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Doreen Alhadeff

SUMMARY

Doreen Alhadeff's family has lived in the Greater Seattle Area since 1906, when her grandmother immigrated and became the first Sephardic woman in Seattle. Growing up, her family was faithful to its Sephardic roots and spoke Ladino at home. In college, as a Spanish major, she studied in Spain, which strengthened her ties to the Sephardic culture. In 2015 she became the first American to complete the process which allows Sephardic Jews to become Spanish citizens, which has been an effort of reconciliation after the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Spain. Since then, Alhadeff has co-founded the Seattle Sephardic Network, and through that she provides a space for Sephardic Jews to celebrate and learn about their culture. She also helps other American Sephardics pursue the path to Spanish citizenship which she took.

Jeff Schwager : I'm hitting record on that and record on this. Good. And I don't really have questions. I just have topics that I want to cover with you. This is more of a conversation. Okay. Perfect. Um, so, uh, and I really just want to learn about you and your life and everything you've done to help affect change in the Jewish community here in Seattle and in the world at large.

Doreen Alhadeff: And the world at large. Okay.

Jeff Schwager : All right, so we'll start just, um, tell me, tell me about your background, where you grew up.

Doreen Alhadeff: Um, born and raised in Seattle. Sephardic family on both sides. Um, my grandmother, my paternal grandmother was actually the first Sephardic woman to arrive in Seattle.

Jeff Schwager : Um, when was that?

Doreen Alhadeff: That was in 1906, I think. Um, so there was hardly a community here. There was just under 20 people at that time. Um, but she was very involved in and she spoke 5 or 6 languages. So she was very involved in resettling people when they came. So she was very much a part of the community as it grew, and the Sephardic culture was a big part of my growing up. Ladino was spoken in the home, especially the generation of my aunts and uncles and my grandparents, obviously. And they would go to that language when they didn't want the children to understand. So it became very important to understand what was being said. Um, and then as we grew up, you know, a lot of the words and things we held on to, we used them in jest. We used them for foods. We use them, um, throughout our lives, but not in coherent sentences. It could be a full English sentence with a Ladino word. Um, and I think all that background pushed me to a Spanish major in college. Uh, it was a culture language type of major. Um, and then, uh, I spent some time in Spain going to school there as well. I mastered, uh, modern Spanish, um, and saw all the ties that there were two, the Ladino, which was an older Spanish, um, and then as things progressed, came home, got married, had children. Um, the Sephardic life was very much a part of our, um, home as well. I also am married to a Sephardic. So that was a bit unusual. Um, but then as things progressed, there was a growing interest in the Sephardic culture as a whole. Um, all all parts of it. Um, and then about, I don't know, 5 or 6 years ago, there seemed to be this upswing of interest. And then about 5 or 6 years ago, a group was formed, um, and we ended up going to Spain, sort of as a roots trip and saw a lot of our culture there and came back and we started the Sephardic Network, which is a group that is fairly new but has actually gotten fairly popular. Um, and our mission was to include all Sephardic, all Jews, but all Sephardic, and to, um, incorporate things that they might enjoy,

things that are cultural, music, food, things that are of interest and be open to the community and sort of be a point at the community that isn't one synagogue or another synagogue or part of another, but a place where everyone could come and enjoy and celebrate. Actually, the culture, what's going on worldwide seems to be this renaissance that's happening. Spain and Portugal were offering citizenship. Um, that was very important to me, not only because of my tie to Spain, which I felt a very strong affinity from the beginning, from when I first went there at age 19. Um, and so I moved forward to apply for my citizenship, uh, to Spain. And actually, I've received it. Um, it was a process, but one that I felt felt very fulfilled by and in the process, because I was one of the first to go through the process, I've helped countless others that are beginning to do that. We have, um, an organization at the University of Washington. Uh, that actually gives the exams. You do have to take two exams for the citizenship. And there are only four places in the US that give those exams, which is the Cervantes Institute. One of them happens to be in Seattle. So we do filter a lot of people through. And I think that a lot of people that have come to me have come both through the Sephardic community's interest and also through the Cervantes Institute being here. Um.

