GEORGE TAKEI INTERVIEW
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

George Takei
Actor and Activist
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Interviewed by Katie Davison
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Takei's family background

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GEORGE TAKEI:

Well, it's the grandparents' generation that immigrated. My maternal grandparents came in the late 1890s to California, to the Sacramento Delta, and they began farming there, and that's where my mother was born. My father was born in Japan, but when he was very small, he lost his mother, and my widower grandfather decided to start life anew in a new country, the United States. And so, he came to San Francisco with his two boys, my father being the younger. And so my father was born in Japan, but for all rights and purposes was American in that he was raised in San Francisco, educated in San Francisco, and went to college in San Francisco. Immigrants from Asia at that time were all denied naturalized citizenship. The only immigrant group coming from wherever in the world that was denied naturalization simply, because they were Asian. There was no ... well, the rationale was we looked different. Our culture was different, language was different, and strange people taking jobs, and because the Chinese were coming in large numbers taking over certain areas of employment that they were seen as a threat, and they were all denied naturalized citizenship.

Current immigration situation in the U.S.

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GEORGE TAKEI:

What's happening on the Southern borders, the Latinos, who are really coming out of desperation, fleeing violence and poverty, and some had seen their spouses killed right in front of their eyes and they're fleeing to this country. So sanctuary was primarily what they were coming for, but also to survive, and that means getting jobs. They're taking on the kinds of jobs that Americans would not take, grunge jobs, slaughterhouse jobs. The most repugnant kinds of jobs were being taken by these immigrants, and contributing to the vibrance of the American economy, and yet they were seen as a threat.

How Takei's parents met

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GEORGE TAKEI:

My parents met in Los Angeles, and they married there. I'm told that there was a go-between, the publisher of the first Japanese language newspaper in

Los Angeles. The publisher was friends with my grandfather. My grandfather was in Japanese language journalism in San Francisco. And so, he set him up with my mother, and they met and married, and thus we were born. I'm the oldest, and my brother was next, a year younger. And my father, particularly, said he wanted a girl. He told us that story many times, and many years later, I think about four years later, he was blessed with a girl, my baby sister Nancy.

Takei's parents' family business

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GEORGE TAKEI:

My parents started a dry-cleaning business in the Wilshire District of Los Angeles. It was a high-end dry-cleaning business right by Bullocks Grocer, which was the most fashionable department store, and the building still exists as a preservation building on Wilshire Boulevard, an Art Deco masterpiece, and it is one of the architectural prides of Los Angeles. He went to business school in San Francisco, and that was one of the kinds of businesses that an entrepreneurial Japanese-American could begin, and he wanted to get a high-end clientele, and so he began in the Wilshire District.

What the Takei family was doing during the Pearl Harbor attack

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GEORGE TAKEI:

My parents were visiting a friend of theirs, and they listened to the radio at this friends, and they became very concerned, and we went right back home. So, I'm guessing that as an adult that that probably was when they found out about the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Takei talking to his parents about Pearl Harbor and the shame amongst the Japanese-American community

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GEORGE TAKEI:

Well, as a teenager, I had many after dinner conversations about the internment, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and he did say that many Japanese-Americans felt shame, but he said the real shame was the government's shame, and he never felt that shame. It was wartime, and I've talked with my contemporaries who told me that their parents ... and to this day, we still hear people saying their parents didn't tell them about their internment, because they felt ashamed. And I'd tell them, 'No, no, no. They weren't the ones to feel the shame.' They were victimized by the shame of the government. The government bears that shame. It was a gross, egregious violation of everything that the United States stands for. It was a violation of due process. It was a violation of the ideals of a justice system that we have subscribed to. Because my parents didn't feel that shame, they knew where the shame belonged. I grew up not feeling that shame, and certainly my parents did not express that. My father did say that there was this a concern about what's going to happen to them. Here we were in the United States, and the country was at war with our ancestral land. And so, there was great concern about what might happen to us.

