

Eat, Lose, Imagine

Janet Beizer

ABSTRACT: The first half of my paper takes the form of a diptych that juxtaposes a personal alimentary story of the 1950s and 60s lived within my secularized, Jewish-tinged American family of origin, and a collectively experienced story about food recounted originally through recipes surreptitiously gathered in Eastern European concentration camps during the Holocaust, and retold through film. My motivation for considering together a series of private anecdotes and a much weightier and darker communal documentation was to think, through these very different narratives and on two very disparate scales, about the relationships among food, absence, and imagination that bear on both. In the process of writing, I came to see that the two initial panels of the paper were imbricated in ways I had not foreseen. The second half of the paper, divided into two sections and a coda, provides the space to reflect on this process.

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for Ross Chambers, in memory

Imagination, says the O.E.D., is either an action, that of ‘forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses,’ or a mental faculty ‘by which are formed images... of external objects not present to the senses’. In other words, fundamental both to the act of imagining and to the function of the imagination is the notion of absence. This leaning on lack or loss is at once so basic and so essential to the work of the imagination that I start my meditation on culinary imagining right there, even at the risk of underlining the obvious. But my implicit underriding question is what eating and food, whose materiality is patent and which belong to a very distinct province of imagined activity, have specifically to do with loss, lack, and non-presence.

Though I have, for the sake of clarity and concision, introduced my paper with a definition, and will later call upon the work of theory, the heart of my reflection is lodged in a recurrent childhood memory about the unexpected and inexplicable absence of a very particular food-giver, my grandmother, her imaginary reappearance, and the significance of the event in my early consciousness. This memory and its associative threads furnish the matter of the first part of my paper, which is a short memoir about alimentary pleasure, loss, fantasy, excess, and oppression: in short, a meditation on the peculiarities of eating in my family of origin.

The second part of the paper turns to French filmmaker and journalist Anne Georget's documentary films, *Mina's Recipe Book* (2007) and *Imaginary Feasts* (2015), both inspired by the re-emergence of collected recipes that had been rehearsed in whispers by starved prisoners (at Terezín, or Theresienstadt, for the first film, and in diverse locations, for the second) and then transcribed at great risk on cloth or paper scraps.¹ I bring into the conversation also the posthumous publication of the eponymous Mina's cookbook, introduced by Cara De Silva, as *In Memory's Kitchen*. These extreme conjurations of food trace a nexus of nourishment, absence, and imagination in contexts sharply divergent from my own childhood memories. They expose a culinary imagination generated by scenarios of almost unimaginable loss: deprivation of food, family, heritage, dignity, liberty, and life.

In the subsequent sections, I grapple with what it means to think about stories of such different scope, scale, and genre together, and I consider the unexpected revelations of the process of writing the juxtaposition as well as the ethical stakes and intentions of the project. In this second half of the paper, I suggest intersections and rapprochements of the two initial diptych panels, without fully articulating them, in order to pose questions that cannot have clear and tidy answers.

Twisting the Grandmother Trope

One Christmas morning I woke early as a child of four or five, brimming with the expectancy of revelation. No religious expectation was involved; we were Jewish, and recently would have lit the menorah candles, but like many assimilated Jews in 1950s America, we also celebrated Santa Claus in our idiosyncratic way, with tangerines and walnuts left for him on the eve. In return, on the morn we harvested gifts overflowing our literally interpreted Christmas stockings. From the foil-wrapped nuts and bright citrus globes glinting through the toes of my mother's rent nylons which had been pinned before bedtime to the couch upholstery--one leg per child--up through the bulging calves and widening thighs, an enticing array of eclectic hues and shapes spilled out onto the living room carpet. My excitement looks rather materialistic, in retrospect, though it was backlit by the homeliness of family ritual and the anticipation of joining cousins and grandparents for dinner. So, it is not entirely odd that in the first moments of awakening on that particular Christmas morning, I heard the bidding tones of my grandmother's voice calling out, wraithlike, drawing me into the day: 'Jaaaaa-net,' she said, and then again, 'Jaaaaa-net'... The summoning was quiet but insistent. I slid out of bed to find her. My infant sister and parents were still asleep; I quickly made the tour of our small apartment but found no one afoot. I looked down the stairwell, under the dining room table, beneath the chairs and couch; no one. But her voice lingered with its come-hither command in the elongated syllables of my whispered name: 'Jaaaaa-net'...

