

Rena Safy interviewed by Pamela Caba
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Manhattan, NY

Pamela Caba: My name is Pamela Caba. I am interviewing Rena Safy at Gemelli Community College on October 19th, 2019. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Rena Safy: Yes.

PC: Okay. Where did you grow up?

RS: I grew up in Hungary, Budapest.

PC: Hungary?

RS: Budapest.

PC: Budapest? And how was your childhood growing up there?

RS: Childhood? it was all right. I played around and spent time with people.

PC: Okay. Did you grow up with both your parents?

RS: Yeah, I grew up with both of my parents in Hungary.

PC: Okay. Would you describe your favorite meal growing up?

RS: Can you repeat that?

PC: Would you describe your favorite meal growing up?

RS: My favorite meal growing up would be chicken with rice and curry. So, the chicken was a sauce and then it was cooked with tomatoes, onions...

PC: The chicken?

RS: It was in a Curry, so the Curry was you know when you put onions, tomatoes. I don't know the name of the seasoning, but they were seasonings in it and then that's when you put the chicken after maybe potatoes and stuff like that. But then that's how the chicken was and then salads you know, and then she could have was a sauce called like chutney and that's like... I don't know what's exactly in it, but...

PC: In the sauce?

RS: In the chutney sauce that's like some kind of spicy, but I don't know what it is, some peppers probably.

PC: And that's your favorite meal growing up?

RS: Yeah. `

PC: So, chicken, rice, and salad.

RS: And that sauce thing?

PC: And the sauce?

RS: yeah.

PC: Okay. Why was it significant to you?

RS: Because I guess it's, it's kind of Middle Eastern food, maybe not Middle Eastern, but maybe South Asian or Middle Eastern. So that's where my parents are from, and then I grew up in Hungary, so, you know, it's not the same. So that's why.

PC: Oh, so your parents are not?

RS: They are not Hungarian. I'm not Hungarian, I just grew up there. I was born in Hungary.

PC: Oh, so where are your parents from?

RS: Afghanistan.

PC: Oh, so you guys went to Hungary?

RS: I was, I grew up in and I was born in Hungary.

PC: Okay. But okay, well was there a meaning behind it beyond the food itself?

RS: Just because it was from, it wasn't Hungarian food. That simple.

PC: That's because it was from like where your parents were actually from.

RS: Yeah, culture.

PC: Okay. That's cool. Does a certain food remind you of the loved one?

RS: Minto. Yeah, it's called Minto.

PC: Minto?

RS: It's like, yeah, it's kind of similar to like a dumpling but not really. It's not really the same because the pasta is kind of made differently. I don't know how it's made. I've never made it, but it looks different and feels different than dumplings. But that's the meal.

PC: What are dumplings?

RS: Dumplings are you know the Chinese things that it's like pasta and then there's like beef or like pork or chicken or something inside it.

PC: It looks like a small empanada.

RS: Yeah, but not as...

PC: But its soft right?

RS: Yeah.

PC: Because I know a lot of people eat it with spinach. They put spinach inside.

RS: They, no they eat it with soy sauce or something like that. I don't know.

PC: So, you said that that it reminds you of a special someone? Who?

RS: The Minto, Yeah. Reminds me of mother.

PC: Oh, so nice. Do you have any memories in regard to preparing meals with an elder?

RS: I used to make some food with my mother in the past. So yeah.

PC: What type of food?

RS: Afghan food, other religious...

PC: The rice, chicken. you know what I do

RS: Not really those by cutting up stuff because I was small so I didn't exactly cook but like

PC: But you were just, you were there, so. The sauce. So was it homemade or was it like brought somewhere?

RS: The sauce was homemade.

PC: Okay. That's cool. So, you know how to make it?

RS: I don't, but she did.

PC: Okay. What is currently your favorite meal to eat?

RS: Currently, my favorite meal would be like kebab with rice. My father makes really good kebab, so.

PC: Kebabs?

RS: Chicken kebab yeah.

PC: Do you actually make food though? Do you ever cook?

RS: Do I make...yeah, I cook sometimes when I have time then I cook for myself only.

PC: For yourself.

RS: Yeah.

PC: Why is that your favorite meal?

RS: The flavor, it tastes good, I just like the way it tastes. Like I don't like chickens that's all chewy. I don't like those types of things.

PC: You like the one that breaks right away?

RS: Yeah, like tender.

PC: So that is really well cooked.

RS: Yeah.

PC: Because you know sometimes when it's fully cooked it's like....

RS: I don't like those.

PC: Yeah. I know it's, yeah. So, does it carry any significant meaning beyond the food itself or is it just because it tastes good?

RS: It's just because it tastes good. I just like it.