Takei's memories of the time his family was taken to the incarceration camps

01:07:01:06

GEORGE TAKEI:

I turned five years old on April 20th, 1942, and I had very little memory. The memories I have was there a little boy named Donald that I played with, and that was before we were taken away. So I was playing with little Donald, our neighbor's friend, and he was a Caucasian boy, blonde, about my height. And then one morning my parents got me up very early together with my brother, four years old, and my baby sister, and dressed us hurriedly. And my brother and I were told to wait in the living room, and while our parents did some last-minute packing in the bedroom. And so, we were just gazing out the front window, and suddenly we saw two soldiers marching up our driveway, carrying rifles with shiny bayonets. I remember the flashing bayonets, and they stomped at the front porch, and with their fists began pounding on the door. That sound still resonates in my mind. We thought the whole house was trembling. My father came out, answered the door and we were ordered out of our home. My father gave my brother and me little packages to carry, and he hefted two heavy suitcases, and a walked out. And we followed him, and we stood on the driveway waiting for my mother to come out. Apparently, she was being interrogated inside, because there was a little wait. And when she came out, she had our baby sister in one arm, a huge heavy looking duffle bag in the other, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. We were leaving our home, and under to us sudden and unhappy circumstances, soldiers ordering us out.

Takei's parents knowing they would be taken away

01:09:17:04

GEORGE TAKEI:

So my parents knew that this was going to happen soon. And then I guess they knew of the date, and so they woke us up early in the morning, so that we'd be ready for the soldiers to come, and we would taken away.

The family business and home after Takei's family was taken to the camps

01:09:40:04

GEORGE TAKEI:

Well, when I was a teenager, I had these after dinner discussions with my father, and I recalled seeing groups of people across the street, and I thought they were neighbors to say goodbye to us because they did wave to us. But my father said they were vultures. They were people waiting for us to be taken away. And they probably, once we were taken away, ransacked the house, took whatever of value that there might've been. Well, it was a rented house, and the government froze our bank account. Rents couldn't be paid. My father's business fell apart, abandoned, everything was lost, everything.

A curfew came down. Japanese Americans had to be home by 8:00 at night, and stay home until 6:00 am in the morning. So, we were imprisoned into our homes, and then the bank accounts were frozen, and then the soldiers came.

How Takei's family was taken to the incarceration camps and the living conditions

01:10:47:06

GEORGE TAKEI:

We were taken by truck. There were other Japanese American families that had been gathered to the Buddhist temple in downtown Los Angeles, in the little Tokyo, Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple, one of the first Buddhist temples built in Los Angeles. And that's where we were all assembled. There were other people there crowded, and with their luggage, and a row of buses. And the buses took us to Santa Anita, where we were unloaded and herded over to the stable areas. And each family was assigned a horse stall to sleep in. From a two-bedroom home on Garnett Street, leafy trees, backyard, front yard, garage to a narrow horse stall, still pungent with the stink of horse manure. For my parents, it was a degrading, humiliating experience, but to five-year-old me, I thought it was fun to sleep where the horses slept. I could smell the horses. So, the same event, and what followed with two parallel stories, quite different. For me, it was an exciting adventure. For my parents, it was the humiliation and the degradation to be followed by an unrelenting series of outrages. We were there about three or four months while the camps were being built. And when the construction was finished, we were loaded onto trains with armed soldiers at both ends of each car, and transported two thirds of the way across the country to the swamps of Arkansas.

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Rohwer, Arkansas was the farthest east of all the camps. There was another camp in Arkansas called Jerome, which was just a little bit ... it wasn't too far from Rohwer, but Rohwer was the farthest east. There were ten camps all together. There were two in the blistering hot desert of Arizona, a camp on the cold, windswept high plains of Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and two of the most desolate places in California. One called Manzanar in the Owens Valley, another cold, desolate, desert-like area, and the other was by the Northern Oregon border—a camp called today Tule Lake. There was a lot of excitement, anxiety. Because here, the train suddenly came to a stop in the middle of a desert, completely desolate, no sign of any civilization nearby. And they said there were some people that said, "Are they going to kill us?" I don't remember hearing it, but my parents said there were people who said that. And the guard said it was just for exercise, and indeed it was that. But there was consternation on the train before we unloaded, because you can't predict what's going to happen next. And some people jumped to the conclusion that ... well, the worst possible conclusion that they could.

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We arrived at the camp, the barbed wire fence was strung right beside the railroad track. The internment camp was built right there, and we could see as we rolled up to the camp, there were others that had been incarcerated before us. And they were crowded there, and they were waving to us. And my mother recognized one of the ladies there, one of her friends from North Hollywood. It was the dictionary definition of a concentration camp. The Jews were put into extermination camps, death camps, there's that distinction. We were in concentration camps. Concentration camps applied to the Nazi camps was a euphemism, as relocation center was our internment camp or concentration camp.

