couldn't find it, I never did,” he says today. While archival research supports Ickes' general characterization of the deportation program as unimportant from a security point of view, it did, in fact, round up a number of leading Nazi organizers and a handful of confessed spies—most of them arrested before Ickes came on the scene in 1943.⁴⁴ His ability to recollect accurately is not at issue, but once again we see that one person, even one so deeply involved at the time, cannot present a complete picture of events.

In the interviews with Bohnenberger, Droege, and Ickes, as in many others, a tension arose between the necessarily selective memories of the participants and the likewise selective record-keeping that takes place in government archives. Taken alone, the testimony presents the deportation program as a gross injustice. Leavened by the documentary record, it provides a more balanced picture, in which the exaggerated fears of U.S. officials led to a policy with mixed results. The accounts of the principals, however faithfully recorded, are insufficient.

Historians may not have many luxuries, but one of them is time, and our work is improved when we use it to draw on as many of the available resources as possible. The context and perspective we can then bring to the task is what enables us to transform testimony from *eine Geschichte*, a story, into *Geschichte*, history.

⁴³ Ickes interview.

⁴⁴ Deportees Ingo Kalinowsky of Costa Rica, Henry Loeschner of Ecuador, George Nicolaus of Mexico, and Herbert Schwartau and Hermann Rullhusen of Colombia all admitted to spying for Germany. See their records in “Name Files of Enemy Aliens,” alphabetical folders in SWP Boxes 31–50, RG59, NA.

