Hear My Story\_ Melissa Hunter

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Holocaust survivor, family narrative, historical novel, Sala Worther, concentration camps, Bloody Wednesday, Jewish community, family history, third-generation, anti-Semitism, television adaptation, family pilgrimage, writing process, emotional impact, historical accuracy

**SPEAKERS**

Al Miller, Bella Ouziel, Melissa Hunter, Trinity Johnson, Lisa MacVittie, Jackie Congedo, Elisha Wiesel

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:20

See, mine is 40018, my sister was 40017,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story - so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations.

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:59

I'm Jackie Congedo in this episode, you'll hear from a woman who has captured the history of her family's experience during the Holocaust in a historical novel. Melissa Hunter's grandmother, Sala Werthaiser, was imprisoned in seven camps during the war. Sala survived, but lost many members of her family. Melissa sat down with us to share her story of carrying on her family's narrative, to make sure it wasn't lost to history, and what it was like to distill her grandmother's joy and pain onto paper.

**Trinity Johnson** 01:30

Welcome, Melissa. It's my absolute pleasure to be with you today and talk about your family story, and I'm such a fan of you, I should have said author, Melissa Hunter, welcome to the show. I am such a fan of your book, "What She Lost," and the times that you share your grandmother's story on the Holocaust Center Speakers Bureau, I see the impact that this story has on audiences. So I'm so very excited to have you on Hear My Story today. So thank you for joining me.

**Melissa Hunter** 02:01

Thank you so much. That's so kind.

**Trinity Johnson** 02:03

And as I shared your book, "What She Lost" is amazing, and it's been getting out there. I know I see all the exciting updates through your social media, but before you were an author, before what she lost shared your grandmother, Sala's, story she was just your grandmother.

**Melissa Hunter** 02:23

Yes, she was

**Trinity Johnson** 02:24

She was your bubbie. Tell us a little bit about your bubbie.

**Melissa Hunter** 02:27

Oh, my goodness, she I always say she was a different person to whoever knew her. She to me, she was this wonderful, bubbly, very youthful woman, and there was a period of time which I talk about in the book, that she wasn't and this was right after my grandfather passed away, and I have memories of that, but I was very young at the time. And I think as an adult, and looking back on her life and her history, I understand why she went through this very dark period, but she came out of it, and probably from the time I was 10 until the years before her passing, she was just a person who loved being with people, and particularly her her grandchildren. And I was the oldest of her three grandchildren. So for me, I remember going out to breakfast with her and going out to brunch and going to the mall. And there's a story where she loved to shop, and I there's a story when I was about 13 years old, I went to the mall with her, and I saw this leopard print dress that I absolutely loved, and I knew my mom would not buy it for me, so I asked my grandma to and of course, she did. And my mom was horrified when I came home with it, but she would buy, I mean, we loved shopping. She loved makeup, perfume, jewelry, all of the very feminine aspects. And we would watch movies together. Some of our favorite movies were Crossing Delancey, and she reminded me so much of the grandmother in Crossing Delancey. I don't know if you've ever seen it, but oh, it's such a good movie. And she was just this bubbly woman who would be who would go around saying, "Everybody loves me. I went and talked to this person, and they just loved me." And so she was really, she was, she was, she was a fun grandma to be with, and she also made the best matzo ball soup. That's one of the things that I remember most for any of our family gatherings, for Shabbat dinner for the holidays, she was the one who provided the soup and for my wedding shower, we had a shower where everyone brought their favorite recipe and a cooking utensil or something we could use for our kitchen to start building up our kitchen supplies. So she got me a big soup pot, but instead of writing down her recipe, she didn't write English very well. She so my brother and my aunt went to her kitchen and recorded her actually making her soup. And that recording is one of my most cherished possessions, because I still have it. I go back and I watch it like once a year, just to see her bustle of her kitchen and see her make her soup, and all the talking that she did in between about this person she knew and that person she knew, and what she saw on TV and what was happening in her soap operas, and she was just she was lovely. I had a great relationship with her.

