

George Takei on his childhood in internment camps — and his faith in the future

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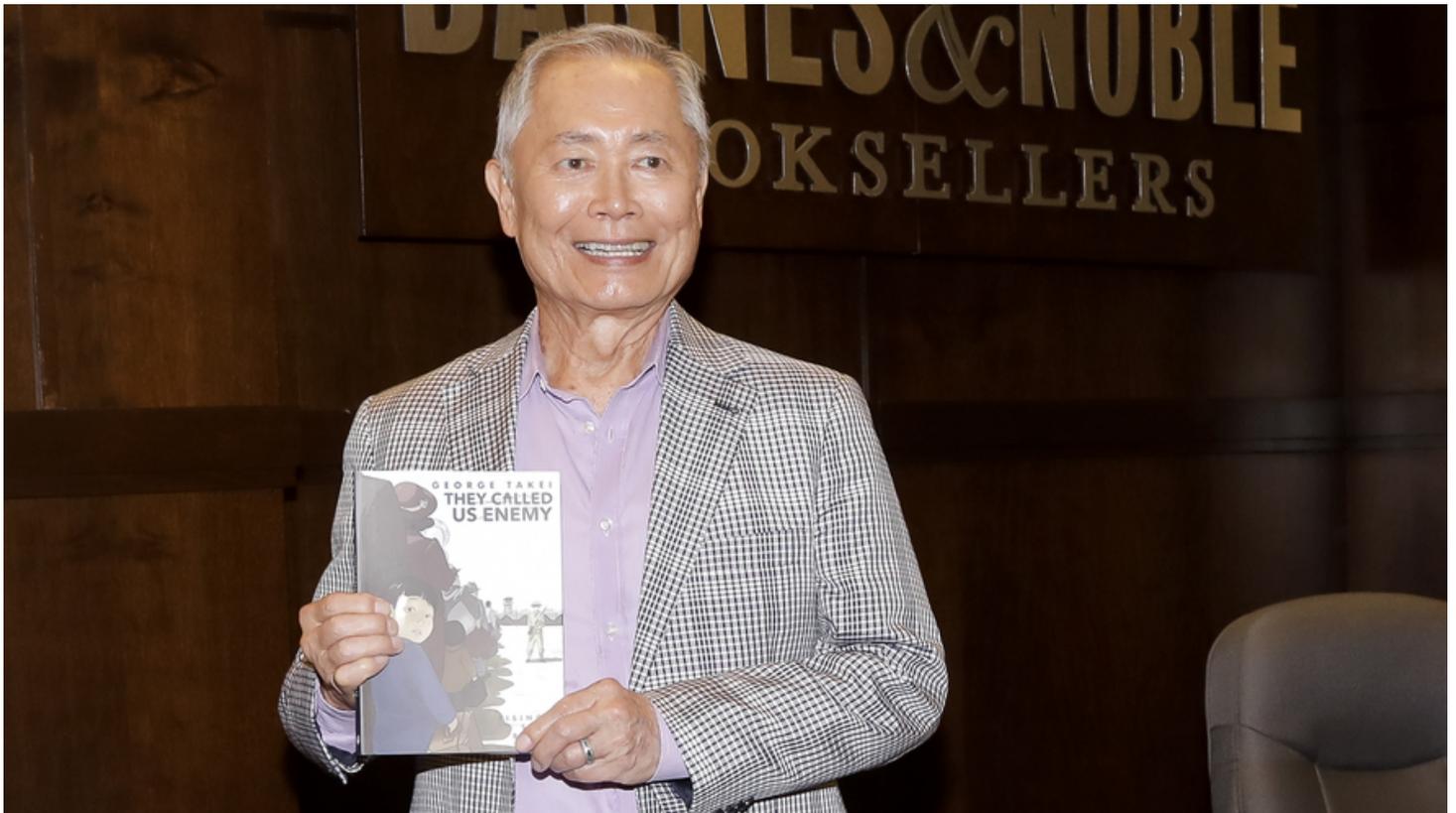


Image 1. George Takei is a well-known actor who spent four years of his childhood in a relocation camp for Japanese Americans. Takei hopes his story, retold in his memoir, will inspire others to fight injustice. Photo: Tibrina Hobson/Getty Images

During World War II, approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced out of their homes and sent to internment camps. This happened after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, a U.S. military base in Hawaii. Among those affected were family members of actor George Takei. He says he's determined to keep talking about it because he wants a new generation to know what happened and fight similar injustices today.

Recently, Takei recounted the morning his father abruptly woke him and his younger brother to get dressed and pack. They were going on vacation, his father explained to 5-year-old Takei as his mother bundled up his baby sister and the few belongings they could carry.

Soldiers forced Takei's family out of their California home and moved them to the city of Arcadia. There, the family was imprisoned in a horse stall at the Santa Anita racetrack that reeked of manure.

"I thought everyone went on vacations escorted by soldiers," Takei told the Los Angeles Times Book Club at the Montalbán Theatre.

Childhood In The Camps

Takei and his family were shipped to internment camps, or prison camps, in Arkansas and Northern California, spending four years behind barbed wire. His graphic memoir, "They Called Us Enemy," is told through the eyes of a child growing up in those camps. The novel details the day-to-day hardships and humiliating experiences.

