

(This page) After enlisting in the US Army, Karl Yoneda left Manzanar for training at Fort Snelling in December 1942, and his wife and son visited him there in April 1943, when this photo was taken. Karl served as Japanese language specialist in China, Burma and India.

The Yonedas lived at Block 4, Building 2, Apartment 2, from April to December 1942. This photo shows Block 4 in 2011.

BLOCK 4

Discovering an interracial World War II

American love story.

Writer **Rachel Schreiber**

THE DRIVE FROM San Francisco to Manzanar is long even on contemporary highways driving 65 miles per hour, and in winter, it's still longer when one needs to skirt the Sierras to the south. This location would have been even more remote in the 1940s, when Elaine Black Yoneda lived there with her husband, Karl Yoneda, and their son, Tommy.

I went to Manzanar to photograph the site as part of an artist's commission that featured socially active but historically underrepresented San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Americans. The story of Elaine Black Yoneda, a Communist labor activist born in 1906, begins in a manner typical of many Eastern European Jewish immigrants. She was raised by well-educated, working-class parents who came to America seeking economic opportunity and freedom from religious persecution, and was regularly exposed to radical thought that shaped her criticisms of capitalism and abuses of workers. As she reached adulthood, however, her story departed from this stock narrative, first through her marriage to a Japanese American, and then as a Jewish woman living in a camp during World War II — but not a concentration camp in Europe; rather, a Japanese internment camp in California.

Sparks were in the air between Elaine and Karl from the moment they met in the Communist Party office in Los Angeles in 1930. They moved in together in San Francisco in 1933, but California anti-miscegenation laws barred their marriage, and they faced severe housing discrimination, turned away by landlords fearful of renting to an interracial couple.

But, as was true for many radicals of their time, they eschewed social conventions including ethnic, religious and legal strictures on their relationship. If it had been up to Karl and Elaine, they would never have married — a marriage license “wasn't going to do anything for me and Karl,” Elaine said. When Elaine faced legal charges for her involvement with a free speech protest in Dolores Park in 1935, her lawyers advised that her cohabitation with Karl could be used against her. Elaine and Karl took a brief trip to Washington state, where interracial marriages were legal, and returned to San Francisco as husband and wife.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Karl was soon out of work. On March 23, 1942, he joined approximately 1,000 Japanese

American voluntary evacuees who were all told they could find work constructing a relocation camp in Manzanar, CA, near a small town called Independence on the eastern side of the Sierras. A month prior, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the relocation of Americans of “enemy foreign ancestry,” and camps needed to be built. Karl willingly went to Manzanar, but on his arrival, he quickly learned that he was not an employee. He later wrote in his memoir, “I was among the multitude who did not realize the significance of Executive Order 9066.”

Elaine soon received notice that their 2-year-old son Tommy also needed to report to Manzanar — anyone of as little as one-sixteenth Japanese descent was to be interned, a guideline disturbingly reminiscent of the “one-drop” rules that applied to blacks during the era of their American enslavement, and also of Nazi Germany's contemporaneous laws used to determine Jewish ancestry.

Elaine insisted on accompanying Tommy because he suffered from chronically poor health. She was not the only non-Japanese to live in a Japanese internment camp during WWII — a small number of friends and family voluntarily joined Japanese Americans to express loyalty and support.

Throughout this time, Karl attempted to enlist in the US Army, a common move among Nisei who sought to demonstrate their patriotism. As Communists, both Karl and Elaine believed that the most urgent matter was to fight Fascism in Europe, and they supported the American war effort genuinely. In November 1942, Karl was accepted into the military.

Once Karl left Manzanar, Elaine requested permission to return to



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PHOTO BY RACHEL SCHREIBER.



San Francisco with Tommy. Tommy's health was declining, and because Karl had joined the Army, both Tommy and Elaine had been continually subjected to death threats and even a riot by the Manzanar Black Dragons, a gang at the camp comprised mostly of Issei who protested the internment and criticized Japanese Americans who expressed loyalty to the United States, like Karl.

Eventually, authorities granted Elaine permission to return home on the condition that she sign an absurd pledge that ostensibly would confirm her son's loyalty to the US. The pledge asked Elaine to promise to report monthly on Tommy's whereabouts, inform them if he had been in any fights related to his heritage and confirm that he would always be in the presence of a Caucasian. Elaine signed the pledge but found it laughable: “If Tommy was to spend weekends...with any of our Chinese, Filipino or Negro friends, would he be in violation [of these orders]?” In December 1942, Elaine and Tommy returned to San Francisco. Karl came home after the war, a decorated veteran.

As I stood in the hot sun in front of the plain brown wooden sign marking Block 4, where the Yonedas lived at Manzanar, I thought about their incredibly complex relationship to being American. What was Karl's reaction in August 1945 when, wearing a US Army uniform and stationed in China, he learned that Hiroshima, Japan, the city in which his mother lived, was destroyed by an American nuclear bomb? What did

Elaine think and feel, as reports emerged after the war about the concentration camps in Europe? She had experienced internment at the hands of the same government that now decried German atrocities against the Jewish people.

Following the war, she and Karl worked for years to ensure that the internment of Japanese Americans would not be forgotten. They were also committed labor activists, anti-capitalists and -nuclear weapons demonstrators and defenders of the rights of all Americans. Karl wondered about the future, “Can we ... conquer these imperialist monsters, to march forward for détente and peace, and ultimately attain socialism? I firmly believe we can, for I have great faith in the multiracial working people and their allies of this nation.”

Karl and Elaine's devoted love for each other superseded every force against them. They brought this same unwillingness to tolerate discrimination to their enduring commitment to bettering the lives of others, and their supreme optimism about their America. [H](#)

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GO TO hyphenmagazine.com for more about the internment camp gang the Manzanar Black Dragons.

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