PC: Okay. If you could pick anyone in the world, who would you eat your favorite meal with? Why, and what would you eat with them?

RS: If I could pick my favorite meal or not favorite meal, my favorite person...`

PC: Favorite person.

RS: I would eat with my mother because I haven't seen her since like I was like twelve. So, I would eat with her, and probably I would eat Minto with her. The food that I described earlier. I would eat with her because I have questions that never got answered.

PC: Okay, so the food that you, it was the chicken...

RS: The Minto.

PC: The Minto, okay.

RS: Yeah.

PC: So that's the one that your dad makes?

RS: No, he never made it.

PC: That's the dumpling thing? The dumpling. See, there you go. Is there any food you will not eat?

RS: I would never eat snails, or oysters. I don't like a chewy stuff. They just gross me out. I cannot.

PC: I agree, oh my god. Snails are... Do you abide by any dietary restrictions because of your culture or religion?

RS: No, I don't abide by any restrictions, but I used to in the past because my father is Muslim. You know how Muslim people don't eat pork?

RS: So, I never ate pork, but now I do. So, I don't have any restrictions anymore.

PC: Why did it change?

RS: Why did it change? I guess because just being around people that eat it. So, they kind of influenced me.

RS: To actually try it and eat it. So, it kind of tastes all right. So, I like it.

PC: Are there certain foods you only eat on special occasions?

RS: I don't really have special occasions, but I used to be in the past, like I ate those Minto stuff and then a meal, a big meal with different kebabs and things like that. Like all kinds of different, I don't know the name. I don't even remember the names of it but different kebabs. But they were on special occasions.

PC: Okay. So, in your opinion, who in your life cooks the best?

RS: Best meals? I mean my father is a really good cook, so I guess really my father.

PC: Okay, what do they usually cook?

RS: My father cooks all kinds of stuff. Like there is like something called Dal. I don't know what it's called in English, what it's made of, but I know what it looks like. So I can't really explain, but it's, I think maybe it's, no it's not Lentils. I don't know. It's like something similar to it, but I don't know what it's called.

PC: Something like beans?

RS: No, it's not beans something similar to Lentils.

PC: Lentils.

RS: Looks like, similar to it, but it's not. I know it's not lentils, but something similar. That's Dal, and then he also cooks stew like chicken stew, beef or something like that. And then lamb, I hate lamb, but he cooks lamb, and then rice and he makes soup. So, a lot of soups and he makes like a lot of, he takes a lot of cakes. So yeah.

PC: So, he doesn't usually stick to the Muslim diet?

RS: I mean he does because the rice, the chicken, and the meat stuff. He just sticks to the Muslim diet, but then sometimes he just makes like French fries or stuff like that. So, it's balanced out.

PC: Okay. So, what does eating well mean to you?

RS: Eating well would be, for me, it's like eating, you know, not eating fast food. I don't like, I don't really like to eat. I don't go out too much to eat fast food because I don't want to eat those, cause I know that they're not healthy. So, I wouldn't want to eat too much fast food. So, I would eat homemade food more often because I know how it's made, where the meat came from and how it was prepared.

PC: yeah.

RS: Like I don't know how some places they might be like restaurants or something they might have like I don't know what they do with their meat behind closed doors. So, that's what it would mean.

PC: So just like a lot of restaurants... Like a lot of people speak about the forks and everything, do they really wash it well?

RS: Yeah, that's what I'm saying that I would rather eat, like I would eat food that I know how it's made. And also like more nutritious like salads and stuff like that.

PC: So, in a way healthy not just junk, but homemade.

RS: Yeah.

PC: But it's also good.

RS: Yeah.

PC: Okay. Do you have a favorite restaurant?

RS: I mean this is not really a restaurant. I kind of forgot the name because I haven't been there since the summer. But it's a Korean place or no, it's a Vietnamese its's not Korean. It's Vietnamese, but they have really tasty French fries. I forgot the name of the place too. Something Vietnamese, I forgot the name. It's in Queens.

PC: It's in queens?

RS: Yeah.

PC: And what do you usually order?

RS: The fries.

PC: Just the fries?

RS: Yeah, the crunchy fries taste really good. Like if you try them you might like them. But it tastes, it's like different than the regular fries around, like they have different things on it.

PC: So, not McDonald's fires?

RS: No, it's not.

PC: How does the food you eat or cook make you who you are?

RS: I don't really think that the food makes me who I am. I don't believe the food makes me who I am. So, I don't think the food makes me into any type of person.

PC: So, when you stopped eating, when you started eating pork, you know, in a way not eating it was cultural. Do you feel connected to your religion?

RS: Oh no, I'm not Muslim. I don't follow the Muslim religion.