Japanese-American incarceration camps being compared with Auschwitz

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GEORGE TAKEI:

I would be very careful about comparison with Auschwitz. The definition of concentration camp is to imprison in concentration, people of a common race, or faith, or culture for political purposes. I don't think we were concentrated with the political or the purpose of annihilating us. The Nazi's intent was conscious -- the conscious intent was to annihilate the Jewish people. There's that distinction. So I would be very careful about drawing a parallel with Auschwitz.

Takei's father's fears during the time they were incarcerated

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GEORGE TAKEI:

My father told me that the thing that tore him apart the most was to look at us, and to see the barbed wire fence, not that our block was right by the barbed wire fence, and to imagine what kind of future his children might have. He had dreams for us, but there we were incarcerated, categorized as enemy aliens, when we were not. And sentry towers, guns pointed at us, searchlights on us at night, and what is going to happen next? Things were happening on almost daily, something unpredictable. And what's going to happen to his children? He said that uncertainty was the thing that made him most grief-stricken.

Takei's childhood memories of the incarceration camp in Arkansas

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GEORGE TAKEI:

I remember when we were unloaded and the truck drove us to our... The camp is divided into blocks. We were assigned to block six, and we were all unloaded by the mess hall with our luggage. And my father said, "You guys wait here," my mother and us kids, and he'll go find our address and he'll be back. And so we sat there, my brother and I, and beyond the barbed wire fence we heard all sorts of strange sounds coming, squawking and hooting and yelping, you know, all sorts of... I call it the "jungle." It was a forest; it was a swamp, which is a forest. But I called it the jungle because trees were growing out of water, which was fantastical, and their roots snaked in and out of the water.

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So we were just awestruck by the jungle beyond the barbed wire fence. One of the big boys, nine or ten years old, told me that those sounds were dinosaur sounds. I'd never heard of that word. "Dino-what?" He says, "Dinosaur, dummy, don't you know what they are? They're great big huge giant monsters that lived millions and millions of years ago, and they died." I said, "They died? How come we hear them right now?" And so, he quickly recovered from that mistake that he made and he said, "They died everywhere in this world, except Arkansas." So, I thought they were dinosaur sounds. They came out of the jungle, which was wet and had trees growing out of them. Later on, once we got settled, some of it was inside the barbed wire fence, and I saw little black wiggly fish swimming around, and I could catch them by scooping them up and putting them in a jar. They just wiggled around in the jar. Then one morning I looked at them, and they were growing bumps on both sides. The next morning, they were larger, and then they started to look like legs. And then the tail fell off. They hopped out of my jar and escaped. Magical things happened in Arkansas. They were tadpoles that turned into frogs. So to me, Arkansas was a wondrous place of discoveries—strange things that are part of the whole landscape.

Developing a sense of community during the incarceration

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GEORGE TAKEI:

For my father, it was of concern, the fact that people were despondent. Everything was lost, they're imprisoned. Other people were angry and raging inside. He felt that here we are, all together, and if we're going to survive, we've got to depend on each other. We've got to develop a sense of community. The camp was a former swamp, they just cleared it and put barbed wire fences around it, and after it rained it turned right back to a swamp. We all had to make that three times a day trip to the mess hall. Older people, elderly people, couldn't make it because their feet would sink into the muck, and they didn't have the strength to pull their feet out of the muck. So young men had to carry them on their backs. That was even more arduous because of the weight, the young men's feet went deeper into the muck. So, my father participated in building a boardwalk that connected each of the barracks to the latrine, the other important place to get to, and to the mess hall. He tried to build that sense of community, and he was elected to be block manager, the person to represent the block to the camp command, and also to settle whatever problems that may crop up internally. So, he was concerned about building a sense of unity and working together in concert as a community if we're to survive this. Children are amazingly adaptable, and we adapted to the reality that we were confronted with and were children. We played games with our friends and had fun.

Loyalty tests and Japanese-Americans fighting in WWII

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GEORGE TAKEI:

This takes us back to immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Right after the bombing, young Japanese Americans like all young Americans rushed to the recruitment centers to volunteer to serve in the US military. This was an act of patriotism, which was answered with a slap on the face. They were denied military service, and categorized as "enemy alien." Which was not only outrageous, it was ridiculous. They were not the enemy, they were patriots volunteering to fight for, possibly even die for this country. And to call them the enemy was crazy. Equally insane was to call them "aliens." They were not aliens. They were born, raised, and educated here. But that irrationality from the beginning resulted ultimately in our incarceration. But a year into our imprisonment, the government realized that there was a wartime manpower shortage, and here were all these young men that they could have had that were categorized as enemy alien. Their dilemma was how to justify enemy aliens out of a US concentration camp. Their solution was as irrational and as crazy as the internment itself.

