Interviewee: Saïd Sayrafiezadeh
Title: **Growing up in the Socialist Workers Party**
Duration: **5 minutes, 14 seconds**

Introduction:
Nobody chooses the world they are born into. So, what happens when you are born into a belief system whose tenets may strike you as questionable? Can you ever fully leave that ideology behind?

In this episode of Bookpod, Saïd Sayrafiezadeh summarizes aspects of *When Skateboards Will Be Free*, his memoir of growing up in a family committed to the revolutionary goals of the Socialist Workers Party.

Presentation:
The title comes from -- *When Skateboards Will Be Free* -- comes from an episode that occurred when I was about eight years old and I asked my mother to buy me a skateboard, and we went to Sears department store, and the sign read, "$10.99." And I told my mom that I wanted the green one. And she said, "Well, we can't afford the skateboard, but when the revolution comes, everybody will have a skateboard because all skateboards will be free."

I left the store with this childish fantasy, imagination of long rolling green hills where there were boys and it was summertime and everybody was skateboarding up and down the slopes. So that's the title: *When Skateboards Will be Free*.

It's a book about growing up with parents who are members of the Socialist Workers Party. It's mixed in with the fact that my mom was Jewish and my father was Iranian and so what it's like growing up with mixed ethnicity.

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I was always embarrassed about growing up in the party. I was so different. You're saying things that are going counter to the general sense of society. You know, that's part of how the Socialist Workers Party defines themselves, as being the opposite of what is said in the mainstream.

I mean, I took so many unpopular positions growing up. The main one that I write about in the book is supporting the, the taking of the hostages during the hostage

crisis in 1979.

In sixth grade I'd just begun a new school, and I remember in the beginning of the school year that I was -- you know, I had quite a number of friends and I, you know, I was popular, and I was part of the class.

And then the hostage crisis began in November of 1979 where ultimately 50 American hostages were held captive at the U.S. Embassy in Iran for 444 days.

And, of course, the Socialist Workers Party's take was that it was a way that a third world country was standing up to an imperialist nation.

And I at some point was asked by my best friend what I thought of the hostage crisis. This was probably about a month or so into it. And I told him, frankly, that I thought the hostages were spies and that, um, they had deserved to be taken.

And, um, that ended my friendship with him and ended basically my sort of sense of comfort in class and school because shortly after that everybody knew what I felt and everybody knew that I was Iranian. Whereas, up to that point, nobody really had even considered Iran or being Iranian, and suddenly they were in the news.

So, um, it made me feel very alienated and protective, and I think it was a very long time before I felt like I could trust people, frankly, maybe even up to this day. I think I'm still wary of saying things, of saying what I really think about things.

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I think in the case of the Socialist Workers Party of my family, the idea of thinking about utopia was a way to really not face your own life. I mean, it's sort of the same Christian idea that things are, well, very bad right now, but they're going to be great at some point, as evidenced by my mom saying, "When the revolution comes, everybody will have a skateboard."

So, I think what that says or what that does for someone like my mom is, then, she doesn't really have to make too much of an effort to change her life in order to be able to buy her son a skateboard, which is really what she should have been focusing her time on.

As I describe in the book, she decided to leave the party because she had been seeing a therapist, who said, "Well, what would you do with all your free time, Martha, if you left the party?"

And my mom had had aspirations to be a writer since she was in college. And she had ignored that dream for the greater work, which is the revolution.

And so, once you leave the party, well, then, you've got to face your life. And you've got to face the fact that you've been absent from your life for the last twenty years, which is a great thing to do. It's a great thing to be able to do finally, to, you know, look at your life squarely, but it's also not going to be the easiest thing. It's going to bring up its own complications.

I mean, one of the differences with my mom and the other members of the party was that she was still a secretary at Carnegie Mellon University, which is not really the right kind of job to have when you're in the party. I mean, the idea is that you're working in an automobile plant or a garment shop, um, and you're talking to the workers. So, she was working in academia.

And specifically that she was in the fine arts department, so she was around musicians and actors and painters, and how could she not always be seeing these young people and think, "Oh, well, that was me when I was at the University of Minnesota twenty, thirty years ago when I had my dream of being an artist."

It finally, like, broke through to her that it's not too late to leave and really try to do something now.

My father is still a leading member of the party. He doesn't have it in him to do that. To have the strength, really, to leave.

Now he's been in it for, you know, forty, almost fifty years, I suppose. It's too late, I think, for him to do that.

It's a big question about what do I think about the Socialist Workers Party now because I still dream about a socialist revolution coming. I mean, my family has invested so much time, it's difficult to sort of just discount that. I mean, it's, it's a very irrational dream, but it's still there. I still feel that socialism would still probably be the best way to live.

Valedictory:
To read more by and about Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, visit sayrafiezadeh.com. That's S-A-Y-R-A-F-I-E-Z-A-D-E-H.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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