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Isa-Kae Meksin:

But first, please let us recognize, Sharon, you must understand this is for you from both of us.

Speaker 2:

Because we love you.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Absolutely. My parents came from the Ukraine. They were the Russian speaking Ukrainians. They left the Soviet Union somewhere in the '20s, early '20s. Came via as many of the people from Odessa did across the Black Sea to Constantinople as Istanbul was called then. And they came to the United States via Italy and then to New York. And there they must have had marvelous experiences. And I have a wonderful photo of them dressed in the garb, which is very Arabic or Turkish looking, I don't know. And it's right here on the table.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

My father was a pianist. My mother was a singer, and he came sponsored by his brother, who was 20 years his senior, who lived in New York in the Bronx. He was a publisher of a fashion magazine called Fashions For Me Lady. I gave the copy I had to my nephew, but I got a copy through a series of very interesting circumstances. And I was given this magazine because on the cover there was his name, Isa-Kae Meksin. And I was named after him. And I began to cry because I'd heard about this publication, I'd never seen it. And of course it was styled for the 1920s. The particular year for that magazine was 1926. So it's quite a family treasure.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

So my father was on the radio. He had his own studio in town hall. He was near, a singer, very popular at the time, Rudy Valley, and knew very prestigious musicians. And my family had musical soirees and it was a very rich environment for me to grow up in. So my father, well, he committed suicide when I was seven. That was a turning point in what had been really an idyllic childhood, where it was a tragedy for me personally, was the issue of how young people are exposed to death. Where instead of seeing the celebratory aspect of a person's life and being immersed in that, the adults around me just went berserk and behaved... nobody existed, they were in their frenzied moment. And it had quite an impact. And I don't think people realize how it can impact children when they have to deal with death in this manner.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I'm very hazy as to where we went then. I know we went to the Soviet Union in 1936 and went on a Polish liner. My mother originally intended to live in the Soviet Union and go back to her family, which would have been her support system. When we got to the Soviet Union, '36 was not the year you went in that direction. You were headed in the Westwood movement because it was brewing.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

And what would happen in, for example, we were in Poland and we were in a restaurant, there was already a picture of Hitler because they had invaded Danzig. And there was a picture of Hitler on the wall. And my brother went, the Bronx chair, and my mother stood up and said, "Oh Paul, you mustn't do this to your mother." She knew the political implications even then. And whenever we got on a bus or when the Nazi uniform people would appear, I didn't know the politics, but the aura of evil was even clear, I was eight by then, to an eight year old child.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

A real critical moment in the development of my personality was the... my mother did not do this consciously. It was her way of dealing with bureaucracy in her tragedy of having to deal with the death of her husband and her limited finances because she lied when she purchased the ticket for the boat. And she said he was under the age where you got half price for a child. However, when we got to the check-in point to go onto the gang plank and the person checking passports and that sort of thing could look at the passport, look at my brother. Well, this was no nine year old. And so he told my mother, stay over there. Go there. Because the crowd was pushing through and he didn't have time to deal with her.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

However, I went as a child to follow what an adult says. Adult says, you do something, you do it. My mother simply said, with an imperious gesture, come children and promptly walked up the gang plank. In that split moment and that gesture, I realized, you can fuck the bureaucracy and move your life on.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

And we got to Poland. It was illegal to export money. She disappeared into the bathroom. And I never understood why she was taking so long, but I understood later she was hiding the money in her body. And that's how she dealt with life all through it. She was a splendid woman in surviving through all of these difficulties in her life. Because I entered the radical movement, which was directly opposite to what she was leaving, we had our own difficulties. And I didn't appreciate her the summer that I was going to dedicate to her life and realize, okay, she is a mother. She will always see you as a child. You just grow up, accept that as a reality and just deal with her and get her stories. And that's the summer she died before I got to her. And I've always regretted that loss.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

