

WORLD WAR II ALIEN ENEMY CONTROL PROGRAM CURRICULUM GUIDE AND LESSON PLANS

LESSON PLAN ELEVEN: *“The Eiserloh Story”*

APPROPRIATE GRADES/COURSES: 8-14, U.S. History; Civics, American Government, Political Science

TOPIC BACKGROUND SUMMARY:

Mathias Eiserloh was born in Plaidt, Germany, in 1895. When World War 1 began in 1914, the German government drafted him into the army. He was 19 years old. The war was a brutal one. Thousands of soldiers perished in trenches on both sides. Mathias was badly wounded and sent home. His own experiences convinced him of the horrors of war, and he decided that after the war ended, he would study engineering and emigrate to the United States. He believed the U. S. tried to avoid war, unlike the Europeans who seemed to have a new war every twenty years.

By 1922 Mathias had received his degree in Civil Engineering and fallen in love with Johanna Vietor, a daughter in the home where he had roomed during his college years. Johanna was five years younger than he; she was hardworking, had a good sense of humor and was eager to emigrate from Germany to the U. S. as well. Mathias’s sister Anna had married an American GI at the end of the war and was living in West Virginia, so he had a place to come to in the U.S. Mathias immigrated first, arriving in the U.S. in 1922; Johanna and Clara, another of Mathias’s sisters, followed in 1923. Johanna and Mathias married soon afterward. Like all immigrants, they worked hard to learn English and took any jobs they could. After a few years Mathias was able to get a job working for the railroads as a civil engineer designing and building bridges in the Ohio-Illinois area, so the young family moved to Ohio and saved money to buy some land to build a house and start a family. Fate intervened though, when in 1929, Mathias received word that his mother was ill. He took a leave of absence from his job, and the couple returned to Germany to see their families. While they were in Europe, the American Stock Market collapsed and the Great Depression began. By the time they returned to Ohio, his job was gone and new jobs were hard to find; Mathias was forced to travel long distances and be away from Johanna and Ingrid, their new baby girl, born in May, 1930.

In spite of the Depression, the Eiserlohs saved their money and purchased two acres of land in Strongsville, Ohio, a small town about nine miles from Cleveland. Johanna raised chickens and sold chickens and eggs, and Mathias began construction on a home for his family, which now included Lothar, a son born in 1935. Mathias built his one story home out of cement block, working every weekend. Friends would help him on the weekends; the wives would prepare food, and Johanna would cook a chicken. After dinner, they would play German music and sing familiar songs together. Johanna

grew lots of vegetables, and they had pear and apple trees as well. In those days, women preserved their vegetables and fruits for the long winter ahead. Potatoes, other root vegetables and apples were put into a root cellar, as were the many jars of preserved fruits and vegetables. After Mathias finished his house, he began construction of his root cellar, also made out of cinder block. Mathias and Johanna had applied for American citizenship in 1928, after they had been in the U.S. for five years, but because of their trip to Germany in 1929, their application was canceled, and when they returned, they had to begin the process of naturalization over again. At that time only husbands could apply for citizenship, and they were required to live at the same address for five years. Because of Mathias's travels in search of work during the Depression, he was unable to meet that criterion, thus in 1941 they still had not attained citizenship.

In Europe the winds of war were blowing again. Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party were in control of the German government and were invading neighboring countries to regain territory they had lost in World War I. Finally, after many warnings to stop, Britain and France declared war on Germany in 1939, after Hitler invaded Poland, and the Poles asked for help. In the U.S., most Americans didn't want to get involved in another European war, but Hitler and his ally, Mussolini, in Italy, were widely disliked because of their aggression against their neighbors and cruel acts against those who protested against them in their own countries. Mathias and Johanna worried about their relatives in Germany and sent them CARE packages of food and basic necessities but were thankful that they were in America with their children and not part of the conflict. Mathias was working full time again, this time closer to home, and the family looked forward to the coming of their third child, Ensila, born January, 1941.

War fever began to grow in the U.S. in 1941, as the Nazi army made advances in Europe. Many Americans were convinced that the U.S. would soon have to join in the war. Then came the fateful morning of December 7, 1941, "a day that shall live in infamy," said President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Japanese government, an ally of both Germany and Italy, launched a surprise attack against a major American military base-- Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. Thousands died in the attack, and the President declared war on Japan. Its allies, Germany and Italy, declared war on the United States the next day.

