

Portraits Podcast – *Live Long and Protest, With George Takei* (Season 4, Episode 3)

[INTRO MUSIC AND AUDIO CLIP FROM STAR TREK]

Kim Sajet: Welcome to portraits! I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. My guest today needs no introduction.

Separate Audio Clip: "No escape for you. You either leave this war bloodied or with my blood on your songs"

Kim Sajet: That's Lieutenant Sulu, helmsman of the Starship Enterprise on Star Trek, also known as George Takei, or, as his name is sometimes mispronounced, George "Takai".

George Takei: But I don't object to the mispronunciation "Takai" because that's a Japanese word that means expensive. So, I'd be more than happy to accommodate if you insist on calling me "Takai".

Kim Sajet: George has lent that same rich baritone voice to a bunch of political and social causes, including gay rights. For example, when the Tennessee legislature was considering a so called "Don't say, gay bill", back in 2011, George had this to contribute:

Separate Audio Clip (George Takei): "I'm lending my name to the cause. Anytime you need to say the word gay, you can simply Takei. For example, you could safely proclaim you are supportive of Takei marriage"

Kim Sajet: The bill passed the state senate.

Separate Audio Clip (George Takei): "You can march in a Takei pride parade"

Kim Sajet: But it was never brought to a vote on the House floor.

Separate Audio Clip (George Takei): "I've created a t-shirt. It's okay to be Takei. I hope you wear it proudly"

Kim Sajet: If you want to understand where George's activism comes from, he says you have to go all the way back to 1942 and his five-year-old self. That's when George and his family were incarcerated in Arkansas, and then California and labeled as "disloyals".

Separate Audio Clip: "Evacuation: more than 100,000 men, women and children removed from their homes in the Pacific Coast state to wartime community"

Kim Sajet: Their crime? Having Japanese ancestry during the Second World War. Although the messaging from the time might have you believe otherwise.

Separate Audio Clip: "They are not prisoners. They are not internees. They are merely dislocated people: the unwounded casualties of war"

Kim Sajet: The memory of that injustice is still vivid for George, and so is the advice that his father gave him about how to be resilient in tough times. Resistance and resilience, by the way, are the themes of this season of Portraits. So, I started off by asking George about his most famous role, which was in his own way, a form of intergalactic resistance.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet: George, thank you so much for doing this.

George Takei: It's my pleasure.

Kim Sajet: Now, as you know because you've been to the museum a couple of times, we have your portrait in the collection. So, this was a picture taken in 1966. In your key role that I think many people still identify with at least of a certain generation like myself, which was when you were cast as Hikaru Sulu by Gene Roddenberry for Star Trek. Can you please describe this portrait? And I've heard a rumor that you're not actually all that enamored with it. You don't really like this picture that much or am I wrong?

George Takei: Yes, it is a stock promotional photo that NBC used. I'm looking at the character of Sulu, sitting at his helm position. And particularly because I was the one that came up with the idea of having a hank of hair tumbling down on my forehead. I had the makeup person spray a hank of hair, so that it's one piece, but the hair that's tumbling down, is all separated. So, I'm not pleased with that dishevelment.

Kim Sajet: Well George I think you look extraordinarily handsome; I'm just saying. I didn't even notice the hank of hair.

George Takei: That was the reason.

Kim Sajet: Gene Roddenberry was writing Star Trek in the turbulent 1960s when there was racial violence and the deeply polarizing Vietnam War. So how do you tackle all of this on television and still keep your advertisers happy? Roddenberry came up with an innovative solution.

George Takei: So, what he decided to do was to tell the story in metaphor and place it in the future. It's the 23rd century and the Starship Enterprise was a metaphor for Starship Earth and the strength of this starship he posited was in its diversity, a beautiful philosophy. He had a problem though with finding a name for the character that represented Asia because every Asian surname is nationally specific. Tanaka is Japanese, Wong is Chinese, Kim is Korean, and so forth and so on. And early 20th century

Asia was turbulent with the warfare and colonization and he didn't want to suggest taking sides, or Asia being represented by one national group. So he had a map of Asia pinned on his office and he was staring at it, trying to solve the dilemma that he had. And he saw off the coast of the Philippines, a body of water called the Sulu Sea. And he thought the waters of a sea touch all shores. And thus he came up with the name Sulu.

Kim Sajet: That is beautiful. You know, it seems to me that for Gene and indeed everyone involved in the starship back in 1966, this was a form of resistance, right? It was it was a form of resistance against the status quo and about what was happening politically. When I asked you, how do you define resistance, what would you say? What does that word mean to you?