In analyzing mother-daughter relationships, even before that, I was much closer to my father. He taught me the piano and he would be the one I would go for walks. And she was sort of a peripheral figure and not really so significant to me as he was. And when he died, she was gone, supporting us. And so my brother and I had a very difficult childhood because he was reacting negatively against me. And so he and I were always fighting, but we were alone. And I would know where my support system was because there were no babysitters in that era, which neighbors I would run to for help when he and I were getting into it and I ran faster than he did, to get away from him. And he didn't remember all the very creative things he was doing.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

And so, she then I found to be very domineering. For example, she would feel it was within her rights to open my mail that was addressed to me. And I found that offensive and I just couldn't accept that. And so when I was now becoming an independent teenager and I was moving independently, I rejected any interference in the way I was going to live my life.

Speaker 2:

To your mom, so then you left home, and then after that, how much time did you get to spend with her over the years? Did you see her?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Very little. I would go back to New York and it was interesting, one summer when I was back... okay, my mother for some reason was very concerned about my eating and she would drive me crazy. And I

learned at an early age that one of the ways you could fight back is by not eating. So I would put the food in one section of the mouth and slow wind it over to the other section of the mouth. If she had just left me alone, because I love to eat. And once you get away from that, she even would follow me around the house with a lamb chop.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I remember these ridiculous images of the food. And I don't know, she didn't come from a background of starvation, so she couldn't say that. It was just to me, a form of domination. And that's how I interpreted it. I didn't verbalize it. I can as an adult, and that's my interpretation. And the reason I mentioned, because I saw that and every time I would go home, she was always pushing food. And I see it in relation to other people, it's hospitality. But because of my interaction, I couldn't see that. And of course I loved her food. I miss the [foreign language 00:10:43] and the lungs with the other meat and with a raisin sauce and a food made from calves and knuckles called [foreign language 00:10:54] which I adore. Different kinds of things. And [foreign language 00:10:58] was superb. All these kinds of foods.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I went back home with an Italian who I think didn't have parents. And when she was getting, "Please eat, eat." And she was thrilled. And so I said leave her alone. No. And we had very different interpretations, but however, I didn't learn it fast enough until 1967 when I was ready to forego all that and just enjoy who she was. Because she was talented, a superb storyteller.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

So that was one thing. Also, in terms of sexism, I again, did not have it verbally stated or in a way that I could consciously explain it to you as a child or teenager or even as a young adult. But I became aware of how angry I was at the fact that women and the goals for women were so god damn limited. For example, one of the things that happened within the home, my brother and I lived identical lives as students. We both went to elementary, whatever school it was at any level. And she asked me to do the dishes. And I said, well, why don't you ever ask Paul? He does what I do. We are the same. And she said, and this is what, I never touched a dish after that "Because you're a girl." I mean what?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Again, I didn't recognize the resistance even, but it just seemed unfair. I noticed also, without absorbing what it meant, she would always frame his graduation from sixth grade, high school, college, master's degree, you name it, discharge, honorable discharge from the Marine Corps. And by the way, he was on Iwojima and how he survived is beyond me, but he was a con artist. I figured he figured away. And all of those got framed and hanging on the wall. I graduated from Hunter College. Nothing. There was nothing.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

And I again, did not interpret, my only value consisted of being a mother and having a child and keeping a good house. And one of her friends, her old Russian friends, actually visited me in New York when I was independent and actually ran her finger along one of the ledgers to check the cleanliness. I was Stunned, who the hell are you? But I mean, it's amazing for this kind of thing, people don't realize the pressure that women of that era went through.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Also in the school, you had boys taking shop and girls taking home economics. And we learned to sew. And I remember one of the garments, we made a jumper and I had a plaid fabric, and I followed the pattern of the plaid rather than measuring the damn thing. So it was a very weird jumper. Well, I do sew