Thousands of Italian, Japanese and German enemy aliens and their families, including the parents of the famous baseball player Joe Dimaggio, were put under dusk-to-dawn curfews in California. About 20,000 Italian, Japanese and German aliens were forced to move from their homes or businesses if they were in "prohibited zones" along the West Coast. Then, in February of 1942, the President announced Executive Order 9066 which called for the creation of military areas on the West Coast from which "any or all persons may be excluded." Eventually, the Executive Order meant that 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were sent to "Relocation Centers" in the interior. Meanwhile, thousands of Italian aliens and their families, including the parents of the famous baseball player Joe Dimaggio, were put under dusk-to-dawn curfews in California. About 10,000 other Italian aliens were forced to move from their homes or businesses if they were in "prohibited zones" along the West Coast.

Lothar Eiserloh was only six years old when FBI agents came to their home in Ohio and arrested his father on January 8, 1942, only a month after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Mathias was arrested without a warrant, and the agents refused to say why he was being arrested or where they were taking him. He just disappeared. Johanna was

frantic. She was left with three children and no income, and she was terribly frightened for her husband. Soon after Mathias was arrested, vandals threw rocks at the house, and someone shot their two German shepherds. Strangers taunted the children and Johanna with bad names. Johanna was afraid to leave the house. She slept with a piece of pipe next to her for protection, and one night she had to use it against a masked intruder, who broke into the house and attacked her while she was in her bed.

Fear, uncertainty, and worry drove Johanna out of her home into that of her sister-in-law Clara's, who lived closer to town. There, she and her children moved into the basement until she could decide what to do. Johanna went to every government agency trying to find her husband. Finally, after about three months, a letter arrived telling her he was being held in a federal camp as a so called "dangerous enemy alien." That was a term she had never heard before. Because Mathias and Johanna were not American citizens, and the U.S. was at war with Germany, their native country, they were considered "dangerous," even though they had lived in the country for twenty years, had always been law-abiding, and their three children were all born in the United States.

Johanna struggled to make ends meet; the government had frozen their bank accounts, so she was unable to use their savings. She took in sewing, did housework and cared for new mothers in an effort to earn money because Clara couldn't afford to feed and house four extra people indefinitely. By 1943, the government had created family camps for the thousands of "enemy aliens" they had rounded up. Johanna asked to be allowed to go to one; she wanted the family to be reunited. She sold their small farm for a pittance, packed whatever items she and the children could carry in the one trunk allowed for each person, and joined her interned husband at Crystal City Internment Camp, located in a small farming community in South Texas.

Thousands of German aliens, including Mathias and Johanna Eiserloh, and their three children, who were all American born citizens, were confined in Crystal City. The camp also held thousands of Latin American Germans, Japanese and Italians (see Lesson Plan Seven, Eight, and Nine) who had been taken from fifteen different Latin American countries and brought to the U.S. for internment. The Crystal City environment was bleak. It was hot and dusty in the summer, and cold and wet in the winter. The good thing was the Eiserloh family was finally united again after almost two years. For the children, life in the camps was not too bad. They had schools, plenty of food, friends, and a baseball field. For the parents, it was another story. The women spent their days taking care of their families and trying to keep a home under very difficult conditions and not much privacy. All mail and incoming news was censored. Internees could only see visitors under surveillance. A dossier was kept on each internee, and head counts were made every day. The men did the maintenance and repairs jobs in the camp. Pay was \$.10 per hour. Mathias and other men made a swimming pool out of an agricultural water storage pond, which was much appreciated in the long, hot summers. Baseball teams were organized. Bartering was common; German women exchanged their rice ration with Japanese women's potato ration. The internees planted vegetable gardens. Adversity brought people together. For young Lothar, the ten-foot barbed-wire-topped fences and the guard towers that surrounded the camp were frightening. He watched soldiers armed with rifles peering down on them at all times and wondered why they were there. Although Johanna and the children had "volunteered" to come to the camp, once inside the compound, they were not allowed to leave.