**Melissa Hunter** 05:15

That's so beautiful. And if I remember right, you like hard matzo balls,

**Melissa Hunter** 05:19

I am, yes, that's how she made them hard as baseballs, fork and knife to cut them. And actually, my husband is the one who has taken over the family cooking for the soup. And this past Rosh Hashanah, we had hard like, these were really hard matzo balls, and we loved them. My family loved them. The rest of the people that were there were like, "Oh, my God, this is not good." But we were like, "Nope, the best, because this is how my bubbie used to make them."

**Trinity Johnson** 05:44

What a beautiful way to remember her, both through what you do so often on our Speakers Bureau, but then also even in the kitchen and at holidays. And that's so beautiful to hear how upbeat and positive she was, because obviously what we will be talking about is actually very difficult history, and a history that really you uncovered for your family and then eventually turned it into a book. And you also mentioned the cooking video, which, when you share your grandmother's story with students, there's another video that there are many segments of your grandmother, you in conversation with her, asking her about her story, which I'm sure is also very treasured, and it's incredible to hear the story and her words and see the relationship of love and trust, because she does get into some very difficult and painful memories. And so when you turned that really, that interview and your presentation into a book, you chose to write it fiction. Can you talk to us about that process, your writing, your research, what you discovered, and why fiction?

**Melissa Hunter** 06:54

Yeah, so the process of writing her story took me almost 20, 25 years to do. When I discovered that I wanted to be a writer, when I found my love of writing in about seventh grade, I wrote just reams of stories, short stories, poems, not very good ones. I wrote for my school newspaper. I wrote for their literary magazine. And at the time, I really loved reading science fiction and fantasy, and I still do, like that's the genre that I tend to gravitate towards. So I was coming up with all these fantastical story ideas, but as I grew older and I pursued an English major in college and a Judaic Studies minor, I kind of felt like I should combine my two passions into one piece, and I knew that my grandmother's story is what I wanted to tell, so I began writing it in my 20s, and it was shortly, I think it was maybe like 25 or 26 that I sat down with my grandmother and a camcorder, and I was so fortunate that she opened up to me and she shared almost her entire story from her years before, her time in the concentration camps, through the concentration camps and then after. And these were stories that I had never heard. She shared little snippets to me throughout the years growing up, but she opened up so much in that interview, and I knew when I was listening to her, I almost got lost in the story, and when I was hearing her history, I was like, "This is it. This is what I need to write. If I write nothing else in my life, this is the story that I want to get down on paper." So I started writing it when I was younger. I had was just newly married, didn't have any children, and as I wrote it - nothing rang true. I tried it as a novel, I tried it as a series of essays, I tried it as short stories. I even tried it as a screenplay, and it just... I couldn't find the right voice for it. And then I had my children, and I kind of fell into the role of full time mom, which is one of my most cherished roles in life, and I was so active in being with my daughters as they were growing up, that writing kind of took a back seat. So when they got older, many years later, I decided I had more time on my hands, and I really wanted to revisit my grandmother's story, particularly because at this moment she started her health started declining, and she, the years before she passed, she had dementia, so I wanted to make sure that I could record her story and have it since I knew her mental health was declining. So I revisited all the papers that I had written, all the pages I had written, and I started writing again. And I was in my 40s at this time, and the words just flowed. And I don't know that I consciously thought I was going to write it as fiction. I just sat down and just started writing. And I think I found my voice. And I always reflect on the fact that at this point in my life, I was now a mom, I was obviously older, had achieved a maturity I didn't have when I was in my 20s, and I don't think that I could have written what I did when I was younger without those life experiences, because I ended up putting myself not only in my grandmother's shoes as I was writing, but into my great grandmother's shoes. And I thought about what it would be like to lose everyone I loved, to see all of my children taken from me, one after another, and I really wanted to show that emotional side of a family being torn apart. And now that I was a mom and a wife, I feel like I was much able, much more able to show that than when I was a 20 year old. So, so it just, it just kind of flowed from me, and I realized, when I submitted it to a publisher, and we were talking and they acquired it, that it was fiction in the sense that this isn't my experience, but I write it first person, so I had to take liberties in certain places, because I had to imagine where there were gaps in the stories. And when I was writing it at this this version of it, my grandmother, at that point, wasn't able to answer questions for me, because she was in the pretty late stages of dementia at that point. So unfortunately, I didn't have anyone to go and ask these questions too, so I had to take liberty with the holes in the story, but everything I did, I researched because I wanted it to be as accurate, historically accurate, as possible. And so that's why my publisher decided to release it more as a work of fiction based on true stories, versus a memoir or a biography. And I'm glad she did. I really love how it turned out.