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They were going to determine the loyalty of people that were categorized irrationally as enemy aliens. They decided to come down with a loyalty questionnaire, a test of their loyalty, after they'd been imprisoned for a year as enemy aliens. This questionnaire had to be responded to by everyone over the age of 17, man or woman, 17 or 87. Everyone had to respond to the

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loyalty questionnaire. There were about 30 questions, most of them fairly innocuous: What did you do for a living? Where did you live? But two questions turned all ten camps into confusion and outrage and turmoil. Question 27 asked, "Will you bear arms to defend the United States of America?" This being asked of my mother. My baby sister was a toddler now. I was six by then, my brother was five. She was being asked to abandon us and bear arms to defend the nation that was imprisoning her family. It was preposterous. Question 28 was even more insidious. It was one sentence with two conflicting ideas. It asked, "Will you swear your loyalty to the United States of America and forswear your loyalty to the Emperor of Japan?" The government presumed that there is an inborn existing racial loyalty to the emperor, which is outrageous to an American citizen, to have them suspect of having a loyalty to a foreign emperor. And so, if you answered, "No," meaning, "I don't have a loyalty to the Emperor to forswear," then that "no" applied to the first part of the very same sentence, "Will you swear your loyalty to the United States?" If you answered, "Yes," meaning, "I do swear my loyalty to the United States," that "yes" applied to the second part, meant that you were confessing that you had been loyal to the emperor, thus justifying the internment and now were prepared to forswear that existing loyalty to the emperor and re-swear your loyalty to the United States of America.

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It was outrageous. It was put together by either someone completely ignorant and didn't know the English language, or someone who meant it to be a cruel test of our sanity. My parents both said, "We will not submit to this kind of outrageous inquisition," and answered, "No." The surprising thing is thousands of young men and women were so determined to prove their loyalty to the United States that they bit the bullet, swallowed the bitter taste, and answered "yes" to those offensive questions, and went to fight for this country. And they were put into—the men—the women were put into the WACs, the Women's Army Corps. The men were put into a segregated all Japanese American unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and sent to the battlefields of Europe. They were literally used like cannon fodder, wave after wave of Japanese Americans going into those intense firefights, and they fought with incredible, amazing courage, indeed valor. And they sustained the highest combat casualty rate of any unit of the Second World War. And when the war ended, they came back the most decorated unit of the Second World War for a unit of its size and length of service.

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They were welcomed back on the White House lawn by President Harry Truman, who said to them, "You fought not only the enemy, but prejudice, and you won." But there is another group of Japanese American heroes. They were the Japanese American young men who said, "I am an American, and I will fight for my country, but I will fight as an American. If I can report to my hometown draft board, with my family back home, I would be like any American. I would have something to fight for. I will fight as an American, but I will not go as an internee, leaving my family in imprisonment, and put on the same uniform as that of the sentries guarding over my family. I will fight as an American." This was a gutsy position to take against the might of the whole United States Government, but it was also a principled position and a very American stance. And for that they were tried for draft evasion, found guilty, and transferred to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. These patriotic, principled Americans were put by this insane government into Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary with other criminals. And yet they fought. Their battlefield was behind those tall concrete walls, but they stood strong against the abuse and the harassment, and the assaults on them as strong American, principled Americans. And I consider them just as heroic as those that fought on foreign battlefields.

Takei's parents being declared disloyal

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GEORGE TAKEI:

Because my parents answered no-no, and that's the term of community, no-nos, they were declared disloyal. And Tule Lake, a former internment camp, was turned into what they called a segregation camp for disloyals. We had to be transferred from Rohwer, Arkansas, to Tule Lake in Northern California. This camp became the most notorious and most symbolic, the important camp, of all ten camps. It was the largest of all ten camps, 18,000 people, when most of the other camps were from 6,000 to about 11,000 or 12,000 people. 18,000 principled people, outraged people, and unjustly incarcerated. The camp was much more harsh than the other nine internment camps. It had three layers of barbed wire fences and, talk about over reaction, six tanks patrolling the perimeter of this camp, intimidating, threatening, and goading.