Jeff Schwager : What are those two? What are those two exams?

Doreen Alhadeff: One of them is a language exam. It's a low level language exam, but a language exam nonetheless. And the other is a cultural exam about Spain. Um, it is all in Spanish. Um, and then. And then when you take your language exam, part of it is oral, part of it's written and the cultural exam, there's a study book like you'd study for a driver's license. So I went through the process and I've been helping others, but to see what's going on worldwide with the whole Sephardic culture has been very inspiring. And I've gotten involved in organizations that are in encouraging that sort of interest in the Sephardic community. There's an organization in Spain called the Red de Juderias that is a network of cities that have Jewish heritage. Um, we I worked with Lisa and others on the exhibit that opened in Leon, Spain. Um, so it's just sort of an exposure issue that I think is happening all over Portugal, as I mentioned, also is offering citizenship. They don't have exams to take, but you do have to show a little bit more lineage, which is sort of difficult to do to go back to the 15th century. Yeah. Um, so I've been involved in all that. And, you know, one thing leads to another. So the organization in Spain, um, that is the organization of the Heritage Cities, came about really, because, um, two years before that, I was in Madrid working, um, on an international Sephardic conference that was in Madrid. And now in 2019, that International Sephardic Conference will be coming to Seattle. I lobbied hard for that and we have it coming now, which will be very exciting. It's like 32 different communities that come to Seattle to share information and network.

Jeff Schwager : How did you go about proving your Spanish heritage? When, when?

Doreen Alhadeff: You know, I'm sort of the anomaly in that my family's been here since my grandmother, right? Since oh six. So they were part of a Sephardic community and they could trace it. They've been involved in synagogues from then. So for for me, it wasn't a difficult thing to prove. My family, um, have been part of the community from the beginning. For others, it's a little bit more difficult. And it could be that, in fact, that those people are not even Jewish now. But they were. So it's a little bit more tricky. But oftentimes they've been able to go back to their grandparents or great grandparents that were members of a synagogue somewhere in Atlanta or elsewhere, and try and trace it back from there. If you don't have that, it's very difficult. You'd have to hire a genealogist and not so easy. And finding the records is also difficult. Difficult.

Jeff Schwager : So yeah, I have I'm not Sephardic, I'm Ashkenazi. But, um, you know, my, my, my mother's family was from Kishinev, where there was a pogrom. Right. Um, and they fled to Kishinev. And so.

Doreen Alhadeff: And you can imagine that there are no records.

Jeff Schwager : Definitely no.

Doreen Alhadeff: Records. No records. Um, I mean, you know, when you think about how long ago this is my, um, my husband's mother's maiden name was Polgar. So there is a small town in Spain named Palikare. So we went there and I thought, you know, there might be something. Well, Polgar is so small that there's not even a restaurant there. We did find a bar to try and question people, but their records, if there are any, are in a larger city, sort of the center of a region. And then, I mean, forget the First World War and the Second World War and Spanish Civil War. I mean, we're going back. It's impossible. Yeah, it's close to impossible. Sometimes you get lucky, but not very often.

Jeff Schwager : Interesting.

Doreen Alhadeff: My maiden name was Cohen. So with that, I've tried, and they just sort of. It's sort of like Jones and Smith. Where. Where do you begin? And my grandmother's maiden name was Levy.

Jeff Schwager : So yeah.

Doreen Alhadeff: Tough. I mean, if you get an.

Jeff Schwager : Unusual it seems like Alhadeff is like Jones and Smith.

Doreen Alhadeff: Yeah. Alhadeff so much bigger here. But not there. Not there. I think that was the name that came along later.

Jeff Schwager : Uh huh. So, um, so were you, uh, from an observant family as a child?

