

The Food of My Childhood

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THE NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE I GREW up in northern Manhattan, on the border of Washington Heights and Inwood, had a high concentration of



— Whole Grain Bread —

immigrants. Many, including my parents, were refugees from Nazi Germany or other parts of Europe, people who had barely managed to escape. Many of the shops along Nagle Avenue and Dyckman Streets were owned by immigrants or specifically catered to them. The stores could have just as easily been in Berlin or Hamburg.

We always bought bread from the Alpine Bakery across the street from my elementary school, PS 152. One of the women behind the counter had a visible tattooed number on the inside of her forearm. My father preferred what was called Korn bread, but that is not what American's think of as corn bread. There was no corn in it. Korn in German means grain. It was a dense whole grain bread, probably

with some rye in it as well as other grains. I've never had anything quite like it since, but to this day I prefer dense bread. No Wonder Bread for me.

We never got the bread sliced, although the bakery had one of those bread slicing machines. The salesclerk would put the loaf into the machine, which acted like two jaws with knives instead of teeth, and when it was finished, there was a perfectly sliced loaf of bread. But, as I said, we never got the Korn bread sliced. My father was the designated bread slicer, and he had a very distinct technique. He did not cut it on a cutting board but hugged the bread into his chest and used a very sharp knife, a dedicated bread knife, to make the cut, pulling the knife towards him. It looked dangerous, but he never cut himself. The loaves were round, so first he would cut the end—I loved the ends and would often get them as a treat—and successive cuts were made at right angles to each other, keeping the slices from being too long.

On Wednesdays, my mother and I would drive out to her half-sister's house for dinner, stopping at the Alpine bakery to pick up a loaf of their rye bread with caraway seeds, which my Aunt Barbara loved. That we did get sliced. Usually, by the time we reached Barbara's house in Bayside, Queens, my mother and I had eaten half the loaf. Barbara knew she was never getting a full loaf.

Across the street from my elementary school there was a pizza shop and Freddie's Luncheonette. I almost never got to "eat out," but brought lunch with me to school every day. My friend Anita would often go to Freddie's for lunch. I remember she always got a tuna fish salad sandwich. I also remember the candy display at Freddie's:

Red Hots, Milk Duds (Anita's favorite), Pixy Stix (straws filled with flavored sugar), and Candy Dots (colored sugar dots on paper). I would get pretzel rods, which were 1¢ each, and you just helped yourself to them, lifting



— Pizza Slice —

the glass lid off the jar. Every once in a while, I was allowed to get pizza for lunch. That was a real treat. I remember the slices were fifteen cents, but sometimes the guy behind the counter would give me a smaller slice for ten cents if he accidentally cut them unevenly; I thought he sometimes did it on purpose. It was also a special treat to get a coke. Soda was something you would never find in our refrigerator at home. My parents definitely turned their nose up at "American foods." I somehow never developed a taste for watermelon or pumpkin—too American. Most of my friends also had European parents, so I didn't feel that out of place, although I was jealous of those who were allowed to drink soda.

Our neighborhood had many specialty food shops. My mother purchased imported

cheeses from a woman named Suzy who had chubby pink cheeks and knew my mother by name. When she got a new cheese that she was especially excited about, she gave my mother little tasting samples. The range



— Limburger Cheese with Onion,
Tomato, and Cucumber —

of exotic cheeses in our refrigerator would be impressive even by today's standards, including Greek Kasserri, French d'Affinois, and my father's favorite, Limburger, which I remember thinking smelled disgusting, although my father would always try to get me to eat it. Suzy also sold various types of pickled herring, which were displayed in glass vats in a refrigerated case. My mother was partial to the creamed herring. We often had herring for breakfast, which my friends from non-immigrant families thought quite odd. I also loved sardines, which my father



— Pickled Herring —

taught me to eat with vinegar. I became a vegetarian after college. People often ask if I miss steak (we rarely had steak when I was a kid) or other meat, but the truth is, that in all the decades since, the only thing I ever even considered breaking my vegetarian regimen for was sardines.

Just a few stores down the street from Suzy's cheese shop was a deli, where pickles floated in big barrels filled with brine, and you could get one for a nickel. Although there was a small supermarket, everyone used the specialized stores for most of their shopping. Meat was freshest when purchased at the butcher shop. The fish store advertised their offerings on ice in the window. Smoked eel was a favorite in our family. We often had fish on Fridays. My mother said it was the freshest then because there was a high demand with all the neighborhood Catholics who abstained from meat on Fridays. Fruits and vegetables were beautifully displayed in stalls that overflowed from the shops onto the sidewalks.

There was one store that sold only imported goods, mostly European, to appeal to the tastes of the neighborhood clientele. That was where my mother would get her stash of German marzipan. American marzipan would not do! For years, my mother returned to that store to buy German-made Nivea cream since what was sold in other stores in the US was made in Mexico for the American market. That had a different formula, which my mother could immediately distinguish from the cream originating in Germany. My mother had beautiful skin into her nineties.

For traditional German sausages, my parents would go to Karl Ehmer and Schaller & Weber, two stores on the upper east side



— Pickles —

of Manhattan. Yorkville, an area from about 80th to 96th Streets, had been a German enclave since the mid-1800s. My father was on a regular diet of Bratwurst (often made from veal or pork), Blutwurst (blood sausage), Zungenwurst (tongue and blood sausage), Knockwurst (garlic flavored), and Teawurst (a smoked sausage spread). Although my father came from an orthodox Jewish family, even back in Germany he would sneak out of the house for non-kosher



— Bratwurst and Rye Bread —

delicacies such as pig's knuckles. Of course, all those sausages had lots of nitrates and nitrites. It is no wonder that my father got colon cancer. Fortunately, he managed to survive that.

