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# Henry Gustave Reinsch Papers

1942-1960

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Born in Germany in 1888, Henry Gustave Reinsch became an American citizen in 1912, registered for the draft during the First World War, married an American girl, and started a family. In 1942, however, two FBI agents showed up at Reinsch's office, and a year later, Reinsch's citizenship was revoked when he was accused by the U.S. government of living a double life -- publicly loyal to America, privately loyal to Germany. Reinsch appealed the ruling to the Ninth Circuit Court and won. His citizenship was reinstated in 1945.

The Reinsch Papers contains newspaper clippings, personal and business correspondence, and official documents pertaining to both citizenship trials, that tell of uncommon wartime experiences.

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## Background on Henry Gustave Reinsch

Henry Gustave Reinsch was born in Germany on July 4, 1888, "a day when Americans were celebrating their freedom." After immigrating to the United States in 1906 and obtaining citizenship in 1912, Reinsch became well known in the lumber business, earning \$10,000 a year as a buyer for the Northwest Door Company. He married an American woman named Bernice with whom he had at least two children. Although he maintained contact with family in Germany, Reinsch took his new citizenship to heart, registering for the draft during the First World War.

Ten months into the Second World War, however, on October 13, 1942, Agents Doig and Shafter of the FBI called on Reinsch at his Tacoma office. The agents had been instructed to interview the Reinschs as part of the FBI's Custodial Detention Index (CDI). Started by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in the 1930s, the CDI was intended as a means of categorizing possible subversives from "most dangerous" to "least dangerous." Leads were developed through "citizen reports ... subscription lists of German, Italian, and Communist newspapers, membership in proscribed organizations, and informant and agent reports on meetings and demonstrations" (Fox, 2000). Technically unauthorized (Attorney General Francis Biddle condemned the index when he found out about it), CDI agents were not to be taken lightly (Stone, 1980): "[I]f you don't want to cooperate with us we'll take you up to headquarters," Doig warned. "We want your wife to be present at this questioning also." Reinsch brought Doig and Shafter home with him unannounced so that Bernice would not have a chance to destroy any evidence before the agents arrived.

The interview quickly became uncomfortable. The Reinschs' comments on Germany, Jews, concentration camps, Walter Winchell, and President Roosevelt had Doig taking notes and warning that some of their remarks were becoming "very ill advised." Less than nine months later, United States District Judge Lloyd L. Black ("the black judge" as the Reinschs came to call him) ruled that the "defendant [was] not entitled to and [could not] retain American citizenship." In August, Reinsch's citizenship was officially revoked and he was ordered by Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt to move out of the Pacific Military Zone. Reinsch was not permitted to return to Tacoma until February 1944 when military zoning orders were dismissed by western defense command.

During the 1942 meeting in which Doig and Shafter warned the Reinschs that some of their comments were "ill advised," Bernice countered with an argument that her husband later adopted as he fought to defend his innocence: "If Walter Winchell can go on the air every Sunday night and blast his dirty lies across the country," she said, "I certainly can say what I please in my own home." In the context of an unauthorized FBI interview, Bernice's point did not hold much sway, however, and on August 15, 1943, around the time that Henry's citizenship was officially revoked, Bernice wrote a letter to Judge Black. "This is America. Where you can have your say about anything without fear or worry. Where freedom of speech is a right nobody can take away from you. This is your America. Keep it free." She refers to the "This is America" series of wartime propaganda posters. Bernice writes of an encounter she had with a Tacoma woman, an acquaintance of Judge Black, who said "she worked on [the Reinsch] case and made a special trip to Seattle to see [Black] about it."

Bernice accused the judge of using evidence not presented in court to make his decision, an accusation that, if true, would nullify his verdict. Quoting her congressman, Bernice argues that "[t]oo many federal Judges consider themselves part of the Department of Justice instead of the Judiciary and as long as this condition exists, no man can go into a federal court and get a fair trial."

In November of 1944, still working for the Northwest Door Company, Reinsch began his appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court. On March 12, 1945, Judges Garrecht, Mathews, and Stephens officially overturned Judge Black's decision, citing *Baumgartner v. the United States*, where "it was necessary [for the government] to establish disloyalty previous to naturalization, in order to take citizenship away from a foreign born."

Little is known of Henry Gustave Reinsch's subsequent life. He spent time in Monte Sano Hospital and Sanitarium in Los Angeles in 1947 with stomach hemorrhages. The distance from his home in Washington to the luxurious hospital in California suggests that he was aware of the severity of his condition and was prepared for a lengthy stay. A short article from 1967 titled "Downtown Car Crash Brings Injuries to Four" reveals that Henry had moved to California and married a woman named Ruth. He died in 1970, at 81 years of age, and Ruth died seven years later.