simple things, but I don't want to do these domestic items. I am cleaner now but when I first started on my own, I didn't exactly get enamored of cleaning. It was a few and far between for major cleanings, just to react.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. At what point do you think in your life you started getting comfortable with these things that were considered women's roles, cleaning, cooking? Did you ever have a family?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Well, I never had children. The men in my life were interesting, but certainly never people... I went through a weird period going through men with the same attitude as men had towards women. And I realized that was very destructive. Ultimately, the best relationship I had was with a man from Belgium who was a scientist here on a project at UCLA. And he was the only man I felt who was so total in what he embodied politically. In fact, he was a socialist. And it required the intervention of the Belgian government who had at that time a socialist prime minister because there were some problems with getting this visa for him to do DNA analysis of tobacco plants that they were doing research on. This was this government, paranoid to the bitter end and still is, to have people coming to do this.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

But he had such humor, politically we agreed. And the humor, I love men with humor. And we traveled together to Mexico. And that was the one decent... and of course, he went back and got married. And even with his wife, when I would go back to Europe, very often, he, his wife and I would always have dinner together. So it was a very cordial relationship. But the others interesting, but honey, no. Get your head together.

Speaker 2:

Can you speak a little?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I had met a man. I had met at a camp, summer camp when I was a counselor. He was nice and I liked him. We had a very cordial, friendly relationship, and he had a hotel. And this man was so violent and so crazy that I did not trust what he would do. And I tried to maneuver him into thinking he was leaving me because his ego could not take my leaving him. And so I told Priscilla, do not let him in no matter what. And I took my phone directories so he couldn't contact anybody, and I just left because we lived on the sixth floor, and I didn't trust that he wouldn't throw me out the window. It was that bad. And so they continued a little longer with their respective partners. And when I look back and think, my God, what was this about that we even tolerated the first blow.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I mean, is this part of our unconscious racism that we made excuses because these are black men? I don't know, but whatever the motivation, I realize you're coming to the end. And I left California. I put 3000 miles between us. New York became anathema to me. I did not want to meet this man anywhere under any circumstances. And because our group did go a lot to Harlem, he was very popular in Harlem. He was a man who had worked as a seaman. He had a tremendous background in terms of militancy. But in terms of whether he was fighting back at White America, I don't know. Was I his whipping girl? I wasn't in his head. Was he a drug addict or DJ? Had no standards that I could live by.

Speaker 2:

How long were you with him?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Four months. Four months, too many.

Speaker 2:

Wow. So was that kind of the last straw that you had to leave New York and you came all the way here? Was that the main-

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Yeah, that was the main impetus. And it was frankly the best thing that ever happened because suddenly... okay, we had this political group was called Correspondence. We put out a newspaper called Correspondence. We did publishing, because the essential philosophy of the group, if you broke it down to the simplest form, is that there are certain segments of society that will push it forward. They are African-Americans called Negroes at the time, or colored. Women, workers, youth, I think those are the major categories we did not, frankly, from my perspective, now understand the gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, that group we did not really have or ever speak very much about, but we had the idea was that we would go into factories, go into places where there were these people and get their stories and print and publish. And we have a publishing backlog, which is enormous.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

We were 70 people scattered across the US, doing this tremendous work. We had extraordinary range of participants from, you have Grace Lee Boggs, Bryn Mawr, graduate, PhD, Hegelian scholar, married to Jimmy Boggs, Alabama Sharecropper background to Raya Dunayevskaya, who was a Russian economist, brilliant in her field, was a bodyguard to Trotsky. And then you had another one, Freddie Forrest, she is the Russian one. Yes, you have the three.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

We have pseudonyms because of the FBI, but I'm sure they knew us anyway, so it was ridiculous because we all laugh when we go through old Minutes and we used our funny names and nobody remembers who was who, who was that. Anyway, it was an extraordinary period.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