On Sunday afternoons, families gathered for Kaffe und Kuchen at Nash Bakery on

Dyckman Street, which served full meals as well as sweets. The mural on the wall created an ambiance of a European café. I loved the custard filled Napoleons. Sunday was also the day for strolls in Fort Tryon Park, especially around the Heather Garden overlooking the Hudson River and the cliffs of the New Jersey Palisades on the other side. It was a horticultural paradise in the midst of the city. The benches along the main promenade were occupied by families and friends discussing the news of the day while young children ran along the walkways and through the floral displays. The air was filled with the sound of German, and a variety of fragrances emanated from the neatly maintained flowerbeds. I remember my mother swooning when the linden trees were blooming. That was a sense memory of her childhood home.

I have a lot of sense memories of food. Certain foods take me back to another time, and holidays bring on thoughts of the foods we used to eat for particular celebrations. Beating eggs with a fork will always conjure up my grandmother, who taught me how to do that. In recent years, I have taken to baking Streusel Kuchen (crumb cake), following my grandmother's recipe for the crumbs. Actually, my grandmother never followed a recipe. I only have these instructions because once, as she was baking, I stood next to her and carefully measured everything as she put it into the bowl.

Our Thanksgiving feast always included my grandmother's Rotkraut (sweet and sour red cabbage) and Klösse (potato dumplings). Of course, no meal was complete without my grandmother announcing that the Klösse were a total failure, that they sank instead of floated, but they were always delicious.



— Apple Crumb Cake —

Rosh Hashana and Passover inspire memories of my mother’s almond sauce served over cold carp. On Rosh Hashana, I especially loved dunking the challah in the sauce. It wasn’t quite as good with matzah. My mother would go to the fish store early to try to get a female carp as I particularly loved the roe—better than any caviar! I don’t know of anyone else who grew up with this delicious way of dressing up the fish. I have tried recreating it, but my mother used the gelatinous water the fish was cooked in as the base for the sauce and I haven’t found quite the right substitute.

We celebrated Christmas with my Uncle Vinny’s family. My aunt had married into an Italian family, for whom holidays were mega-feasts. A multi-course meal started on Christmas Eve with all kinds of fish and spaghetti with clam sauce. That was integrated with the goose that my grandmother would make, German style, also an occasion for her Klösse, which the Italian side of the family came to love and expect. After the fish courses, we would take a break from eating and play poker. Then, at midnight, it was time to bring out the red meat—stuffed peppers, plus meatballs and sausage over pasta with tomato sauce. We all ate so much we would end up on the floor unable to move.

Although I grew up in the city, we embarked on regular weekend outings to the countryside, often to Bear Mountain State Park, just north of the city, and summer excursions to Jones Beach. On those trips, we always feasted on my mother’s picnics. We had a heavy, cylindrical metal cooler, and my mother figured out that she could fill old coffee cans with water and freeze them to keep our food spectacularly cold. One special picnic item was my mother’s cold breaded Wiener Schnitzel, which my childhood friend Susan remembers to this day, some fifty plus years later. I definitely learned the art of the picnic from my mother. These days, I pride myself on the nicely chilled gourmet meals I can pull out of a light insulated bag. Friends are always impressed.

My father was also very focused on food. On coming home after a vacation, my father would reply to the question of whether he’d had a good time with either, “Yes,



— Liverwurst —

the food was excellent.” or “No, the food wasn’t very good.” He liked my mother’s home-cooked meals, although there was a period of time before I was born when my mother worked as a secretary in the lower

part of Manhattan, and she got home after my father; he would proudly recount how he cooked dinner during those years. My mother would always whisper under her breath about how he left the kitchen a mess, and she would have to clean up after him, which was much more work than if she had done the cooking.

We rarely went out to eat. One exception was a Chinese restaurant on 125th Street in Harlem—Tien Sien. At that time, there weren't too many Chinese restaurants outside of Chinatown, so this was a real novelty. That particular restaurant was recommended to my father by a Chinese friend (my parents spent the war years in Shanghai, before being able to come to the US, but that is another story). My father had a scrap of paper that he always kept in his wallet. His friend had written out suggested dishes in Chinese, and whenever we went to the restaurant, my father just handed the waiter that little piece of paper. We never deviated from that menu. It included a whole sea bass, head and all served on a large platter. My father delighted in eating the head. We also got spareribs, dumplings, hot sour soup, and a few other things I don't remember. In the later years of my father's life, we would take him to Chinatown, to another restaurant we found that served sea bass prepared the same way. He loved it.

My parents owned their own business—a lampshade factory—and my mother packed a homemade lunch for them every day. My mother was on a strict regimen of liverwurst sandwiches, which she dined on almost every day for years. When my mother was in her nineties and in rehab after spinal surgery, we were able to secure some excellent liverwurst. That, combined

with avocado to supplement the nursing home food, helped bring her back from the brink and build up her strength. If we had relied on the nursing home meals without the added liverwurst, I'm not sure she would have survived.



— Popover —

My food recollections are a strong connection to the past, and I cherish those sensual memories. I now make red cabbage on special holidays, and on a few occasions, I've been successful at recreating my grandmother's Klösse (another recipe I had to generate while watching her). When I eat marzipan—the same German brand my mother insisted upon—almond horns, or hazelnut gelato, it feels like I am sharing the gustatory pleasure in my mouth with hers. Trips to the Jordan Pond House in Acadia National Park will never be complete without a popover in my mother's honor. ❖