Doreen Alhadeff: I would say it was an observant family. We were not Orthodox. The synagogue was Orthodox, but we were never Orthodox. We we, um, observed all the holidays. Um, my father's family was the dominant family here. He had five. We had three other brothers and two sisters, and everybody was here. So we always got together with them. My mother's family was from Portland, so that wasn't as much a dominant part of our lives during the holidays, but we observed holidays. Um, always two nights, you know, Sephardic style. Sephardic style. So. But not, you know, not orthodox by any means, um, much, much more cultural, which I find for a lot of Sephardic. The strength that they feel about the Sephardic is the cultural part of it, as well as the religious.

Jeff Schwager : Um, what about Jewish values? Do you identify with Jewish values? Have they been important to you?

Doreen Alhadeff: Very much so. Very much so. I think that, um, I grew up in a household where both sides were Jewish, the grandparents were Jewish. The whole idea of Jewish values and education and family were very much not only a part of our lives, but ingrained in our lives. Um, and, you know, I grew up in South Seattle, so it wasn't that I was a minority. I was a minority, but not a tiny minority. There were lots of Jewish people in South Seattle, in Seward Park and Mount Baker. And because of that, even those around us were used to our holidays and what what we had. And so we were able to maintain the culture and the values that we had at home without feeling like we had to assimilate into something else. It was never an issue.

Jeff Schwager : Interesting. Um, you talk about, uh, feeling culturally, um, Jewish. And that's your main connection perhaps to.

Doreen Alhadeff: Yeah, I don't know about main, but it's a very strong connection.

Jeff Schwager : How do you, um, how would you differentiate the Sephardic Jewish culture from the Ashkenazi or other Jewish cultures?

Doreen Alhadeff: Oh, I think in much the same way that you would differentiate somebody from northern Europe versus southern Europe. Very demonstrative, um, openly affectionate, uh, noisy family gatherings. Um, I think it's much more of a mediterranean personality versus a northern European personality. And, um, that is, I think, a very dominant feel within the, um, within the Sephardic families. I think if you put two families side by side, I think that's what you would notice much more open. Um, not as reserved. Um, and, and in many ways more tolerant, I feel and I think if you took a religious Ashkenazi Jew and a religious Sephardic Jew, I think that they would appear those two Orthodox Jews would appear a bit different to the outside. And I think it would be maybe just sort of a tolerance, sort of a willingness to adapt. Maybe it's an adaptability, you know, and maybe that comes from being the minority. Right? We're a minority culture within the Jewish community and have been. And for that, you need to adapt and be a little bit more, um, less rigid to survive, maybe.

Jeff Schwager : Okay, good. Um, how big is the Sephardic community in Seattle?

Doreen Alhadeff: Difficult to say, because in in many ways it's hard to tell. Because of intermarriage, because of unaffiliateds, but somewhere around 5000.

Jeff Schwager : So that's pretty big.

Doreen Alhadeff: It's pretty big. It's the third largest in the US. It's the third largest New York and Chicago or New York and LA. You know, everybody's sort of like there's really a top four. But they say that we are of the third largest. But um, I think the number is actually larger than that if you actually took I mean, I don't know how you find all the affiliated. We've had many people, new people move into the area. And I'm sure some of those people also would be Sephardic people as well. But we have no way of knowing if they're not affiliated.

Jeff Schwager : Mhm. Um, I'm curious about your experiences as a young woman in the world. Um, were you encouraged, uh, with a sort of feminist attitude that women can do anything men can do. Or is that something that, uh.