PC: Okay.

RS: So that's like, I'm not really into the religion. Only my father is so, but I still, that was the only thing that followed from it in the past was not eating pork.

PC: Okay, do you observe certain rules or traditions in regard to drinks?

RS: I don't really observe any, but I've seen people drink a lot of coffee. Like everyone drinks a lot of coffee every morning. I just see it in the subways in schools everywhere. People drink a lot of coffee.

PC: You're not a Starbucks person?

RS: I don't drink coffee at all.

PC: Okay.

RS: I just see people drinking.

PC: How come? You've never tried it before?

RS: I've tried coffee, but I don't know. Some people are addicted to the taste or just addicted to the coffee, so I've never been addicted to it. It tastes good. I like it, but I would not want to coffee to control me and having to buy coffee every day.

PC: If you could go anywhere in the world to try new food, where would you go and why?

RS: I think I would go to Tibet. That's like, right now it's under control of China because it used to be a free country, but not anymore. I would go there because my favorite person, she's from Tibet, so I just want to try the food that she has from her own culture.

PC: Who is your favorite person?

RS: She is like she; I mean like she's 32 and then she's like a mother figure so.

PC: Okay.

RS: So, I guess that's the person.

PC: What is the meal or snack? You can eat all the time and never get tired of?

RS: The snack I would eat all the time and never get tired of would be Takis. I just love Takis because of the flavor. It just tastes really good.

PC: You like spicy food?

RS: I mean Takis are like, I don't like all time type of spicy food. Like there are some spices, food that just, just spice and then like there's no taste to it.

PC: Um hmm.

RS: I don't like those, but if it tastes good and spicy then yeah.

PC: Okay. Cause there's different types of Takis.

RS: I know. I liked the one with the lime, the...I think it's the lime thing.

PC: The green one.

RS: Yeah.

PC: It's the green one, the one with the green packaging.

RS: No

PC: You like the purple one,

RS: The purple packaging.

PC: You like the purple, so it's not the one with lime.

RS: It says lime on it. It says Fuego and lime or something.

PC: Oh, maybe I'm wrong. What is the most important meal of the day to you?

RS: The most important meal to me would be breakfast because I need to eat breakfast. If I don't have breakfast for the day, I might be really grumpy and be mad at people. So, I need my breakfast.

PC: So, in a way food controls you?

RS: No, it does not, but then I just emotionally, if I'm hungry, I might be just a little different than when I'm not hungry.

PC: So, when you do eat... you eat food.

RS: I feel better.

PC: You feel better right? So, it does control you.

RS: All right. All right.

PC: Okay, so food and you explained how your mom, so throughout your life has there ever been a moment where you actually faced real hunger?

RS: I've never faced real hunger, but there has been a time where I've been in the rehab and I chose not to eat the food. So, I was, for, there have been times that the food was so disgusting at the rehab, sometimes it was either uncooked or sometimes they were just food I didn't like. So, it's like I didn't eat it on purpose because, and I made, I was starving on purpose because I'm not going to eat this food if it looks so disgusting. So yeah, that was the one time. But outside of the rehab it has never happened.

PC: Okay. So, going back to pork, would you ever think of doing the diet around there where you completely stopped eating it in terms of just maybe fitting into your culture again, if you wanted to?

RS: No, because I don't believe in the Muslim religion. So no, if it never happened again but in the past I kind of believed in it because I was little, you know what my father tells me. So, I just did what he, you know, following the parents. But then after getting older, so you know, I don't really believe in the religion. So, no, I would never go back and then stop eating pork. Like I don't eat pork all the time, but like sometimes I do.

PC: Uh huh. Do you think that your favorite meals in general are healthy?

RS: I mean they are healthy enough, they're balanced not like super hard, you know, like those crazy healthy foods for, you only eat just the salad and stuff like that with protein and stuff. But then I eat salad right next to the chicken, the rice, and then there's like other sauces. So, it's balanced out. It's like in the middle.

PC: Do you know that the American plate?

RS: Yeah.

PC: How it's, like set up.

RS: No.

PC: Do you think that you...You don't know it?

RS: No.

PC: It has like grains...

RS: And it's all right there right. Seen pictures.

PC: And do you follow that? On purpose?

RS: I don't really follow it. No, I don't follow that in my plate. I just put everything together as much as fits on it. So, I don't, I don't go like one plate this and one plate that I just put everything on one plate.

PC: Okay. Okay. Okay. Is there any question that you think I should have asked you for better understanding anything?

RS: No, there isn't any question.

PC: Anything that you want to add?

RS: None. No.

PC: No. Well, thank you for your time. Thank you for allowing me to interview you about this.

RS: Yeah.