In late 1944, Mathias and other men were called before the authorities. They were told that they could return to Germany to be exchanged for American prisoners of war, or remain in the camp until the end of the war. Mathias and Johanna argued over this. Mathias wanted to return to Germany. His parents had died, and he would inherit some land. He felt he would have a hard time in America getting a job as a German after the war, and they no longer had their home. Meanwhile, Johanna was pregnant with her fourth child. She was horrified at having to travel to Germany with an infant, and three other children, ages 14, 9 and 4, all American citizens. Germany was being bombed every day. Food was scarce. How would they survive? In the end, Mathias prevailed. Each family member could take one wooden trunk. Johanna took the house sale money and purchased blankets, warm clothing and every necessity she could think of for their journey. They were not allowed to bring U.S. money. The family was taken by train to New York. On the way, Johanna gave birth to a boy. They named him Gunther. The family waited at Ellis Island until the neutral Swedish repatriation ship, the M. S. Gripsholm, arrived. The Eiserloh family and one thousand other German families boarded the ship and were sent back to Germany in January of 1945 during one of the coldest winters on record in Europe.

After arriving in Marseilles, the family traveled by train to Switzerland, where they were exchanged for Americans being held in Germany. Their trunks were put into storage and never seen again. They traveled with only the clothes on their backs and one small suitcase with necessities for the newborn baby. Lothar's first memory of Germany was of coming out of a tunnel, on a train, and being bombed by Americans and protected by German anti-aircraft guns. He recalls his father throwing him under a seat in the wooden passenger car and watching the machine gun bullets coming through the walls and ceiling. They were forced to flee the train during attacks and walked many days, taking trains whenever possible, to get to their destination.

It took them two months to reach Ichstein, where Johanna's elderly parents lived. They arrived exhausted but happy to be alive. Less than two weeks later six German Gestapo agents burst into their basement room and grabbed Mathias, accusing him of being an American spy. When Lothar tried to save his father from being beaten by the Gestapo, he was flung across the room by one of the men. After his father was taken away, Lothar, at age nine, became the man of the family, responsible for getting food to feed his mother and siblings. His mother was very ill; his baby brother and sister Ensila suffered from severe malnutrition, and both had rickets from lack of B vitamins. Lothar stole potatoes from a farmer's field in the dead of night so they wouldn't starve. Their diet consisted primarily of boiled potatoes and the water they were cooked in.

The family was saved by American soldiers when the war ended three months later. Luckily, they were in the American zone. When the American tank troops entered Ichstein, Lothar and the other village children had lined the streets hoping for food. The GI's tossed out chewing gum and chocolate bars to the kids and yelled to them in English. Lothar answered them back, and they stopped. They hauled him up on the tank, amazed to find an American child there. This lucky meeting meant that Lothar's family finally had some real food, and Lothar's mother was able to plead with the soldiers to find her husband. After about two weeks Mathias was found and released. Lothar was adopted by the American regiment as their mascot. They even made him a small uniform. He traveled all over the region with them, helping with translations. Two years

later, Lothar, age 12, and his older sister, Ingrid, age 17, were allowed to return to the U.S. to live with their Aunt Clara, who had moved from Ohio to California.

Lothar's parents and younger siblings were not able to return until 1955. His father died five years later. Johanna Eiserloh became an American citizen in 1961. She lived to be 96 years old, but she never found out why her husband was arrested as an enemy alien. The people sent to Crystal City were arrested under laws which are still in effect today. It wasn't until the Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996 that Lothar and Ensila were able to request the documents that the government used to imprison their parents. They found out that many of the allegations against their parents came from a neighbor who their mother had argued with about a property boundary. Lothar's father was accused of building a "bunker," "buying a lot of cement, and making a flat roof on his house so German aircraft could land." His parents were also accused of being Nazis because they had "lots of Germans" over on weekends, and they "sang in German." Mathias was also accused of having "Nazi" literature in his house. He admitted having a copy of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's book on Fascism, but said it was to learn about that philosophy so he could understand its appeal. He told his questioners that the book was not illegal, and he believed that in the United States there was freedom of speech and press.

Neither Mathias nor Johanna ever had a public hearing and never knew who their accusers were. They were never able to bring witnesses in to defend themselves, nor have an attorney present when they were questioned. They were never charged with any crime and never had a trial to prove their innocence or guilt. They were held without bail or bond and were incarcerated behind barbed wire fencing, with guard towers and armed guards. Finally, they and their American-born children were sent to Germany at the height of the Allied bombing to be exchanged as war prisoners, even though they had lived as law-abiding people for over twenty years in the United States.