Doreen Alhadeff: I grew up with a grandmother who was, to me, the first feminist. She came on her own at 17. She was the one who was the first one here. She was educated and spoke 5 or 6 languages. She believed that women could do anything and that

they were very bright, and no one should tell them differently. And she portrayed it all the time. And she always used to, you know, say, if you want something, go get it. It's yours to go get. Um, and she, she had a very broad world vision, which I think was very helpful in growing up. It wasn't a Seattle first of all. It wasn't a Sephardic vision or a Jewish vision or a Seattle vision. It was much more of a worldly vision. Um, she worked outside the home, not for money. She. She donated her time. She resettled people. Um, she had six children. She sort of managed it all, and she did it with a strength that she. You never had any doubt whether she was capable or incapable of doing something. It was that she was capable. And she always used to say, never wait for someone else to make you happy. You make yourself happy first and then. So I think to me, she was every bit of feminist. And she had I she had two daughters, four boys. She had two daughters. Um, neither one married early in life. And so I grew up with not only this strong grandmother, but two aunts who had careers. So my influence from a young age was probably from a very different vantage point than others in the community.

Jeff Schwager : Um, interesting. Um, tell me about your career.

Doreen Alhadeff: I sell residential real estate, and I have for 27 years. Um, I do it here in the greater Seattle area. I love it from. I've loved it from the beginning. It's lots of new people and it's a new challenge, it seems all the time, which I like and it's flexible, so it gives me time to come and do this or be on other boards and get involved. I am involved in, as I said, the Seattle Sephardic Network. Um, I'm involved been involved with Hillel and Jewish Family Service, um, and juvenile diabetes. It could be any number of things, but, um, I wouldn't give up my job to do these things, but each one is sort of a section to enhance and enrich for me.

Jeff Schwager : And your family. Uh, now.

Doreen Alhadeff: Family. I have two grown boys. One is married with two girls and a boy, and they live in Seattle. And I have a younger son who lives in New York. Um, and actually, we just got back from visiting him and both doing very well, very close. We're all a very close knit family, um, which is very important to us, but we have a good time together. Other. And, um, we work at it. It's important.

Jeff Schwager : Yeah. And your husband? What does. What does.

Doreen Alhadeff: He. My husband is, um, from Seattle as well. Both of his parents are here. Um, and he has a brother who lives here on Mercer Island. And he works for the Benaroya Company and has done their real estate for a long time. And so very involved here locally as well. He's involved in the Seattle Sephardic Brotherhood. So our ties to the community are strong on both sides.

Jeff Schwager : Um, so I've often seen the name right throughout town. Are you are they Alhadeff that I see here in town? All related. Are they? Is it a.

Doreen Alhadeff: Pretty much all related? Um, I would say pockets of it are close with, with, within themselves because it's a very large family. And so there are, you know.

Jeff Schwager : How many are there?

Doreen Alhadeff: I couldn't begin to tell you. We do. There is a picnic that's planned like every other summer, and they can end up with 80 people there, a hundred people. I people. I mean, there's so many generations now. Um, but they started out with, um, I don't know, one sister and like 12 brothers or something. Lisa actually would know because they did a whole tree on the house. So each brother that then married and had children and had children, some of those groups stay together. But for everybody to get together, it requires something like a park, which was what happens once every other year now. But they stay. A lot of them stay in touch. They do have this sort of thread, I would say, that binds them together.

Jeff Schwager : Okay, good. Um, let me look at my notes here. We've gone this far without the notes. Good for you keeping track of our time. Good. We're good on time. Um. Can you tell me who your heroes and influences were when you were growing up?

Doreen Alhadeff: Heroes and influences. Um, well, I think from young, my grandmother, as I said, she was a very strong figure and she's probably even to this day, the wisest person I've probably ever known. She was able to sit back and look at a situation and determine it. But I think often that I think one of the things that was very big in not necessarily molding me, but continuation into life was I was a child of the 60s, which was we had race relation issues, we had women's issues, we had all sorts of things. And to see, um, to live through that, to try and put yourself in someone else's shoes to, to fight for that, I think became, um, I think I had it in me. And I think that being that that person at that point in time of history was, um, was big for me.

Jeff Schwager : How did the feminist movement influence you?