Tanks, which belonged on a battlefield, not outraged American citizens with three layers of barbed wire fence and a half a dozen tanks.

Takei's memories of being transferred to the Tule Lake camp

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GEORGE TAKEI:

It was sad, because we had gotten used to Arkansas, to Rohwer, we had friends there now. And those sentry towers, which were threatening, were familiar parts of the landscape now. And I remember that train ride leaving Rohwer, because the camp was right up there. Again, waved to our friends goodbye, and they got smaller and smaller, the only thing visible became the sentry towers on the horizon, and then we made a turn, and they were gone. The contrast between Rohwer, Arkansas, and Tule Lake, California, was dramatic and harsh. Arkansas was lush, humid, verdant, lots of water. Tule Lake was an ancient dry lakebed, and so there was sand like a desert, but unlike the Arizona desert, it was bitterly cold. The sand was not the soft sand of a beach, but sharp, gritty, hard sand. It was windy, and when the sand was blown into your face it hurt. And there were landmarks there. One prominent landmark was a mountain that we called Castle Rock. It was sheer on one side and sloped on the other, and it came to a kind of a triangle like this. It looked like a castle with a rampart, so it was called Castle Rock. On the opposite side to the east was a mountain that had been flattened and rounded, and we called it Abalone Mountain, because it looked like a huge, giant abalone. So it was sharp, gritty, hard sand. No vegetation except tumbleweed, dry tumbleweed that rolled around on the flat landscape.

Radical groups at the Tule Lake camp

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GEORGE TAKEI:

Some of the young men had been radicalized by the relentless assault on them and their dignity by the government, and some of them were people that initially right after Pearl Harbor volunteered to fight for this country. But after this constant wave of assaults on them, they were radicalized, and their attitude was, 'All right. You're going to look at us as the enemy, by gum we're going to show you what kind of enemy you have to contend with.' Their position now was they were going to rise up when the Japanese Army lands on continental United States, and they were going to be fit. They jogged around the block every morning. And I'd wake up to the sound of their jogging. I heard the Japanese cadence. They had white headbands with the Japanese military flag, the rising sun with the red rays, painted on their headbands. They ended their jogs with 'Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!' which really woke me up. So, that was the changed climate. It was intensely political, intensely radicalized, and they were always agitating. My parents were considered the conservatives, because they said, you know, "We're standing on principle, we're not going to take it, but we're Americans." So again, my father was asked to serve as a block manager in Tule Lake, and he a much more challenging, more difficult situation, a highly politicized environment

Divisions amongst the Japanese-American community at Rohwer camp

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GEORGE TAKEI:

Before the loyalty questionnaire, already the Japanese American community was becoming divided. The final chop of the butcher shop knife was the loyalty questionnaire. The community was definitely divided. There were those that had been college students yanked out of college, and they wanted to continue their education. So, they had been pleading, lobbying, to be released from the camp. We have an organization called the Japanese American Citizens League, which was founded back in the '30s, and they were advocating for the students to be released. They were urging the government to close down the camps. And so, the group that was lobbying for that was the Japanese American Citizens League. The other group, those that stood on principle and said they're not going to submit to that, became the ones that were sent to Tule Lake. Of those that were advocating for closing down the camp, the JACL, they were vocally voicing their support for the government. And the people in the camp naturally opposed them. They were seen as dogs. They were called by the Japanese name *Inu,* the dogs that are just wagging their tail and wanting the government to like them. So there was that division in the camp before the loyalty questionnaire. When the loyalty questionnaire came down, that divided definitely the Japanese American community.

Going to school at the camps

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GEORGE TAKEI:

I did go to school. Some of the teachers were, this was back in Arkansas, nice ladies who came from outside the camp. I guess they were volunteers, but they were probably remunerated, I don't know. They were the school teachers. I remember we began every school day with Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. I could see the barbed wire fence and the sentry tower right outside my schoolhouse window as I recited the words, "With liberty and justice for all," totally innocent of the stinging irony in those words: liberty and justice for all.