## Scope of collection

The Reinsch collection consists of court documents, including official rulings and pieces of evidence, six letters from Reinsch to Bernice during his time in the Los Angeles hospital, one letter to Reinsch from his mother in Germany, as well as an intriguing letter from Bernice to Judge Black.

Bernice's letter has two strong creases, suggesting that it was folded and placed in a business envelope for mailing, however, this document likely never made it to Judge Black. The letter is held together with adhesive tape, having been ripped into eight pieces. Two mostly blank pieces have been lost. Edits on the document suggest that this letter may have been a draft, but Mrs. Reinsch's signature suggests just the opposite. Possible explanations of Mrs. Reinsch's letter range from the pedestrian -- perhaps she accidentally tore it up while going through personal and legal records, deciding what to save and what to throw out -- to the provocative -- perhaps she sent it to Judge Black, who, wanting to make his position clear, returned it, torn to shreds. The true story behind Bernice's letter remains unclear.

A scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings provides biographical information on Reinsch and a timeline of his trials. Clippings that do not directly relate to Reinsch's trial are at least as important as those that do. Articles about Ku Klux Klansmen not being allowed to demonstrate suggest that Reinsch viewed his trial as a Freedom of Speech issue. Headlines from an issue of *The Thunderbolt*, a periodical claiming to be "the white man's viewpoint," may reveal some of Reinsch's political feelings: "Eichmann Trial Giant Propaganda Hoax."

This collection documents an exception to the rule when it came to investigations for the Custodial Detention Index. Reinsch "loaned" large sums of money to William Dudley Penney, the head of the fascist Silver Shirts Legion, who, by the time Reinsch was on trial, was serving a fifteen year sentence for sedition. Reinsch was not merely a supporter, a level "C" on the CDI classification scale, of the Silver Shirts, he spoke as a leader, a level "A", at meetings held at his own home. Reinsch may not have been dangerous. He may not have been a fascist. He may have been willing to give his life for his adopted country. He may only have been guilty of exercising his First Amendment rights. There can be no question, however, that compared to the thousands of truly innocent German Americans who were interned during the years of World War II Reinsch was guilty.

# Inventory

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## Correspondence

1943-1947

Box 1: 1

## Defendant Exhibits

1912-1944

Box 1: 2

## Documents

1942-1961

Box 1: 3

## Documents, Court

1943-1945

Box 1: 4

## Newspaper Clippings, loose

1940s

Box 1: 5

## Newspaper Clippings, loose

1950s

Box 1: 6

## Newspaper Clippings, loose

1960s

Box 1: 7

## Newspaper Clippings

1943

Box 1: 8

Before denaturalization ruling, arranged on pages from scrapbook.

## Newspaper Clippings

1943-1966

Box 1: 9

Post-denaturalization ruling, arranged on pages from scrapbook.

## Newspapers, German-language

1958-1960

Box 1: 10

## Petition to Lieut. Gen. J. L. De Witt

probably 1943

Box 1: 11

## Scrapbook boards

undated

Box 1: 12

A few clippings are adhered to the inside boards of the scrapbook, the pages were removed and filed as newspaper clippings.

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Donated by Vincent DiMarco in June 2007.

### Bibliography

Fox, Stephen. *America's Invisible Gulag: A Biography of German American Internment & Exclusion in World War II*. New York City: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000.

Stone, Geoffrey R. "Review: Surveillance and Subversion: The FBI's Secret War." *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 8, No. 1. (March, 1980): 134 - 138.

### Processing Information

Collection processed by Alex Lent, June 2007.

### Language:

English

## Copyright and Use (More information )

Please use the following format when citing materials from this collection:

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## Search terms

### Subjects

Citizenship, Loss of--United States  
Fascists--United States  
German Americans--Washington  
Silver Shirts of America (Organization)  
World War, 1939-1945--German Americans

### Contributors

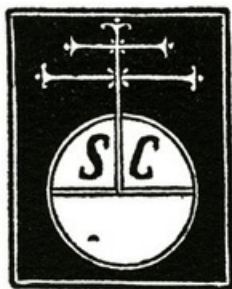
Reinsch, Henry Gustave [main entry]  
Reinsch, Henry Gustave  
Reinsch, Bernice

### Genres and formats

Letters (Correspondence)

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