I loved my grandmother. She didn't live with us, but she and my similarly adored grandfather joined us Friday evenings for dinner, riding from the far shores of Manhattan out to Queens and then back again a few hours later. My grandfather arrived in the evening, after work, his oversized coat pockets distended with sour pickles filched from the constantly replenished bowl in the diner where he ate lunch. They were duly plated and found their way to the table to join the feast my mother and grandmother would have spent the day preparing. It is possible that Shabbat was the distant avatar of these Friday night dinners, but not a candle or prayer remained as token of such rituals, only the copious table, replete with challah, but also milk for me, whether the meat was chicken, beef, or pork. My grandmother came early in the day; from our double-parked car, my mother and I trained our eyes to find who would first see her emerge from the mouth of the subway at the 179th Street Station in Jamaica for a day punctuated by forays to various supermarkets and finally, Adrian's, the special occasion bakery. There we got golden-crust ed buttery challah and an extravagant dessert for dinner: chocolate babka or banana cream pie or cheesecake with chocolatey ripples running through, and thick chocolate squiggles threading through dense buttery crumbs on top. These upper layers could be lifted off and enjoyed, sometimes well before dinner, if I was quiet and careful enough. The meal would be three courses: first an appetizer of cantaloupe crescents or a grapefruit half, then a roast chicken or beef or pot roast, occasionally leg of lamb or pork loin, roasted till crackly with garlic, bedded down in onions, potatoes, carrots, and gravy. And a Bird's Eye brand green vegetable on the side, because it was the '50s. Accompanied by my grandfather's pocket pickles, as we called them, and followed by the bakery cake, however diminished.

In telling this story, I realize that if I am to recall with any measure of fidelity how my past was constructed, I cannot *not* fall back on what Helen Rosner has called 'the grandmother trope' of food narratives: the assumption that 'our elders are the keepers of domestic wisdom'-- and most crucially, the guardians of the recipes that preserve home cooking and tradition.² But the inexorable deviation of this trope from its standard cocooning of home, hearth, forebears, and food, might already begin to be clear in the quirky details of its spinning out, even without any elaboration of its later evolution into a trail of roast chickens--sent by U.S. Postal mail--to grandchildren dispersed across the country, relegated to bunking in college dorm rooms and consigned to subsist, on other nights, on cafeteria fare.

But to close the parenthesis that risks precipitously circumnavigating childhood: we are still, in fact, many years before the college chicken years, on a Christmas morning in Queens when a small child hears her grandmother's whisper in her ear. Christmas morning was not part of the grandparent ritual, though, and even after the entire household--mother, father, baby sister--had been wakened, and the underside of every bed checked, no grandmother was in attendance. Despite parental assurances that she could not be found because she was

simply not there, I insisted. I knew her voice, and I'd heard my name called. I remember my mother dialing her phone number so I could speak to her in Manhattan and have her whereabouts directly confirmed: yes, she was home in her apartment and even if she had called out to me, because of course she was thinking about me, she always was, I could not have heard her voice so far away.

This memory today stays with me as a watershed of sorts; it is probably my earliest remembrance and certainly the most powerful. The sharpness of the combined sense of loss and awe has not dulled, the wonder tempering the absence by a glimmer of something not quite understood but vast in its openness, almost magical in its portent. For the adult looking back, the moment has come to suggest itself--but this only after many, many years of playback and pondering--as the dawning consciousness of imagination: the inchoate almost-awareness that something can exist in the mind or the heart that is as clear as a sound that falls right into an open ear, and yet not be physically at hand.