**Trinity Johnson** 11:39

Yeah, it is beautiful, and your grandmother really does shine through and in such a beautiful way. And I'm hoping, can you give us a snapshot of her experience, and then I'd love for you to read a part of the book specifically, but can you give us a brief snapshot of her experience during the Holocaust?

**Melissa Hunter** 11:59

Yeah, so she grew up in a very small town in Poland. It's called Olkusz, and my understanding is that it's near Krakow. It was a very insular Jewish community. Her father was a baker. She had a family. She had five brothers and a sister, and herself, and then her and her parents, and it was very close knit. They knew all their neighbors, and they really kind of kept to themselves. They were Orthodox, so it was a very they didn't really interact with the outside community that wasn't Jewish. And when World War II broke out and when the Nazis invaded Poland, her brother Jacob, was drafted into the army, and so, so that was really their first introduction to the war. And he was, he was sent out, and within... immediately came back because the Polish army was defeated. And he was saying, you know, that we were officially at war. And that was like the first moment that, I think, for my grandmother's family, they realized that the war and what was happening in the outside world could touch them personally.

**Melissa Hunter** 13:13

And after that, they were forced to leave their home. They were put into the ghetto, the Olkusz ghetto, and at that point she was able to smuggle in food. She met a woman who was able to give her food to take back to her family, which was extremely risky for both her and the woman, the Polish woman, who helped her. And at the point that she was in the ghetto, at that point, they started rounding up, obviously, the Jewish residents in the ghetto. And so one by one, each of her siblings was taken until the time that she was taken to the camps, and at that point, that was the last she ever saw of her mother and father and her two youngest brothers. So then she she had, she was in, I believe, seven camps over the course of four or five years, and this was the time that she was 16 to 20, which I think about that. And I think about like, you know what I was doing when I was 16 years old, 17 years old, what my daughters were doing at that age. And I just, I can't even fathom experiencing something like that at such a pivotal moment in your life, and I really think that shaped her into the woman she was maturity wise and how she was able to why she was dependent on people the way she was, because she never truly matured.

**Melissa Hunter** 14:34

And shortly after the war, she ended up in a town called Reichenbach, which was had been a German town near Gross Rosen concentration camp, which was where she was, and it was there that she met my grandfather. A lot of the survivors in the surrounding areas ended up in this town, and she met my grandfather there, and within like two months, they were married, and she was so young, but my. understanding was that a lot of the survivors did end up like getting married almost immediately and having children almost immediately to try and build back what they had lost in their you know, in the experiences during World War II and all the family that they had been separated from. So one of the things I try and show in the book is not only her life before the war, but almost immediately after liberation, what that looked like. Because I hadn't seen that in a lot of other books, and that was one of the areas I was really fascinated with when I was doing my research and listening to her talk about her life, because I never could figure out what happened in those days right after liberation, what did they do? How did they survive? Where did they go? Where did they find food? How did they reunite with their loved ones? And so that was something that I was really fascinated to to learn more about in the process of writing the book.

**Trinity Johnson** 15:47

Wow. And I know you touched on doing extensive research. And there's one watershed moment in particular that I'm hoping you'll you'll read an excerpt from your book on and it's called Bloody Wednesday, yes. And this very much shaped your grandmother's perspective that they carried with her through I believe it was four years and she was in seven different concentration camps, but this moment in particular was really impactful. And I'm hoping you'll read a little bit for us a bit, but share a little bit more about that watershed moment.

