

## IN MEMORIAM

# Nikkei Community Loses Loyal Friend

Ralph Lazo, believed to be the only non-Nikkei without a Japanese spouse to voluntarily enter camp during World War II, died at age 67.

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The Japanese American community lost a loyal friend when Ralph Lazo, a Mexican American who as a teenager endured internment with his Nikkei friends in a World War II U.S. government concentration camp after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, died on New Year's Day at age 67 of liver disease. He was buried on Tuesday at Glen Haven Memorial Park in Kagel Canyon.

Lazo, who was at Manzanar from May 16, 1942, to June Nov. 28, 1944, is believed to be the only non-Japanese person, who didn't have a Nikkei spouse, to voluntarily enter a camp for Japanese Americans.

On Feb. 19, 1942, President Roosevelt had signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the government to forcibly remove 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry—whether they were U.S. citizens or permanent resident aliens—from their West Coast homes and into internment camps.

Lazo, who read in the newspapers about the evacuation orders, had gone to a Nisei friend's house to help him pack for evacuation, when his friend asked, "Why don't you come along?" So he did, according to his sister, Virginia Lazo of North Hollywood. "He just walked up to where everyone was registering for the camps, and he went in."

Lazo, who was about 5 feet 9 inches tall with dark brown eyes and olive complexion, must have been mistaken for a Japanese, Virginia Lazo said. "They didn't even ask if he was Japanese. He remarked in later years, 'Being brown has its advantages.'"

Lazo had many Japanese American friends at school in Los Angeles, and also had friends in San Pedro. He was in Little Tokyo quite often to visit with friends, said Virginia Lazo. "In a way, he was adopted by the Japanese American community."

At age 17, he joined his friends and 10,000 other Japanese American prisoners of the United States government at Manzanar, located in the Owens Valley high desert of eastern California.

Lazo had strong feelings about the internment of Japanese Americans, his sister related. "He was very upset. He felt it was an injustice, that it should never have happened. The Italians and Germans were not placed in camp, just the Japanese."

Bill Hohri of Chicago, who became friends with Lazo at Manzanar, said, "I'm very saddened by his passing. I shall remember him with great fondness and respect."

Lazo was a "unique and important symbol in our camp experience," Hohri stated. "As far as I know, he was the only non-Nikkei to volunteer to go to camp, outside of spouses of Nikkei. He stands as one non-Nikkei American to stand with us—it was very important to have one rather than none."

Hohri, who served as spokesperson for the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR) throughout the 1980s, called Lazo a "staunch supporter of redress," and revealed that Lazo was one of the early contributors of \$1,000 or more so that NCJAR could launch its class-action lawsuit against the U.S. government.

"Ralph was by far the most popular student in our Manzanar High School class (Class of 1944)," Hohri maintained. "He was a friendly, open person. I remember in a letter to me, he wrote that he thought in his heart he was Japanese."

Hohri added that his classmate's "voluntary incarceration and strong support of redress really reflected the kind of person he was. I shall remember him with great fondness and respect."

Mary Kinoshita of Sun Valley, a close friend of the Lazo family, recalled that Lazo went to Manzanar "just to be with his Japanese American friends."



(Above) Ralph Lazo, wearing a striped shirt in the front row, second from right, is seen in this Manzanar High School yearbook photo of student body leaders. Lazo passed away on Jan. 1, 1992 at age 67. (Right) Lazo in high school portrait, and April 1990.

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Remembering those camp days, Kinoshita said Lazo got along with all the Japanese Americans. "We didn't think anything of it (a Mexican American living in an internment camp for Japanese Americans). He was a part of us."

Kinoshita and Lazo worked together in Manzanar's administration offices, handling the files and distributing the mail.

Lazo's death was a "big shock to me," said Kinoshita, who was 17 when she entered Manzanar. "I'm happy to have known him. He was a very nice, pleasant person, and I'll miss him very much. We had a lasting friendship of over 50 years, from Manzanar until now."

Sue Kunitomi Embrey, another friend from camp who has spearheaded the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage, said Lazo was "a very gentle man and a loyal friend of ours. Even though he originally went to Manzanar to be with his friends, he realized the magnitude of what happened, and in later years he spoke before students and teachers groups. He was always donating books on the camp experience to libraries."

She noted that although he was not in good health, he kept in touch with his Nikkei friends and was always cheerful. "The last pilgrimage he attended was two years ago, and he helped out a little at the Manzanar Reunion in 1991."

Embrey said Lazo's friends stayed loyal to him, and he kept in touch with them. "He even spoke a little Japanese, enough to get by."

Lazo received some recognition because of his camp experience, Embrey stated, "but he didn't get the recognition he deserved for making a lot of speeches on (the internment of Nikkei) at schools and before other groups."