Takei spoke with reporter Teresa Watanabe about the effect the camps had on his life and career. Watanabe asked Takei how he has healed from the experiences in the camps.

"It has shaped me," Takei responded, "As a teenager I learned about the internment and the injustice. My father said, 'You have to actively participate.' It was the internment and my father's good guidance that made me the activist that I am."

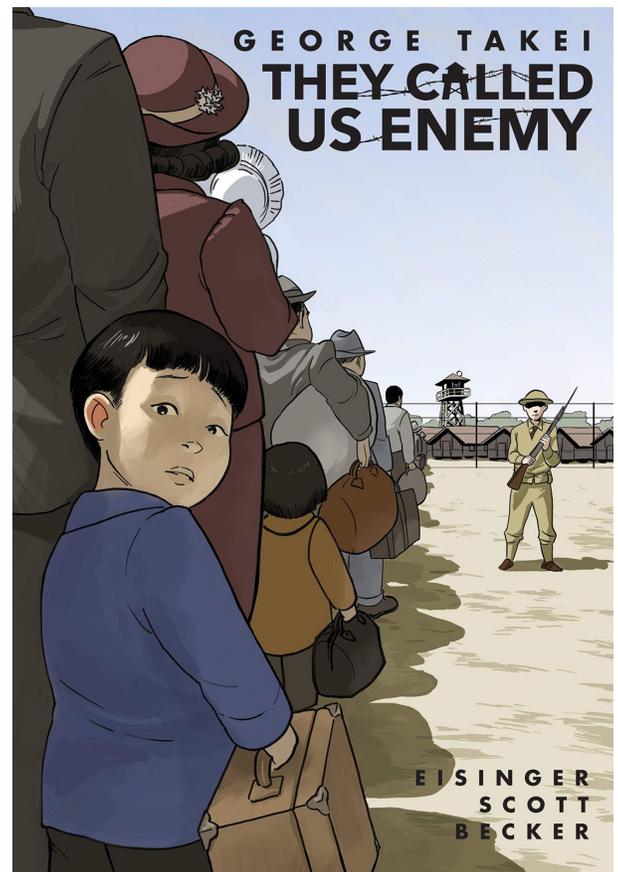
Takei said his father maintained an unshaken faith in American democracy, despite the family's imprisonment. So much so, he took teenage Takei to volunteer at Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign headquarters in downtown Los Angeles during the 1950s. Stevenson lost the race, but his father said, "In a people's democracy, you keep on keeping on."

Fighting For Justice

When asked what it's going to take for history to stop repeating itself, Takei echoed his father: participation. He pointed to the 2016 election, where about half of the eligible voting population in the United States did not cast a ballot.

At 82, Takei relived the World War II era in his role on "The Terror: Infamy," a TV series set in a Japanese American community. The story takes place in a fishing village on Terminal Island near San Pedro, California, following Japanese immigrants and their American-born children as a spirit haunts them through the war. Takei plays Yamato-san, the community's elder statesman.

Takei is also a force on social media. He has 2.9 million followers on Twitter, which he credits to his tongue-in-cheek approach to politics. He uses



the networking platform to advocate for the LGBTQ community, refugees detained on the U.S.-Mexico border and other causes.

That visibility on social media and in popular culture is important to Takei. "We were incarcerated [partly with the help of] the stereotypes and the images that were sold to the American public by the media: radio shows, movies, stage shows, comic books." Following the Pearl Harbor attack, many Americans unfairly treated Japanese Americans as disloyal or untrustworthy.

Takei noted the significance of his role as Mr. Sulu on "Star Trek," which premiered in 1966. It was the first time a Japanese American actor was cast in a leading role on prime time TV. The Starship Enterprise was a model of inclusion at the time, he said, with a Black communications officer played by Nichelle Nichols.

Faith In The Future

An audience member asked Takei about Nichols, who played Lieutenant Uhura during the show's three-year run. Nichols planned to leave the show after the first season, but Martin Luther King Jr. persuaded her to stay in the role.

"There was no other person representing what she represented," Takei said. "That was an important statement that Dr. King made to her. I was mindful of the role that I played because we didn't have opportunities like that before — to play one in the leadership team and to be in a futuristic utopian vision of our future."

Los Angeles Times arts and culture editor Craig Nakano said he was drawn to passages in "They Called Us Enemy" in which Takei describes seeing the first snowfall as "pure magic." Takei also recollected decorating a Christmas tree while being surrounded by barbed wire. For Nakano, those moments also contained a desire for normalcy within the camps — which echoed his own parents' stories of the internment camps.

Nakano shared pages from his father's 1945 internment camp yearbook with photos of the forensics club, student band, Girl Scouts and basketball team. The yearbook included the high school principal's letter to the students as the closure of the camps was approaching: "Let us have faith in the future. Let us not exaggerate our fears and difficulties."

Takei said the yearbook reminded him of what his father used to say: Resilience isn't just a muscle flexing strength, it's also the strength to create joy under tough circumstances.