From my perspective, well, I lost a job as a result of the FBI in 1952. I was working for a gyroscope company that made gyroscopes. It was a competitor of Sperry, and I don't remember the name, but it was a big one. It was the best paying job I had because at that time it was 80 cents an hour, as much as it sounds weird, but 1952, it was 80 cents an hour. And so here it was \$1.50, whatever it was. And it was a very interesting place. It was a 10 hour shift, and it was a very meticulous job that required absolute cleanliness, not even a speck of dust to get into a gyroscope, which would balance whatever it was they were putting it into.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Well, this FBI agent came to the door one morning and wanted me to name names, and I said, I have nothing to say to you. And I shut the door and I'm getting on the bus and he follows me on the bus to my job. So when I entered the work that day, the end of the shift, I had no job, and there was no other reason to intervene other than the FBI. In 1963, I believe Kennedy was assassinated a month after his

assassination, stomping up the stairs are these two men holding a manila envelope. They're from the FBI, show me the thing. They want to talk to me.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

My political group, Johnson Forest ended in 1956. It disbanded, period. Finished. There are a number of reasons which are a whole different story, but you are coming to me in 1963 asking me about 1956, what? He says, "There are charges against you." What are they? He says, "Well, unless you talk, we have nothing to say." Well, unless you tell me the charges, I have nothing to say, and shut the door. There was no repercussion. I have no idea why they were there other than to let me know that they were there. I have no doubt that there is a file, but I have such contempt for the whole damn thing that I don't even bother. Do me something, now at 88, they ain't going to do nothing.

Speaker 2:

Can you speak of people they're asking for?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Well, you would have to then follow through who in a sense promotes the kind of governments we have. There's been a total lack of sophistication, a kind of amnesia in the educational process. Since the Cold War and Bernie Sanders, the word socialist has always been a dirty word. You see Stalinism and what has happened to actually look like a socialist or communist society has been a horror, has not been the fulfillment. This is not what Marx was talking about. It's a denigration of people who haven't studied Marx.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Now, I find myself unable to really grapple with the economic theories and all of that. But the socialist society is the development of the human personality, the full exploration of communal, genuine communal living among peoples and cooperation and not competitive grinding and this sort of thing, and creating the economic structure that fulfills that. And there are movements, the cooperative movements that take place in Spain and other different factories that have tried this, moving, and this is why Detroit was so special and why all the activities in Detroit as pushback to show that human beings do create alternatives.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Right now, and our group was trying to explore and document what we call the invading socialist society, which was that. And not what these others call socialism or communism, which has never been, they called China's communist. What the hell is communist about that?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Just let me mention this about the group, when our group disbanded in... okay, I had been working for a Minneapolis Honeywell. I got this job, again, a very well paying job with a union with many Black workers who came from the South, but who during World War II were in the machine shop of Minneapolis Honeywell, making gas appliance controls in Torrance here in Los Angeles. I was on the assembly line and it was a fast moving belt with southern women who had a very different attitude about work. I mean, you really put in a day's work.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I come from New York, which very different attitude, as somebody called it the J and L walk, Jones and Loughlin walk, which is a Bethlehem Steel company. And you walked and you do things slowly because the minimum becomes the maximum or the maximum... and you have to keep moving faster and faster and faster. So you don't speed it up, honey, you keep it slow.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Okay, so along the line, I also learned that there was a lot of segregation because the Black... there was a room where you could rest. There were like cots and I, for my 10 minute break after lunch, I liked to rest, and the Black women were there also resting or whatever it is they were doing. And the other White women were not going there. But these were the white southern women. And so I know what I wanted. So that was great.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

And in 1958, I needed surgery. I was out for the surgery. And when I came back, the foreman made a medical decision over the doctors who said, I shouldn't go back to work yet. And I was fired. I called the union. They did not defend me. And that was the end of Minneapolis Honeywell. While I was in the hospital, the group no longer existed. Any impetus or need to go into a factory to document what workers are saying and doing was gone.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

So I began to think in other terms and went back to school to get my teaching credential. At first, I thought I would teach children in hospitals, but then I saw the list of Cal State, LA. There was the blind, the deaf, the this, the that. For some reason, I don't know, I chose the blind, and I am thrilled, I might have been thrilled with the others, but that's where I went and that's what I did. So in a way, I'm grateful for that because that again changed my life.