**Melissa Hunter** 16:21

Yeah, so that the Bloody Wednesday. I didn't know that's what it was called. I didn't really know anything about it, but I have a specific memory of sitting with my grandmother, and she shared with me two photos that she had somehow gotten from someone she met who was from her hometown, and this was years and years later, and they handed her these two pictures. And one was a picture of young Jewish men registering at a table. The Nazis were sitting at the table, and they had their hands up, and they were registering. And the second picture was of the town square in Olkusz, where she grew up, and it's just it was, it was filled with Jewish men, young men from 14 on up, lying face down in the square. And surrounding them were Nazis with their guns trained on these men. And when my grandmother showed me these pictures, they were old pictures. They were kind of crinkled. They were black and white, I thought that they were the only two pictures in existence of this moment where the Nazis gathered up all the Jewish men in town and basically for the day, humiliated them, tortured them, some were killed, and this is this, and then sent them home. And then this was shortly before they were all sent to the ghetto. So I ended up researching this incident, and that's when I discovered online that it was well known. And there's that those two photos I had were not the original photos. They were there online. You can look it up. It's it's Bloody Wednesday, and the Nazis that came to town that day photographed it for propaganda, for their own propaganda. So there's photographic evidence that this actually happened, and it is now out there on the internet. And when I discovered that this day had a name, why it was photographed by the Nazis, what they did to the Jewish residents, I that was like a scene that I knew somehow I had to put into this book, because it had been living in my mind from the two pictures my grandmother showed me, and now I had all the information about what occurred that day from my research. And so that was that, and it was hard for me to write that scene, because my grandmother didn't experience - she was she was home, but her father was taken. Her brothers were taken. Her uncle was taken. Her male cousins were taken. So I tried to imagine what it was like to be left behind and not know what was happening to all these people that you loved, but still hearing gunshots and shouts from the town square and just being frozen and paralyzed and not knowing what was going on. So that's what I tried to incorporate into the book. Will you share that passage. Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Okay. So my grandmother, as I as I explained, she was home with her mother, and her brother was engaged to be married to a woman named Helena. And so all the women were gathered together in the apartment, and they were just like trying. They didn't know what was going on. So it says, "The soldiers came this morning and took Papa away. We didn't know what was happening. I went with Malka to the square, and we saw, we saw her. Words fell away and she wiped a tear from her cheek. What did you see? Helena? My mother asked urgently. Helena shook her head again and swallowed before she was able to continue, there was a crowd in the square. The soldiers were there, and the men and the boys, it looked like the whole town. I saw Eli and Wolf from next door. I looked for Papa. I couldn't find Jacob. I. What were they doing? My mother implored, kneeling before Helena, what were they doing with the men and the boys? I couldn't tell. Helena cried, burying her face in her hands. They were all lying on the ground. They were face down with their hands behind their backs. The soldiers were yelling and their guns were out. I heard shots fired and dogs barking, but I couldn't see what was happening. Malcolm made me leave. I wanted to stay to find Jacob. Her voice trailed off as sobs overtook her. What do we do now? My aunt asked, fear sharpening her voice, what can we do? My mother asked, standing again and beginning to pace. We wait, we pray."

**Trinity Johnson** 20:39

a powerful writing, and I think it's so important that that we hear how you wrote this very traumatic and scary experience. I can't imagine the fear, but I think part of how you wrote this book so eloquently and bringing forth your grandmother's story, it's really no wonder that this has since been optioned for television, right? So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that process and kind of what's next for this being shared with even more people?