Finding out about President Franklin Roosevelt's death

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GEORGE TAKEI:

There was a man that we all thought was a crazy man, who always hung out by the latrine. He was always spouting rumors. There was a term that was used in Tule Lake for the president, *loose-belto*, in Japanese accent, loose belt, Roosevelt, loose belt. I remember him yelling about, "Loose-belto dead! Loose-belto dead!" Shouting it right by the latrine. Everybody, you know, had to go there. So, that's where he stood to shout out the latest rumor. Or "Yamada is a inu," you know, a guy named Yamada is a dog wagging his tail to the government. So, he was always shouting rumors, and I thought that was the crazy man again, just shouting another rumor, because he was always doing that. "Loose-belt was dead."

Finding out about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings

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GEORGE TAKEI:

He was shouting that as well, that a horrible bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the city was flattened. He was saying it was terrible. But you know, we didn't get news from outside, and so thought it was... I mean, we had people that had relatives in those two cities. As a matter of fact, in our family my mother's parents, our grandparents, had gone back to Japan before Pearl Harbor. They had gone back to Hiroshima. And here was this rumor shouted by a crazy man, but whispered by other more credible people as well that they heard from so-and-so that there was a horrible bomb dropped on Hiroshima first, and then Nagasaki. And the uncertainty was what added to the horror, not knowing whether that's true or not. And we couldn't get any more information from the camp command. It was just this crazy man shouting it out, but the other people whispered it. It was terrifying. And for my mother, I remember her constantly crying, just bursting out whenever someone said something and she thought of her parents. And my parents used to go on long walks. You know, there was no privacy in the barracks. The walls were paper thing. We had plasterboard walls, which was I guess something privileged, because I learned later on that some camps didn't have walls separating the barrack into units, it was just one vast space with a row of beds. We had walls, but the neighbors could hear even whispers. So my parents went on long walks, and they often came back with my mother's eyes bloodshot. As it turned out, they survived. They were on the... Hiroshima is rimmed by mountains. It's a kind of a flat wash land area, it's city of canals. When the bomb was dropped, the radiation ultimately went up. It came down and up because of the mountain range. They were on the other side and saved the irradiation. I had an aunt, my mother's youngest sister who left with my grandparents. She was married by then and had a boy, and she was in downtown Hiroshima shopping, and she perished, she and the boy... I never met my aunt nor my cousin, the boy, but their body was found in a canal, charred.

Takei's mother renouncing American citizenship

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GEORGE TAKEI:

We were in this highly fraught environment of Tule Lake with the agitators, the radicals, and those of us who just wanted to survive and endure. But the government was getting very concerned, agitated by the agitators, and they wanted to silence them somehow. So they passed an unconstitutional law, a law that we later called the Denaturalization Act. It was Public Law 78-405, which allowed people to renounce their American citizenship on United States soil during wartime. This was the middle of the war, and they passed a law allowing renunciation of American citizenship. These radicals immediately seized it, and they began a campaign to get others to renounce their citizenship as well. But it was just these radicals that took that dramatic action. The government became frustrated by that and also the JACL's campaign to close the camps, and so they passed a law saying all the camps will be closed and the people released. This was terrifying to those of us in Tule Lake. There were, I use the word advisedly, rednecks taking potshots at white people driving over to visit the people in Tule Lake, taking potshots at white people. If they closed down the camp, they were going to release everybody, and so the irony of the barbed wire fence that confined us was also a barbed wire fence that protected us from the war, hate filled people outside.

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We were terrorized when they threatened to close down Tule Lake and let us go into this intense hate filled environment. It was terrorizing. The radicals seized that, and that said that if enough people renounced their citizenship, we can force the government to keep Tule Lake operating. Because my mother wanted to protect the family, keep it safe, and wanted the protection of the barbed wire fence at a time like this when the heat of hate was intense, licking at the barbed wire fence, she renounced her citizenship. And enough people renounced their citizenship so that the Government was forced to keep Tule Lake operating. But when the war did actually end, that renunciation came back to bite us with a vengeance. She was a renunciant. We learned that my mother's name was on the list of the people to be shipped to Japan when that ship could take off. The war was over now, ships could go to Japan. It was terrorizing. They were going to send us, we were going to go as a family, send us to a war torn, war ravaged country, where the people there were starving, scrounging in the ruins of a destroyed nation, and we would be going there. If I had gone to Japan at that time, it would have changed my life completely. It was at a time like that, that one of my singular heroes came to our rescue, a civil rights attorney called Wayne Collins, who was one of the most incredibly courageous attorneys in the United States.