Doreen Alhadeff: Well, I don't know that it was the it's more that it was an awareness, because when you're young, you don't realize that at 25 you're going to hold a job and that the gentleman sitting next to you is going to make more money than you are. You're not focused on that. But when a movement comes forward and brings it all to the forefront, it's an awareness that you hold on to so that when you see an injustice, you then can call it out later. So I think from that standpoint, the feminist movement then is not what it was now. It was then it was much more predominantly the race relations. And, um, there were things with migrant workers. There were all sorts of that sort of a thing. But there was still that women's movement that was going on. Just having the freedom. There was it was the 60s was a very tumultuous time. And if you kept track of what was going on or were at all involved, um, I don't know that you could not have stepped out of that without it having affected you.

Jeff Schwager : Um, were you a hippie at all?

Doreen Alhadeff: I wasn't a hippie, but I did my did my fair share of demonstrating.

Jeff Schwager : Um huh. What did you demonstrate for?

Doreen Alhadeff: I race relations. I went to Franklin High School, so that was a big issue. Um, I can remember out of the you there was a migrant worker issue. Um, so I think my father felt that I carried a soapbox on my back. Maybe.

Jeff Schwager : Interesting. And what was your family? Political.

Doreen Alhadeff: Not really.

Jeff Schwager : Um.

Doreen Alhadeff: Huh. Um, I say that, but, I mean, they did have a bias. Um, I had a great aunt who was in Istanbul in the 50s, and things were getting difficult there. It was my grandmother's, my paternal grandmother's sister, because my grandmother was from Istanbul, and they wanted to bring her here. And it was very difficult at the time. And so there was a thread there of people getting a little bit political to see what they could do to bring her here. And so I remember that process. But I was young because she came in 57, I was seven. But so it's not that I remember the lead up. I remember a little bit before she came and then more just the process after she came, because to bring her here, everybody had to agree to the fact that she would never work here. So those visas were granted, but with stipulations. So as a child, I remember hearing political things. But political family? I wouldn't say so.

Jeff Schwager : And are you a political person now?

Doreen Alhadeff: I'm more of a political person now, clearly, than my family was.

Jeff Schwager : Yeah. Interesting. Okay. Um. What are the what are the most important values to you that that you try to instill in your children when they were young and.

Doreen Alhadeff: And now.

Jeff Schwager : And.

Doreen Alhadeff: And.

Jeff Schwager : Now and now.

Doreen Alhadeff: Um, values. Well, you know, I think that Jewish value of, um, kindness to others, the education important. The value of family. I think one of the things that I work at is empathy. I think we live in a world where things are moving quite quickly, and maybe we don't, I think, feel very lucky for all that we have, and that maybe we don't take the time to realize that, that we need to have a little empathy and work toward those that don't have as much. And that is, um, not easily taught. I mean, you have to live it.

Jeff Schwager : Yeah. Interesting. Okay. Um. Tell me about the role of women in the Sephardic community traditionally, and also how that plays out here in Seattle.

Doreen Alhadeff: I think it's actually a very that's an interesting question, because I think that the Sephardic male, um, would say that it is very male dominant. And I think at first blush, when you look at it, it is very male dominant. It looks like the man just

does. Um, but I think it is. I would say almost all are matriarchies. I think that the, the, the place of the woman in the home is a very, very strong one. And the woman's place in the family is a strong one. And because the family is so important within the Sephardic culture, that role is a dominant one. Um, and I think that while it may not appear to be so, I think that the female plays an incredibly strong role in Sephardic culture. Clearly, um, as I go back to my grandmother, I didn't know my other grandmother, so I couldn't tell you. She died when my mother was young, so I couldn't tell you. But I know that in my, um, on my paternal side, it appeared that my grandfather was a strong character. And I think he was. He was a wonderful, warm guy. But I think that ultimately my grandmother, it was a matriarchy. He died much younger than she did, too, so she carried on. But I think she managed a house and six children and volunteer work very well.