**Melissa Hunter** 21:17

Yes. So this was a total surprise to me, but last year, I was contacted by a screenwriter who had discovered the book, and I was skeptical. I'll admit I was skeptical because I get a lot of, you know, emails and text messages and messages on social media that read like a form letter. It's like, dear (and then insert author's name) we think your book, (insert name of book) will make a good you know... and a lot of them I just end up forgetting and throwing away. But this was a personal email from this gentleman, and he was actually in the letter, he actually included scenes from the book that he had read. And so I realized that he actually knew the book, he had read the book and and he wanted to talk to me about ideas that he had for turning it into either a motion picture or a limited series. So I was like, what does it hurt to have a conversation? So we talked, and I immediately connected with him. He had a very successful career as a screenwriter. He won a very coveted award in 2013 for up and coming screenwriters. He's a little bit older than me. Had retired from his his his job that he'd had his life in his family business, and was returning to his love of writing and turning stories into visual representations on the screen. And I think through our conversations, I thought, this is someone I could see handling the story very, very well. We had a lot of shared history as well, which was very important to me, that he understood where I was coming from with telling the story. And so we entered an agreement to turn it into his vision. Was a limited series because he felt that it it was better suited to a story that could unfold over different episodes, because it's very character driven, and it could focus on the characters and their experiences in each episode. I was like, that's great. Like, I'm all for that. That was never anything that I had anticipated or even envisioned for it, but it's fascinating to think that that could happen. So for the maybe three or four months, he got to work on writing the pilot episode. We would talk every week or every other week, and he would share the pages that he'd written and make sure that I approved of them, that they followed the tone of the story and stayed true to the plot, which it did, and when he had written the first episode, he said, now it's time for me to go out and shop it. And so that's the stage we're at right now, and it is being looked at by studios. And I'm very excited. I can't say much more on that, but I'm very excited about where it's headed. And I said to him, even if nothing comes from this, this is further than I ever would have anticipated this got, and I have a copy of a script that maybe I could do something with it in the future if this process ends up fizzing, you know, but it's very exciting. It's not something I would have anticipated, and it's neat to see it, and imagine what it would be like to see these characters brought to life by actors on screen or on stage, so...

**Trinity Johnson** 24:34

Well, I wish you could share more, but I'm very excited to learn,

**Melissa Hunter** 24:39

thank you

**Trinity Johnson** 24:41

this, and maybe even be able to tune in and see it, which would just be incredible. Fingers crossed your your family story out there more and couldn't, couldn't imagine who would portray Sala. But I cannot wait tohear what's next.

**Melissa Hunter** 24:56

That's so funny, I was with some friends last night, and we were talking about it, and we were all just talking. Around the table about who, what actors and actresses we thought would play the and it's, I don't know myself, you know. So I'm curious to see if it should get picked up. What would happen? Yeah, that would be a fun thing to discover.

**Trinity Johnson** 25:12

One thing you touched on that that's interesting. And now I want to get a little more personal with you and your part of identity as a third generation, or the grandchild of survivors, and you said it was important to work with someone who understood who I am and where I'm coming from, and I'm just wondering how much of your grandparents experience has shaped your life, and tell us a little bit about your identity as a third generation, and why sharing the story in the many ways you've shared has been so important to you?

**Melissa Hunter** 25:48

Yeah, so obviously, I grew up in a Jewish home, and we, we always were together for the holidays, and growing up, I would go to my grandparents to my grandmother's house for Shabbat. We are... we... So Judaism was something that has always been present in my life. And when I think about my identity as a Jewish woman, I really feel this connection, this it's, I can't even explain it, it's like this visceral tie to my history, like it's something that connects me, not so much to the religious doctrines or anything like that, but just this, this history, this cultural history, this collective history, that has been passed down to me. And I think that's always been very important to me, and always something that has been why I identify my... as Jewish, not just because I was born into a Jewish family, but why I am Jewish, and why Judaism is so important to me. And as I got older, I realized that that, because it was such a defining part of who I am, my writing has, over the past 5, 10, years, really taken shape around being Jewish. So everything I write mostly has a Jewish lens. From my novels, I work for the local Jewish newspaper, so I get to cover Jewish events in the city. I've written essays and short stories and everything is about my identity as Jewish and the third generation of Holocaust survivors. And in recent years, with the passing - my grandparents have both passed on - and I see that that generation is not going to be with us much longer. And I also see how collectively, we are forgetting what has happened. The further away from World War II we get the further away we get from this moment in history. I feel like there is this collective forgetting of what happened. And I see in today's world this uptick in antisemitism. I see it on college campuses. I've noticed it obviously since October 7 occurred, and it is so alarming to me, and I think I that has only fueled this passion within me as a third generation survivor, as someone whose family was directly impacted by the events of the Holocaust, that we don't forget what can happen and what we are capable of, the horrors that we're capable of, and that's why it's so important for me to get the story out and to talk to students and to talk to people, and to share the lessons of the Holocaust and and how it could still happen, you know. And in some ways, I see the divisiveness in our country and the divisiveness just amongst people, and I see that it's very it's very disheartening to me. So I also know that as a third generation, my grand my grandmother and grandfather are no longer with us, and this year, my father also passed away. And so in that lineage, I'm the next one, and I don't want those stories to be forgotten. So when I wrote the book, it was really with the intention of just sharing these experiences with my own children and sharing why, why this is so important to our family and everything else that's come from it has just been like icing on the cake. And so the fact that my daughters can now have this book and hopefully carry on the torch of the family history and share the stories is what's so important to me for the fourth generation.