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When any lawyer wouldn't touch a Japanese American case with a ten-foot pole, he came to the rescue of all Japanese Americans, whatever they were, whatever the case was. In fact, he represented Fred Korematsu and represented him all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1944, the Supreme Court ruled against him. This man, this courageous man who passionately loved the Constitution and was an eloquent spokesman for us, as well as a very foul-mouth man, he was a chain smoker, but he is one of my heroes. He came to our defense. He took on the case of the renunciants, explained the whole situation. He said no American can renounce their citizenship at time of war. No one. It's like resigning from the human race, it is ridiculous, and this is cruel and unfair. And he was able to get a last-minute mitigation hearing for my mother, and we did not have to be on that ship. I'm eternally grateful. Otherwise, I may be speaking Japanese; I may be thinking differently, I may be a totally different person. One man can change another human being's life, and Wayne Collins did that for me. I'm eternally grateful for that. Later, he carried on the pursuit for the reinstatement of the citizenship of the renunciants. It took many years, I think about two or three years, and my mother's citizenship was restored. We are indebted to incredible, courageous, principled people like Wayne Collins. He changed the lives of many, many people.

The decision to go back to Los Angeles after the incarceration ended

01:52:14:11

GEORGE TAKEI:

Many people decided that they were embittered by their West Coast experience, and so they chose to go relocate in places like Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Boston. My parents decided to go back to Los Angeles, but Los Angeles was still an intensely hostile place. Fletcher Bowron was still the mayor. He was the one that fiercely advocated our imprisonment, and he was still the mayor, so my parents were very brave to consider going back to Los Angeles. We had nothing. When we were "freed," the government gave us a one-way ticket to anywhere in the United States plus $25. We had that to start life all over again. For my parents, everything that they had worked for throughout their life was taken away. All they had was the $25. We came back to a place where jobs were impossible. Where housing was equally impossible. Our first home was on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. And as terrorizing as that morning when the soldiers came to get us was, I think being freed, for us kids, was more terrorizing. Here we were in a community that stank, the stench of human waste all over, on the streets, in the hallways, everywhere. Scary, smelly, ugly people, staggering about, leaning on walls, sprawled on the sidewalk, fighting, women shrieking and pulling each other's hair, and falling down, and wrestling. We'd never seen anything like that. And the chaos, the sirens, and the police cars shrieking all day long, all night long, and our Skid Row room would at night suddenly glow red with the light from the police car. One day we were walking down the street, and suddenly we saw this derelict staggering toward us like this, glaring at us. We thought he was going to assault us, and when he got near us, he suddenly collapsed and barfed right in front of us. And my baby sister said, "Mama, let's go back home," meaning behind those barbed wire fences again because that's all she knew. Her four years of life was behind barbed wire fence. That was home to her.

The trauma left by the incarceration

01:55:18:10

GEORGE TAKEI:

After Skid Row, my father found a dry-cleaning shop with an apartment behind it in the Mexican-American barrio of East L.A., and so there we were in an all Mexican American neighborhood. My brother became a stutter. He couldn't get a word out. It was...[stutters] Then, you know, finally spit out a word. He also started bedwetting, and at that time, we just thought Henry was funny. And my mother was very upset that he wet his bed, and she thought she'd shame him by hanging out the sheet with the yellow circle on a clothesline, so everybody could see. I don't know whether that was good therapy for him or not, but he became a very nervous and insecure young boy. He was what? Eight by then... Or seven by then.

Takei's conversations with his father about democracy after the incarceration

01:56:34:21

GEORGE TAKEI:

I really think, looking back, I had a really rare man for my father. He was an extraordinary man. He bore the anguish, and the humiliation, and the horror of that unjust imprisonment the most in our family. In fact, not only for our family, but he bore the burden for our block, our community. He went to negotiate with the camp command for a lot of the young men who were unjustly dragged out of the barracks. He bore, and he lived through all of that. And yet when his son, me, wanted to know more about it, I scoured the history books. I became a voracious reader. Couldn't find anything about the internment in the history books. I read civics books, hoping that there might be something in that. Didn't find anything. What I found was the noble ideals of our democracy. And so armed with what I read in the civics books, I engaged my father in conversation. And he said, "Yes, these are noble, shining ideals of American democracy, but ours is a people's democracy, and the people have done noble things. Those ideals that you're reading about in your civics books were thought of by people, the founding fathers. People have a capacity to come up with ideas like that, but people are also fallible human beings, and they make mistakes." And he told me that Roosevelt, in the '30s, was a great president. We were being crushed by a crushing depression. People were hungry, jobless, homeless, lining up in great big long lines for a bowl of soup, and at a time like that he was the president. And he brought the power of his presidency, as well as his political smarts, and his various connections and created jobs, post offices all over the country. He hired the people that would be unemployed first. Artists to paint those magnificent murals on those posters. He built bridges, roads. He created jobs and pulled the nation up from that horrible depression.