George Takei: Well, in this context, Gene Roddenberry was part of the resistance. He was a Hollywood producer and writer. I have a heritage in the entertainment world of stereotypes of Asian people. And they were all unattractive stereotypes. There were first of all very few opportunities for Asian American actors. And the few opportunities we had were either as loyal servants, comic buffoons, or as evil villains. Absolutely merciless villains. Ming the merciless I think says it all for that type of stereotype. When I got the offer from Gene Roddenberry, this was a groundbreaking opportunity because I was not... well we were all racially defined. That was part of his own philosophy. But we were all top fleet enterprise officers, part of the leadership team. And for me, as an Asian American actor, it was a breakthrough opportunity to get a role like that. So Sulu symbolizes for me a number of challenges that I overcame; the ethnic stereotyping and for me personally, to have this career advance made.

Kim Sajet: George likes to point out that these ethnic stereotypes had been in place long before Hollywood had anything to say about it. There are plenty of examples from the 1800s when Chinese workers were disparaged as a, quote, "yellow peril". In fact, some of the United States earliest immigration laws targeted Asians, not for visas, but for exclusion.

George Takei: So all immigrants coming to this country could someday aspire to become naturalized Americans except immigrants coming from Asia. The minute they stepped on U.S. soil, they were discriminated against.

Kim Sajet: George notes that one of the largest mass lynching in US history, targeted Chinese immigrants in his hometown of LA. It was 1871 and at least 17 Chinese men were murdered by a violent mob.

George Takei: So lynching was already going on at that time, but the target was Asians. The rural area of California was not unlike the rural areas of the American South.

Kim Sajet: Yeah, I think a lot of people don't realize that when they talk about lynching, it wasn't just the black men and some women that got lynched, but also Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish Americans got lynched. That certainly was across the United States, and very much so on the Mexican American border out on the west coast as well.

George Takei: Yes, so this is the background that we had. There was this hate from the very beginning that simmered and simmered and then occasionally broke out, but on December 7, 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor that terror rolled across the United States.

Separate Audio Clip: "On December 7, 1941, Japan like its infamous access partners, struck first and declared war afterward"

George Takei: And overnight, Japanese Americans were spat on, yelled at with ugly racist words, and assaulted. My father's car was graffitied.

Kim Sajet: Within weeks, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. It cleared the way for the imprisonment of somewhere between 110,000 and 120,000 Japanese Americans who were living in the western United States.

Kim Sajet: So George, you wrote a book recently called, "They Called Us Enemy". It's an illustrated book. And you have very early in the illustrations, which is actually lovely done by an artist called Harmony Becker, a page that talks about the day that the soldiers come to take your family away to prison and then you call it a prison. Barbed wire and guards who rounded you up like cattle, you put on chains-

George Takei: Sentry towers with machine guns pointed at us. At night, when we made the runs to the latrine, search lights followed us. My mother hated those search lights. But for me as a five-year-old kid, I thought it was nice that they lit the way for me to pee.

Kim Sajet: George's father had told him that they were going away on a long vacation. And one of the illustrations in his book depicts his mother coming out of the house, the day that the soldiers came for them.

[MUSIC]

George Takei: And when she came out, she had her baby sister in one arm, and a huge duffel bag in the other, and tears were streaming down her face. The terror of that morning is seared into my memory. That horrifying, terrifying, scary morning. We were innocent, they had no charge against us. And so that's how the internment began.

Kim Sajet: On the other side of the break, a story about a knot of wood and about tying the knot.

[BRIEF PAUSE]

Separate Audio Clip: "The time: spring and summer of 1942. The place: ten different relocation centers"

Kim Sajet: My guest George Takei was a small boy when the United States entered World War Two, and then shipped 10s of 1000s of Japanese Americans to internment camps. At first, his family was

held at the Santa Anita racetrack. Then they were put on a train to the Rohwer war relocation center in Arkansas.

Separate Audio Clip: "Each family was assigned to a single room compartment about 20 by 25 feet, barren, unattractive, a stove, a light bulb, cots, mattresses..."

Kim Sajet: George remembers his father teaching him something about resilience during this time. As he told CNBC a couple of years ago, my father said: "resilience isn't all just teeth gritting strength and endurance. It's also the ability to find beauty in an ugly situation or an ugly place to make your joy. We think of resilience as flexing the veins in our throat. That is part of resilience" George said, "But you're going to be exhausted when it's flexing all the time. Let's get back to our conversation.

George Takei: We were in the swamps of Arkansas. And just beyond the barbed wire fence was an area that they call the bayou. And trees loomed up from the water and their roots twisted and turned and went back into the water and in and out like a snake and my father got permission to go beyond the barbed wire fence to collect some of those Cypress knots, they called them. And he brought it back and boiled it in an oil drum and peeled the bark off. And low and behold, there was a beautiful sculpture of nature. This root, we carried our daddy's, we called it "Kobu", the Japanese word for knot, with us to Northern California. And after we were released, we brought it home with us. And so we have that Kobu in our library at home to this day.