**Trinity Johnson** 29:25

Yeah, and have you actually gone to Europe and seen any of these places?

**Melissa Hunter** 29:32

Oh, my goodness, I was supposed to go. I was invited to a memorial in Olkusz after the book was published, summer of 2020, and obviously that did not happen, but it is on my bucket list to go there. Particularly, I'd love to go with my brother and my cousin to see all these locations, to to visit my where my grandmother grew up. Um. Um, and we also just discovered recently a cousin in Germany. This is a whole other story, but we discovered family that still lives there that we didn't know about. So in the past two years, we've kind of connected and shared stories from across the ocean. And so there is plan in the future to go visit her, and to visit where my father was born, and visit the apartments that are still standing where my family lived after the war. So it is a family pilgrimage I'm hoping to take in the very near future.

**Trinity Johnson** 30:31

That'll be amazing. And I hope you'll write about that as well.

**Melissa Hunter** 30:34

I will. Yeah

**Trinity Johnson** 30:36

And so your grandmother opened up, and really you were kind of the first generation in your family to hear this story. Obviously, I'm sure your children have read your book as well. Was that something? Did you tell your children early on about the family history? Or was it something you waited... How did you approach that knowing that it was shared with you so early.

**Melissa Hunter** 31:02

That's really interesting, because I don't remember a specific time that I sat down and said to them, this is your history. I think it was something that was just a given, and that's what it was like for me growing up. I don't remember when I realized, okay, I'm the granddaughter of survivors. I don't have, like, a specific memory where it was like before I didn't know and after I knew. It was just something that was always talked about, always known. And so I think for my girls, it was the same. Obviously, they went to Sunday school, they learned, you know, in Sunday school and in regular school, the history of the Holocaust. But I think they, they they probably knew, because this novel had always been in the back of my mind. And we had the video of my grandmother, and unfortunately, she was not well and able to really be for them who she was for me. So I would show them the video as they were growing up and say, This is what your bubbie was like. This is what she was like when she was able to just go out and be herself and and, and so they were able to see that. So I think it was something that we they always knew. And then obviously, as they got older, and they had questions, then we talked about some of the harder subject matters, but I think it was just part of their upbringing.

**Trinity Johnson** 32:24

And not that you're not busy enough as a writer, as a columnist, working at the local Jewish newspaper and also optioning TV. But there's also another project in the works you've mentioned, writing your grandfather's story. Yeah, and I'm wondering, if you've had time, when you've had time, how is that project going? Have you had to put it on pause, or are you still currently working on that as well?