Embrey added, "As he got older, he realized what a terrible thing it (the internment) was. When young Sansei asked 'Why did you go? You didn't have to go.' He would answer, 'None of us should have had to go.'"

Ralph Lazo was born at a Black hospital in Los Angeles in 1924 to parents of Spanish and Irish ancestry (his father's side of the family was related to Sam Houston) who migrated to Los Angeles from Chihuahua, Mexico. After his mother died when he was quite young, Lazo and his sister were reared by his father, a painter and veteran of World War I.

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# Loyal Friend

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He grew up in what is now the Temple-Beaudry area, just west of downtown, and attended Central Junior High (where the Los Angeles Board of Education is now lo-

cated) and Belmont High School, and was graduated from Manzanar High School.

In 1944, Lazo was drafted into the Army from Manzanar and saw combat in the Philippines. For his performance under fire, he was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism. He was in the military from

1944 to 1946.

After the war, Lazo was graduated from UCLA and received his master's degree from California State University, Northridge.

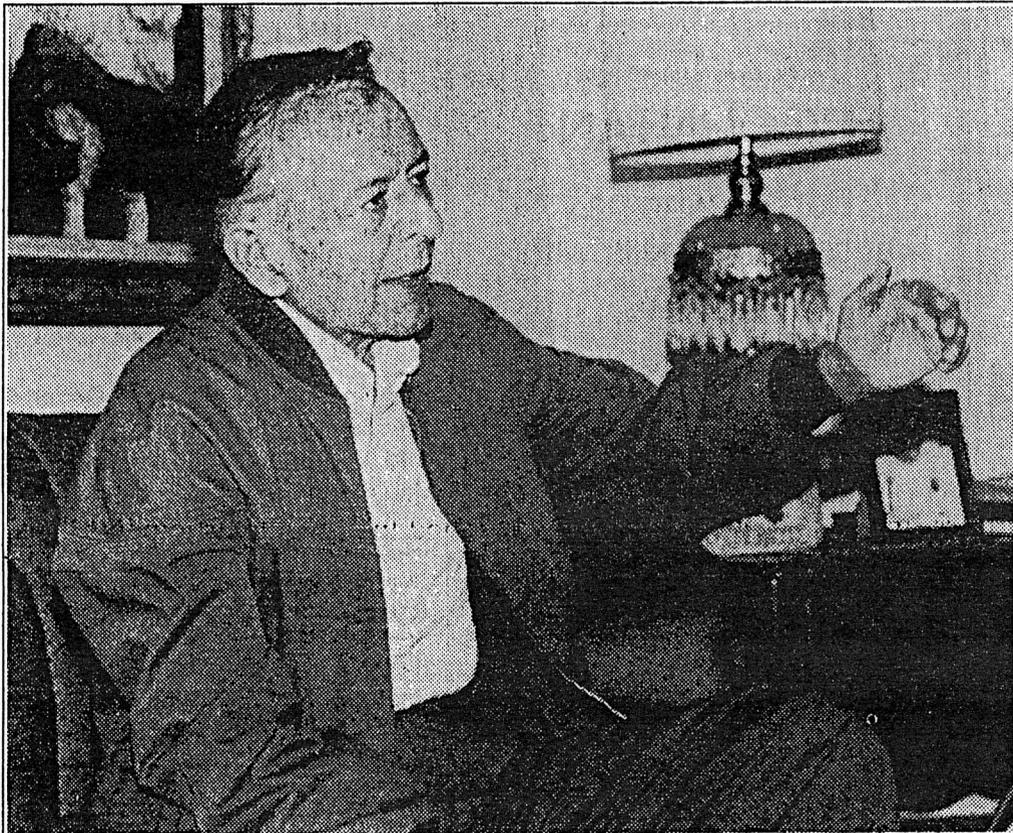
He also spent time in Chihuahua, teaching physical education and English for a few years, and helped start up the university, Technologico, in 1951.

Lazo got married there, and returned to Los Angeles to start his teaching career at San Fernando Junior High School. Then he taught at Grant and Monroe high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, before moving on to Cal State Northridge for a short time. After that, he served as a counselor at Los Angeles Valley College in Van Nuys until his retirement five years ago.

"He was a hustler. He made the life he wanted to have," said his sister.

"He was a special person in my life, a wonderful man, wonderful brother and a friend. He will be remembered for many years to come," Virginia Lazo added.

Lazo, who was divorced, is survived by his sister, Virginia Lazo; his daughter, Laura; and sons, David and Danny. He is also survived by two grandchildren, who are part-Japanese.



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**Ralph Lazo, here in an April 1990 photograph.**