Kim Sajet: Pretty soon the U.S. government had a problem on its hands. It needed more recruits for the war effort. And so, it cast an eye over the same young Japanese Americans it had just uprooted and carted off to camps. First though, it asked the adults to fill out a so-called loyalty questionnaire. And while most of the questions were pretty innocuous, towards the end, there were two highly problematic ones.

George Takei: Question 27 asked: "Are you willing to serve in the United States military on combat duty wherever ordered".

Kim Sajet: Never mind that we just ordered you to this swamp in Arkansas. George's parents worried that if they answered yes, they might be shipped off to the war without their children.

George Takei: They answered honestly and truthfully. No, they cannot do that. Their children are very young.

Kim Sajet: Question 28...

George Takei: It asked: "Will you swear your loyalty to the United States of America and forswear your loyalty to the Emperor of Japan?"

Kim Sajet: This one seemed like a double-edged sword. How could you renounce loyalty to the Emperor of Japan if you'd never held loyalty for him in the first place? Plus, remember, Japanese

immigrants were barred from becoming US citizens at the time. So, if they renounced their Japanese citizenship, they'd be essentially stateless.

George Takei: And my parents again definitively said no.

Kim Sajet: Two nos. These people were referred to as the no no's and they were sent to a high security camp in Tule Lake, California.

George Takei: It had three layers of barbed wire fences. The sentry towers were installed with machine guns pointed at us and the outer perimeter was patrolled by a half a dozen tanks, vehicles of warfare.

Kim Sajet: Tule Lake became notorious. There was squalid housing and inadequate food. But when it was announced that the camps would be closing, panic set in. Inmates worried that life outside the barbed wire fences would be even more dangerous. Army personnel told them that they could stay at the camp and be safe, but only if those born in the U.S. renounce their citizenship. 1000s of inmates at Tule Lake did just that. And George's mother was one of them. So, when the war finally ended and they were released, not only did they have no home and no jobs, but his mom now faced deportation. Into the man in our next portrait...

George Takei: Wayne Collins was an extraordinary man. At a time when no one, no attorney, would touch Japanese American cases with a 10-foot pole, he took these cases on.

Kim Sajet: He was an extraordinary patriot, which also is the point of resistance as well that even when your government may indeed be doing things that you don't agree with, it can be patriotic to actually bring them to task. You would have had a very different life had it not been for Wayne Collins.

George Takei: One man can change the course of a person's life.

Kim Sajet: Collins fought for years and saved 1000s of Japanese Americans from deportation, including George's mum.

George Takei: Had I been sent to Japan, I don't think I'd be speaking English like this. I wouldn't be thinking like this. I owe who I am today to that one man and extraordinary, passionate lover of the Constitution.

Kim Sajet: Thanks to Wayne Collins, about a decade later, the young actor George Takei is living in Los Angeles. And to appease his parents, he's studying architecture at UCLA because you've got to have the degree.

George Takei: UCLA is in Hollywood and a casting director saw me in a production there, and I landed my first feature film starring Richard Burton. And all my scenes were with Richard Burton himself.

Kim Sajet: And so did you meet Elizabeth Taylor?

George Takei: This was in his pre-Elizabethan period.

[LAUGHTER]

Kim Sajet: Oh okay, right right...

George Takei: That's how long ago this was. My film with him was ice palace.

Separate Audio Clip (George Takei): "You have trouble in Seattle?"

Separate Audio Clip (Richard Burton): "Why do you ask?"

Separate Audio Clip (George Takei): "White man never work in Alaska for Chinese wages if not big trouble."

Separate Audio Clip (Richard Burton): "What's the pay?"

Separate Audio Clip (George Takei): "Good season, hundred dollars maybe."

Kim Sajet: So you're in Hollywood, your parents have sort of acquiesced to the fact that you're not going to be the world's greatest architect.

[LAUGHTER]

Kim Sajet: That you're going to be an actor. But you're also acting your own life in a way, right? To an outside public because you couldn't be your true self. You were holding your sexuality from... I mean, were your parents aware, were your family aware?

George Takei: No, I was tightly closeted because if you were known to be gay you could not be an actor. No one would hire you. I desperately and passionately wanted my acting career. And I had to struggle for it. And I didn't want the fact that I was gay to make me lose the career that I was building.

Kim Sajet: George said that being closeted was torturous, like living behind a barbed wire fence all over again. But he did take one chance that was something like an escape. He joined a gay running club. It seemed like there was a relatively low risk of exposure. And he loved running.

George Takei: And that's where I met a young man who was a terrific runner. He was a racehorse.

Kim Sajet: He ran rings around you?

[LAUGHTER]

George Takei: Oh, he was a lead. He was the front runner. And I thought, oh he's a good-looking guy and he's athletic. I want to get to know him. And so, when the run started, I started running alongside him chit chatting, but his strides were much.