**Melissa Hunter** 32:52

It's, I'm so glad you asked this, because for the past two years, I had put it on pause because of the work I'd been doing at the paper, and also because we lost my dad as well, and that was a very hard, long process. And obviously writing about the subject matter is not is not light, and I was not in a mental place where I really wanted to delve into heavy subjects. So like in the intervening years, I actually wrote a Hanukkah romance that was just something fun and a completely different genre from this. But because I love writing, I had to have an outlet. So I wrote this, this romance, but now I have returned to the story and my publisher, the publisher who published What She Lost has said she's going to acquire the next book, and it's basically a continuation of this story, and not only with the focus on my grandmother, but obviously my grandfather, too, and his life story is just as fascinating to me as my grandmother's was, and unfortunately, he passed away when I was eight years old, so I didn't have the first hand account that I had from my grandmother, but of his 10 siblings, seven of them survived, which is just astounding to me. And they all found each other, and each of their stories, their individual stories, is fascinating and discovering this cousin who still lives in Germany and how she's related to us through my grandfather's brother. She's done a ton of research on her end and has filled in all of these missing gaps that I didn't know about. So I actually am back to work on the story. My goal is to have it done and in my publisher's hand by the end of this year, beginning of next year. And I'm just so excited about it. I just get this this, I can't even explain the feeling I get when I sit down and I start writing the story. I feel it's a connection to my past, and I really feel like I'm with those that have that are no longer with me. Um. And I plan to dedicate this next book to my dad. That's, yeah, he's in it.

**Trinity Johnson** 35:05

I know he would be so proud. He was so very proud of the work you have already done and how you touched on this a little. It's been difficult for you to grapple with this history and write about it, and you've had all the personal kind of things that have happened in the last year with your father's passing. How do you stay positive and hold on to hope? Is that a separate thing from knowing your family's history, or is there a piece of that that actually helps propel you forward?

**Melissa Hunter** 35:39

Wow, that's interesting. Um, I think I would say that this year has been a year of contrasts. We've had a lot of hardship in our family, but we've also had a lot of joy in our family. My daughters, I'm gonna get emotional here. My daughters both graduated. My oldest from college, my youngest from high school, my nephew had his bar mitzvah, my daughter got her first real job, and we moved her into her first like apartment, not college apartment, but like apartment apartment. And I think for me, I find hope and joy in seeing all of these events in my family, I realize where I am in my life kind of sandwiched between the my children's generation and my parents generation. I have a lot of friends who are amazing support system, because we're all go, we're all going through the same thing, and we talk a lot about where we are in our lives. So I think through, through my friendships, through my family, it's easy to find the joy, even when bad things happen, it's easy to find the joy, and I try to focus on that joy, and just being with my family, being with my daughters and my husband, is what just fills my heart. And seeing the promise of them continuing and their loves and their pursuits is brings me a lot of happiness.

**Trinity Johnson** 37:05

Well, and you have always been bubbly every time I'm around you. And I just always feel that positivity and so energizing. So I've just been so happy to be in conversation with you today. And my last question is, for anyone else who is even toying with the idea of both researching or trying to explore their family story, whether that ends up in a book or on TV or whatever, what advice or kind of tips would you give them? How do they get started? What should they do?

**Melissa Hunter** 37:38

Well, first, I say, do it, because I see that being able to, especially if you have relatives that you want to know their story, talking to them firsthand, because life doesn't let you keep the people you love forever. And so if you are interested in your history, talk to the people who lived it. Talk to their, you know, talk to the many generations you can. Write it down. You can record it. I think just for me, feeling... knowing my family history is an anchor in my life. It puts me where I am in my life, and I think it makes me feel grounded. And so I think, obviously, with the internet, there's so much material out there, that's where I do most of my research, but I make sure it's from reputable websites too, because there's a lot of stuff out there that obviously is not reputable. But I just feel like going to the library is a wonderful way to research as well. But my advice would definitely be talk to the people that you love you know firsthand, hear their life stories. And I really believe that everyone has a story to tell, and everyone's life has something unique in it that everyone should know.

**Trinity Johnson** 38:49

Well, I could not... that is the perfect end cap, that we all have a story, right? And that's why so special to have you here sharing your family story on hear my story. And what this whole series tries to do is bring these stories to light and inspire others as well. And thank you for being part of that mission and for being my guest today, and we can't wait to hear what's next for you and this story.

**Melissa Hunter** 39:15

Thank you. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much for having me.

**Jackie Congedo** 39:19

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