After years of internment, many internees like the Eiserlohs suffered from what was known as "the fence sickness." Although Mathias had been "safe behind bars," he had been incarcerated for four years without knowing why. He had wanted a new life away from European wars when he came to America in 1922. Yet his adopted country had imprisoned him without any of the safeguards that drew him to America in the first place. He had no knowledge of what would happen to him and his family in America after the war was over. His home and farm were gone. He was fifty years old. As an engineer, he worried about finding a job. Who would hire an enemy alien who had spent years in a camp? He knew Germany was devastated by the war, but he had a home there to go to, and he felt certain he would find a job helping to rebuild the country. It was a difficult decision.

What would you do: Remain imprisoned in uncertainty or risk freedom, even if it could mean death or damage to you or your family?

ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION OF LESSON PLAN:

Two class periods. Teachers interested in having their students pursue the underlying legal issues of the Eiserloh case should review Lesson Plans Three and Four.

STUDENT OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to evaluate certain decisions made by the government in time of war and determine the following:

Did the government violate the rights of innocent civilians?

Were Bill of Rights guarantees violated? If so, which Amendments were violated and why?

Are there safeguards today to protect non-citizens in times of war?

Students will also be able to:

Identify the Bill of Rights Amendments.

Analyze each Right and explain if and how a Right was violated in the Eiserloh story.

Students will be able to exercise critical thinking skills and express themselves analytically, both orally and in writing.

MATERIALS:

Copies of the **Topic Background Summary**: "The Eiserloh Story"

Copies of the **Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Fourteenth Amendments** (see Lesson Plan Four).

Copies of the **Alien Enemies Act** (See Lesson Plan One)

Copies of **Presidential Proclamation 2526**. (<http://www.gaic.info/history.html>)

PERIOD ONE--CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

For the teacher

Distribute the Eiserloh story and other materials

For the students

Read and discuss the Eiserloh story in small groups of three-five. Students should select a moderator to read each question. Each student should take notes on the discussion to be used to help them with their homework assignment for Period Two:

1. In what ways do the rights of citizens differ from those of non-citizens who reside in the United States?

2. In war times, do you think the government should be able to arrest and hold "enemy aliens" indefinitely without allowing them to have an attorney and a public trial or hearing? Why or why not?

3. The laws that brought about Mathias's arrest are still in place today; in your opinion, are they fair? Why or why not? Should aliens be given the same safeguards as citizens? Why or why not? Should there be a difference in how aliens are treated if they have lived in the United States for a long time and have never been in trouble with the law? Why or why not?

4. Do you think Mathias made the right decision to return to Germany with his

family rather than stay in the camp until the end of the war? Why or why not?

Student homework

In writing, students will analyze the “Eiserloh Story” for evidence of Bill of Rights violations and laws supporting the government’s position. Students should consult:

Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Fourteenth Amendments
The Alien Enemies Act
Presidential Proclamation 2526

PERIOD TWO--CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

For the teacher

Divide the class into three groups. The first group will represent the government’s case; the second group will represent the Eiserloh family; the third group will act as judges in the case, hearing the evidence and ruling on the constitutionality of the arrests and incarceration.

Students in groups one and two should be given 10-15 minutes to meet with their group to "prepare" their case.

Students in group three should review the pertinent Amendments and wartime laws that apply.

Groups one and two should be allowed 10-15 minutes each to make their case.

Group three (judges) should be allowed 5-10 minutes to "deliberate" before presenting their findings. They may also ask questions of the other groups to clarify their arguments. (If there is not enough time, the ruling may be presented during Period 3.)

For the students

The students should use their notes and homework to help make their arguments.

Each student should make a contribution to the oral presentation and should be prepared for questions from the judges.

Homework

Each student will explain in writing, how the judges made their decision and why he/she agrees or disagrees with the decision.

SPECIFIC READING MATERIAL FOR THIS LESSON PLAN:

(See Lesson Plan One for a general list of key reading material on the Alien Enemy Control Program)

Internment Camp summaries from www.gaic.info, especially regarding Crystal City Family Camp and Ellis Island, which includes information on exchange voyages on the Gripsholm. http://www.gaic.info/internment_camp.html

Real People stories from www.gaic.info, www.densho.org, www.segreta.org,

www.itvs.org/facetoface/stories/ruth.html

ONLINE/MEDIA RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON PLAN

(See Lesson Plan One for a full list of Online/Media resources)