Kim Sajet: You can't talk and run if you're serious, George, you know that right? Otherwise, you're not a serious runner. So, you had to work even harder at it I bet.

George Takei: Well, I couldn't keep up with him. I felt bad. So that's where our love affair began. And when I went on location to film Star Trek four, "The Voyage Home" on location in San Francisco, Brad flew over to visit with me.

Kim Sajet: The Voyage Home came out in 1986 and sent the Enterprise crew back in time to save humpback whales.

George Takei: We ran from San Francisco to cross the Golden Gate Bridge.

Kim Sajet: But that sounds very romantic running across the Golden Gate Bridge.

George Takei: It was romantic. And with the pounding rain [sarcastically].

Kim Sajet: Oh, well even better.

George Takei: And we had breakfast looking through the fog at San Francisco. So we fell in love.

Kim Sajet: Beauty amid the ugliness of intolerance. George and Brad had been together for 18 years when California's legislature became the first in the nation to approve a same sex marriage bill without court pressure,

George Takei: And it needed one more signature. Our governor happened to be another movie star, Arnold Schwarzenegger. When he ran for governor, he campaigned by saying, I'm from Hollywood. I've worked with gays and lesbians. Some of my friends are gays and lesbians. And so, I thought with that kind of campaign rhetoric, he might possibly sign this bill, although his base was the right wing of the Republican Party. When the bill landed on his desk, true to form, he vetoed it. And I was raging. I was so angry. And I had a discussion with Brad, and I said, I've had a career that's good enough. But this is the straw that broke my back. I've got to come out. And Brad agreed. And I spoke to the press for the first time as a gay American and I blasted Arnold Schwarzenegger veto of the marriage equality bill. And from that point on, I joined with the Human Rights Campaign, HRC, and I campaigned across the country. They organized the speaking tour and I spoke on the importance of recognizing LGBTQ people as equal Americans.

Kim Sajet: Did it affect your career at all, George, by that stage? I mean you were so well known and so established. Did it make an impact?

George Takei: That was the surprising thing. I made that decision fully acknowledging the repercussions from that coming out. I was willing to see my career fade. I had my career, but instead, my career just boomed. I was getting cast more than I ordinarily was getting cast, but interestingly enough, most of them were as gay George. Shows like "Will and Grace".

Kim Sajet: Yes, right.

Separate Audio Clip: "Today's special guest got his name and outer space but back here on earth, he is legendary ladies' man and pro-life activist."

Separate Audio Clip: "No, I won't do it. George Takei is a prancing, giggling queen. And I will not slander his good name by implying he's straight."

George Takei: So, the reverse totally unexpected happened

Kim Sajet: I asked George to look at one last photograph: a black and white family portrait. It shows a woman in a smart wraparound jacket and her husband in a finely checkered tie. In front of them are two boys in matching shirts and a girl holding a doll. The doll has long eyelashes and golden curls.

George Takei: And this is the post-war. And I would say this was probably taken when I was about 10 years old. And by that time, my parents had gotten back on their feet. When we were released, we were impoverished. All Japanese American bank accounts were frozen. So we were completely impoverished. And so they gave us a one way ticket to anywhere in the United States we wanted to go to and \$25 to begin life anew. And my parents decided to go back to Los Angeles and LA was still a hostile place and finding a place to stay was near impossible. Our only place that we could stay was on Skid Row. We were there for a few months and then my parents found a dry-cleaning shop in the Mexican American barrio of East LA. And then from there, they worked their fingers to the bone and we were able to move to back to the old neighborhood. And my father got into real estate. And here we are in the lower middle class and looking like kind of life that my parents wanted.

Kim Sajet: It's an amazing picture because you would not think that this family was or had ever been on Skid Row. Your father is in a two-piece suit. Your mother is wearing a string of pearls around her neck. It's a real portrait of resilience. Of a family that you wouldn't actually know unless you had told the story of what they had gone through.

George Takei: And in 1988, President Ronald Reagan formally apologized to the Japanese American community for that incarceration and signed the Civil Liberties Act, which pledged a \$20,000 token redress for the incarceration. That's the happy ending.

Kim Sajet: Thank you for the honor of sharing your life story with me and making yourself so vulnerable. I'm so appreciative.

George Takei: Thank you very much.

Kim Sajet: Brad Altman and George Takei were the first same sex couples to apply for a marriage license in West Hollywood in 2008. Once marriage equality was passed, they were married at the Japanese American National Museum, which Takei helped found at the Democracy Forum. You can see the portraits we discussed in the show notes of this episode, or at our website npg.si.edu/podcasts. This episode was produced by Ruth Morris. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanon, Deborah Sisum, Abel Berhan, Rebecca Ortiz-Hernandez and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Our music is by Joe Kye and Breakmaster Cylinder. Until next time, I'm your host, Kim Sajet.