Jeff Schwager : I guess I didn't ask you what your what your grandfather did for a living and your father as well.

Doreen Alhadeff: My grandfather, um, worked downtown at the Pike Place Market for a while, and then my grandmother and grandfather had a hotel on First Avenue for a long time, as I remember as a child, the Oregon Hotel. Um, my father had grocery stores when I was a young girl. And then his later years, he ended up working at Pure Food Fish at the Pike Place Market.

Jeff Schwager : Oh, wow. Was he a fish tosser?

Doreen Alhadeff: He wasn't a tosser. He wasn't a tosser. He was just sold. And it was great because when my children were little, I was able to go down to the market 2 or 3 times a week, and everybody would see him. It was great.

Jeff Schwager : My grandfather owned a fruit stand in the Bronx.

Doreen Alhadeff: Oh, in the Bronx?

Jeff Schwager : Yeah.

Doreen Alhadeff: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager : Nice. Were you. Was your generation the first to go to college?

Doreen Alhadeff: Yes.

Jeff Schwager : Yes. And did you go to University of Washington?

Doreen Alhadeff: Went to the University of Washington. I spent two years in Madrid. I was at the University of Madrid for a year, and I went to New York University in Madrid for another year. But I ended up graduating from the University of Washington. Okay. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager : And what was your major?

Doreen Alhadeff: Spanish language and literature.

Jeff Schwager : Okay. Good. Well, I only wanted to ask you one more thing. Um, and I wonder if you could articulate for me why it was so important to you to get Spanish citizenship, what that means to you. And, um.

Doreen Alhadeff: Um, so for me, you know, at the beginning, I thought, do I want this? And, and there was really never any when it came up that it was possible. I remember I they took a vote in their legislature, and I remember getting up at 4:00 in the morning to see if I could catch the news, to see if it passed. So it was very important to me to know it was sort of the gesture also that was important to recognize that a wrong had been done. And then it was something that had been taken away from my family. And although clearly I have no idea what that family was or where they were exactly, I wanted it back. I felt it was important to take it back for all of them, but also because I wanted to respond to the gesture. I mean, I don't believe that that the sun should pay for the sins of their father. And so this, this, this motion forward to try and repair a wrong or to try and correct it and undo it, but to do something to to acknowledge the fact that it exists was very important to me. And I felt that not only did I want to capture what was taken, but I also wanted to do the gesture of yes, this was a good gesture. This was important and it's important to us. and it was important to me to to do it. That was the one side on the other side. I was there the first time when I was 19 years old. I felt a very strong affinity from the beginning, and I think it was cultural. I think it was that Sephardic culture that I felt when I was in Spain. So it came at me from both sides. There was never any question to me that I was going to move forward with it. Um, and there's been criticisms and complaints. It took longer than it should have for sure. But, um, I think recognizing and acknowledging that the gestures been made, um, is a good one. Um, and for me, you know, when I finally finished the process, as I said, it took longer than I thought it was a sense of, yes, this is something I wanted to do. I have helped several people also achieve it. Um, and that

gives me pride, too. And I've met some wonderful people along the way. And what's fascinating to me is everybody's wish and hope for this is different. It comes from a lot of different places. Some of them are similar to mine from the standpoint that they remember their grandparents speaking Ladino and talking about their culture and that sort of thing. But for others, it could be business. It could be, um, the idea that they also want to have be a part of something greater. It's a European Union passport. Um, but I think in many ways it's united, a lot of Sephardic that are trying to do this and and it's a discussion like you're asking me, I, I ask others, why are you doing this? It's not easy. So you have to want it from a place that is not just, oh, I'm going to sign my name and they're going to send me this. And that's been an interesting process.

Jeff Schwager : Beautiful. That's a beautiful answer.

Doreen Alhadeff: Oh, thanks.

Jeff Schwager : Well, thank you very much for doing this. Sure. That was, um, it's really enjoyable to get to talk to you and to learn about this as a non.