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He said, “There's nothing to fear but fear itself.” Have some confidence in yourself and pull yourself up. But when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the whole nation was swept up in war hysteria, the president was a human being. He got stampeded. But when a great president makes a mistake, it's a great mistake, and we had to pay the price for that horrible mistake. But he was a human being with all of the great potentials that people had, and he used them, but he had the same fallibility. And so he said, “Our democracy is dependent on people who cherish those shining ideals and actively participate in the process.” And I said, “But, daddy, look at those people on the news all the time, the civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, he's inspiring. And here they are advocating for equality, and they're beaten, and dogs are...” And my father said, “Yes, people have to fight for their rights sometimes in a people's democracy, and we have to do that too.” And I said, “But, daddy, it's not happening. They're being destroyed.” And he said, “Let me show you how it's got to work.” And one Sunday afternoon, he drove me downtown to the Adlai Stevenson for President campaign headquarters, and he introduced me to electoral politics. And there I was with other people passionately dedicated to getting this great governor, eloquent governor, of Illinois Adlai Stevenson elected president, and I understood what it took. And despite the fact that he didn't win after two tries... He tried a third time too, but didn't get the nomination. My father said, “In a people's democracy, you never give up. You keep on keeping on." And so, I became a political activist and also a social justice advocate as well.

The importance of learning lessons from the past

02:01:58:07

GEORGE TAKEI:

The internment that we went through, the incarceration, is history now, 75 years old. But I feel like it is current news because it is current news. What's happening on our southern borders is the same kind of irrationality. We were characterized as spies, saboteurs, fifth columnists with no evidence. And now, a President of the United States is making this broad, sweeping generalization. Those Latinos coming across the border are rapists, drug dealers, and murderers. He knows better than that. He knows that these are desperate people fleeing violence, and poverty, and all sorts of horrors, and they're fleeing for asylum, to find escape from all the horrors that they're facing in their home countries in Central America and Mexico. And to call them and to characterize them as that kind of sweeping generalization... And then we're reaching a new low, a grotesque new low. Children being torn away from their parents. We were always intact as a family, but the children are being torn away and put in filthy, disgusting cages. And to really underscore the evil in this, some of them are being scattered in the outlining areas of the country from the southern border, Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Jersey—deliberately, intentionally making them difficult to find. And indeed, when the courts order them to bring them together, they can't find the right parents. Some parents may have been deported already.

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He is dramatically destroying the lives of people, and so what we went through is being repeated again. We have this cycle, this endless cycle, of cruelty and injustice being inflicted on innocent people for political convenience. And another outrage was Trump's first executive order that he signed. The Muslim travel ban. Again, this sweeping statement, that generalization that Muslims are all potential terrorists. However, this time it was different. When we were incarcerated, every elected official in the United States, from the mayor of Los Angeles all the way to the presidency, were vilifying us. Only one elected official, Ralph Carr the Governor of Colorado, stood up and said, "This is wrong." And for taking that honorable principled position, his political career was destroyed. Everyone was against us. When Trump's Muslim travel ban was assigned, thousands of Americans rushed to their airports all across the country. Lawyers went to the airports to offer pro bono service to help foreigners coming into this country. And the Deputy Attorney General of the United States Sally Yates stood up and said, "I refuse to defend this executive order." We have made progress. Dramatic difference from when we were incarcerated to now. Unfortunately, it was a repetition of the same kind of outrage, but the reaction of the country was different. And that's why I wrote the book, *They Called Us Enemy*, telling the story of our incarceration from the eyes of five-year-old me. Because when I was a teenager and preteen, I read comic books—that was my literature, and I still remember the things I read in the comic books. And so by using the graphic memoir form, and telling the story of the incarceration of Japanese Americans, and the horror that my parents went through, we're informing young people at an age when they're absorbing in information that they're exposed to, and they grow up with that information in their body, and they become voters. They become movers and shakers. They become the good America that knows the failures of America, where we stumbled. And with that knowledge, I'm hopeful that our country will become a much truer people's democracy.

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