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“Oh My”: The Internment of George Takei in *They Called Us Enemy*

By Giovanni Gonzalez

George Takei is one of the biggest Hollywood actors in the history of cinema. He stars in many television shows and movies, but he is well-known for his run on the popular Sci-Fi television show *Star Trek*. Besides starring in *Star Trek*, George Takei is widely known for his humanitarian work on spreading Japanese American history across the United States. Takei was part of one of the most traumatizing events in California history, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Due to events that he experienced during the long five years; he wrote down his experience in his memoir *They Called Us Enemy*. His memoir outlines the effects that the internment camps have on him to this very day.

Even though there are numerous books, memoirs, and autobiographical works that were written about the Japanese internment camps, Takei's memoir is completely different in that he talks about his experiences of Japanese relocation from the perspective of a child. What makes his memoir more memorable is that we get to experience how a child's memory about this form of racism is viewed differently from an adult who understood what was happening. George Takei remembers that the internment camps were filled with happy childhood memories to ease the mindset of not only himself, but his siblings as well. What makes his book exceptional is that he was able to recall this event as a good time but still remembers, as he grew up, the true meaning of what he and his family experienced due to the irrational fear by the United States government.

The beginning of Takei's memoir starts with telling us about the events leading up to the relocation program. It starts with George Takei being with his family, having a fun time, then on the radio, it was announced that Pearl Harbor was bombed by the

Japanese military. This led to President Franklin D. Roosevelt declaring war on Japan and cementing America's involvement in World War II. Because of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many Americans started blaming Japanese Americans for the attack and believed that they were spies, working for the Japanese government. As a response, California Governor Earl Warren began the political position of "Lock up the Japs" to ease the people's fear and blamed Pearl Harbor on a group of people.⁵ Fletcher Brown, Mayor of Los Angeles during the 1940s, states the people of Japanese descent were "nonassimilable" and that they should not be trusted, even though they were American citizens. Then, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which relocated every person who was deemed a threat to national security. A surprising fact is that the Order never used the words "Japanese" or "camps" when it was issued.⁶ Next is where the story of George Takei develops.

One morning, everything was normal, then a loud bang came from the front door and George's life changed forever. His family was forced to vacate their home and relocate to the Santa Anita Racetrack before being sent to one of the ten internment camps across America. At first, George and his siblings were excited to be living at the racetrack because they were going to be sleeping in the stalls where the horses lived. This excited George so much that he did not even pay attention to his parents' expressions as they were being treated as animals. After spending several months at the Santa Anita Racetrack, George and his family were moved to Camp Rohwer in Arkansas. It was at Camp Rohwer that George Takei had the best time of his childhood life. It was there where he and his siblings were able to create so many fun memories.

After the events of the internment camps, George Takei, now an adult, fully comprehends what truly happened. As a teenager, George was angry at "Daddy" for letting this happen to

⁵ George Takei and Justin Eisinger, *They Called Us Enemy* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2019), 20.

⁶ Exec. Order No. 9066, 3 C.F.R. 1 (1942).

his family. He responded that he still believed in American Democracy, even after everything that the U.S. government had put his family through. George was angry at his father's response, because he did not understand what his dad felt, not until he was much older would he fully understand the pain, suffering, humiliation, and degradation that his father had to go through to make his family feel at ease. In the end, he uses his experiences to help start-up his acting career and spread awareness of the racist acts that his people had to experience, with the creation of the Japanese American Museum, to let other people know his story and its long-lasting effects on the history of both California and the United States.

George Takei wrote his memoir to tell the positive side of history that most books never mention. Even though his memoir was told from the perspective of his childhood, he was able to shed light on one of the darkest moments in this country's history. The main person that helped get George to process the truth behind the internment camps was his father. Even though they went through the struggle of this event, he was able to tell George Takei that there is always light at the end of this dark tunnel and that he should remember the good times he experienced, not full of sad moments, but happy moments. Even after his father's death, George Takei tells his stories so that other people will know how this event shaped him into becoming one of the most beloved people in today's times. All thanks to his father, who inspired him to make the most of his life and become an inspiration to not just Japanese Americans, but to everyone who overcame such obstacles. George Takei is an inspirational figure for future generations.

George Takei's memoir is an amazing example of how he viewed the internment camps in a positive manner. He takes a traumatic event in history and is able to put it in a more positive light compared to other books about the internment camps. What I like about his memoir is that it was an easy read, as it was written in a graphic style that made it more entertaining to read - which could benefit casual readers or people not familiar with California

history. The images in the book caught my eyes, as they perfectly described the feelings that Takei and other people experienced, as realistically as possible.

Bibliography

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Author Bio

Giovanni Daniel Gonzalez is currently a second-year transfer student at CSU San Bernardino, double majoring in Anthropology and History. Giovanni's interests include Ancient History, Roman Egypt, Classics, Classical Archaeology, Ancient Warfare, Trade and cross-cultural interactions. With help from the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, Giovanni is planning to go to graduate school to earn his Ph.D. in Ancient History. After earning his Ph.D., Giovanni plans to teach at a university level in History and Anthropology.