Speaker 2:

Up until that point, had you thought about teaching or was it-

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Never.

Speaker 2:

So it was just at that point you were like what do I do now?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

It was a reflection of how do I redirect my life. You have no idea how significant the political movement was. I mean, if I could reject an invitation from my brother, for example, women were asked not to have children because it would take away from the political activities. And many women did not have children because of that request that we not do this. Some women said, "Well, hell with that, I want a child." And they did. I mean, there would be no repercussions of what are they going to do. No. The binding, it was what gave life meaning. And because of that, I can recognize the devotion and the adamant how... there's no other way to look at things. However, the older I got, and the more I could experience and see the deficiencies and the inadequacies and the fact that, no, you can't be that rigid, that there has to be a, let's see what could be done.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

For example, I was thrilled when I read at Braille Institute, I read to a woman who was an evangelical, and I thought, oh my God, what am I going to get into here? However, there's a branch of evangelism that is very different from what the Republicans represent. It is stewardship over the globe. It is women involvement in the church. And she knew all the biblical leaders of women, and there are publications she had. I was thrilled to read to her, and she read many of my medical and vegetarian kinds of food. She knew all the ingredients on a label and which were good and which were bad, and very different perspective. Now, we never talked about gay marriage, I don't know, or abortion, because I have a feeling on those issues she might have disagreed, but it was not significant in our connection. But much of what I had, I could share with her. And she was interested in hearing about it.

Speaker 2:

I didn't know, I mean, I'm learning so much. I didn't know about this whole idea that within these political movements, the passion and the dedication to that work, people basically gave up such big parts of-

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Oh, absolutely.

Speaker 2:

It was like, this is what you're dedicating yourself to for the greater change, the greater good, that outcome out of it.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

When you consider the work, when you consider the public, the organizing, the involvement with strikes, for example, it's not just verbal. It's actually going and participating in a strike. The Trotskyists were very involved in. There was, as I recall at the time when I first became involved in the 40s, they had already done a tremendous amount of strike work in the northwest, somewhere Minneapolis or one of those, to organize truckers and remembered even the Communist party, the socialist party, all of them were involved in creating a society where people forget what labor conditions were. Child labor, you worked endless hours, no benefits, no nothing. So all of that came with blood, with people being killed by the police who supported the industrialists in their struggles. I mean, there's a history of blood, and of course there's a marvelous book by Howard Zinn if you're interested in the history of the US from a workers and the people's point of view. It's A People's History of the United States by Howard's Zinn.

Speaker 2:

Absolutely. How do you feel There's been a big push in America today to what happened in Wisconsin? We're trying to get rid of the unions.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Oh, I know.

Speaker 2:

Do you, with all the sacrifices and all the blood that has been shed to get these rights. And now it seems like everything is kind of going backwards.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Absolutely.

Speaker 2:

Do you feel like it'll go backwards? Do you feel like there's enough people to fight to continue forward? How do you feel about the current political system with everything-

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I feel there's push and pull and push and pull in both directions. For example, I just was reading today the California Teachers' Retirement publication, they're attacking our pensions and the way they're structured. To gut the, to go put it into some privatization. There's no way in hell I want to go into anything privatized. It could be failure, and I would never risk my pension behind such a thing. And so there's resistance from the teachers. We're not stupid because we don't get social security. We have to go through the California State Teacher's Retirement System.

Speaker 2:

Oh, I didn't know that.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Yeah, there's no Social security for me. I didn't work the quarters. I worked only half, and so I'm not working again to get the other half. No, it's fine.

Speaker 2:

Do you feel hopeful about America's future?

Isa-Kae Meksin:

I feel hopeful because number one, there's this new generation that is quite another cup of tea. Whether Sanders wins or not is irrelevant to me because I see the momentum of young people who don't buy this stuff and they can see it in a very different way. And so yes, I do have hope. I see pushback. People like you, filmmakers with a conscience. That's why I wanted you to meet Abby, because she's made a film about students who are blind and her film will go to Congress through the National Federation of the Blind, and then to take a chef from Slovenia and a chef from Peru for Netflix and to do a film. And I want you to meet the other one. You have to meet King's Roost, his wife. I haven't met her, but she's again. And these directors, she's a director.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

In Hollywood, there's an article about women directors. They are not represented and the difficulty of breaking into, and you see the Academy Awards and the pushback against not having anyone awarded. So yes, I feel very hopeful in spite of what's going on in the world. And if you take away hope and all you have is a cynical appraisal, you're dead in the water. You have nowhere to go except suicide, cynicism and maybe alcohol or whatever pleases you, or some stupid self-centered, meaningless thing.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Yeah, there are great many people out there. And it's disrespectful to disregard the efforts, whether it's in the community gardening movement, urban gardens, community gardens, nutritious food, fighting back against them, fish, a salmon, do I now never eat salmon? Because I can't trust, I will not eat genetically modified salmon. Leave them alone. I mean, what is this mentality? Screw your profits for my health. Oh, there are publications like Public Citizen, worst pills, best Pills. Oh my God. You don't want to take pills if you can avoid them. They critique them very critically. And we do not have the governmental agencies backing us up and capitulating, but there are people who know that and fight back to the degree that they

can. And educating and alerting people. They're not bomb throwers. They're doing things in a way that connect in a positive way. So be hopeful.

Speaker 2:

Do you ever have times or moments where you question if your hope is-

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Unfounded?

Speaker 2:

... pointless? Yeah.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Frankly, no, I don't. Because I think my political perspective from Johnson Forest has given me a kind of fortitude. And I believe the reality is on our side as to what is real, as we are able to interpret. And that was the point when we were first looking at the Black movement, there was a segment of the radical movement that said black people have been so victimized, so infantilized that they cannot deal. They need the workers. They need our political platform. And until we have the revolution, they ain't going to change for them at all. And we said, no, it is precisely because of their background. And this is before the civil rights explosion. And I think we clearly saw that within these struggles and the pushback... remember the lynchings that were taking place, all that was going on in the United States and the racism that was considered ordinary. Of course, that's the way it is.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

No, and the pushback that's been going on ever since, and you see it in other forms like the whole thing with the imprisonment and the prison system, but it's being exposed. Michelle Alexander is marvelous, and many others like her. Critical resistance, fighting the whole damn prison system, shut them down and move to another way of life and thinking. Youth Justice coalition, they're magnificent. They started school for youth, nobody wants. And have graduations that you should film and get the people in that audience, the family members who see members of their family who have gone through the so-called prison, the criminal justice system, and the triumph of their victory. This is another breed that will come forth.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

So it's only moving in this, it may take a while, but let's go get there someday. I probably will not see it, but I've seen a lot and a lot of my own loss of anger. I don't get angry with men in a sense I feel they don't have the richness of emotional experience that women do have. And I hope they are able to achieve that kind of discussion that women have together.

Isa-Kae Meksin:

Okay, I told you that I worked in a factory when the political group collapsed and so there was no motivation to go back into a factory again. And when I was in the hospital for major surgery, and that's when I got fired, and that's a whole little story in itself from Minneapolis Honeywell. In 1958, I had workman's comp, and my mother helped me to go back and get a degree because I realized I had already the Hunter College BA. I now went back to school to teach children in hospitals because I thought that sounds very interesting.

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Isa-Kae Meksin:

So when I went to Cal State, LA, there was a listing of these schools. I mean the different disciplines you could go into. And I have no reason that I can give you why I didn't go for the deaf or the multiply impaired or whatever, the autistic, but I chose blindness. It just seemed interesting to me, and I'm frankly thrilled that I did. It was, to me, the best direction I could have taken for my life. And I'm grateful to my students and to the many, many people I met in the field.