That the advent of imagination--or at least my coming to awareness of it--was coupled for me not only with wanting or lack but more precisely with the absence of the figure most identified with culinary pleasures in my life seems indicative of a potent connection among the workings of eating, suffering loss, and imagining.³ And yet, and at the same time, this triad flickering at the brink of mourning was connected too with an enthralling sense of discovery and even power, as if I now fathomed that I had within me an arcane faculty that could potentially summon what was lost or too far to reach. The graven acoustic image that has held me in its thrall for as long as I remember and continues to haunt me is, I suppose, a variation of the grandmother trope. Yet it seems important to note that the scene that brands my memory is not one where my pot-stirring grandmother is reassuringly ensconced in her own aromatic kitchen, nor in ours, though in fact she often *was* to be found in these places. Instead, I am marked by the instance of her unfathomable physical absence belied by the sound of her voice, disembodied, resonant only within me. I hear it still.

However worn the grandmother trope may be in the collective unconscious, it appears to be more stubbornly unconventional in its actual unwinding: in my experience and, I suspect, more generally, it binds eating, losing, and imagining in a weave that can be as formally irregular as it is mythically familiar. The slipping of my mother's mother from my childhood clasp and the decentering of her voice, the work of a few passing moments that reassigned her to a phantom presence, inaugurates a file of culinary eccentricities that further destabilize everyday kitchen narratives. At what point in family history did eccentric food practices veer into oppressive feedings? Where do I locate the warm light shading into a darkening chill? When does memory effect a transition from the first to the second? Or were they always already one and the same? I cannot forget the urging to eat everything on my plate, and to replenish if I already had, and the reminder, if I protested that I was no longer hungry, to think about all the starving children in India. I remember a

young cousin of seven or eight who cried through the better part of a Thanksgiving dinner when the copious turkey, carved into neatly separated joints and slices, was placed on the crowded table, coincidentally, no doubt, right before him. 'Grandma,' he sobbed, 'I can't eat that much!' A funny story savoured by all the adults and older cousins. In retrospect it ushers in a pattern of excess and glut: my grandmother's impressively large purse packed full of plastic bags ready for stashing away the surplus food she helped herself to from restaurant buffets; my grandfather's liberal and unabashed grazing on olives and tomatoes from self-serve barrels at the supermarket; the systematic family use of M&M candies as potty training rewards for successive generations of toddlers, as if the bodily parting with food waste needed somehow to be compensated and sweetened in a never-ending cycle.

As they grew older, my grandparents' feeding behaviours intensified. Every communication with grandchildren at college began and ended with the question: 'Are you eating?' – and the postal roast chicken deliveries peppered these queries with emphatic force. What had once been an offering of plenty evolved into an overwhelming surfeit whose effects were only heightened by age and my grandfather's death. In every telephone conversation with my grandmother, a veritable verbal bombardment of daily menus served at the Senior Centre, a litany of reported meals and their evaluations: 'ham sandwiches with swiss on rye, but the bread was stale,' 'lasagne, not bad but not hot,' 'rice pudding, good but the portions were so small,' 'roast turkey with gravy and mashed potatoes; they gave us so much, I brought half of it home.' On every passing visit to her apartment, an insistence that whatever was in the fridge be placed on the table and consumed. Plied with the leftovers of the past week's meals, some from my grandmother's kitchen but the larger part increasingly retrieved from her lunches at the Senior Centre or various neighbourhood restaurants, overcome by an existential and often physiological nausea, I could only resist the escalating exhortations to take, and take in, and take some more, and more again.

Cooking with the Mouth

Imaginary Feasts opens with the off-camera sound of dogs barking sharply in short ominous bursts. Then we hear hushed murmurs against the harsh canine blasts, whispers of initially inaudible speech, women's voices at first, intoning words that we can begin to make out only when they are paired on screen with images of handwriting on scraps of paper and tatters of cloth.⁴ Scattered words gradually become audible and then recognizable as a litany of recipe titles: 'profiteroles au chocolat...riz à l'impératrice...flan au fromage...sauce au vin blanc...charlotte au rhum...coq au vin...croquettes de pommes de terre...blanquette de veau...flan breton...fruits confits...marrons glacés'.... These incorporeal voices breathe lists in our ears without origin or context; they make ghosts of food and usher in cooking as a dematerialized concept. Against this background, we are introduced to the clandestine culinary conversations that punctuated women's concentration camp existence and

sometimes led to the cobbling together and smuggling away of written recipes, scribbled on found or scrounged surfaces and bound pell-mell. Holocaust cookbooks bear witness to human captives barely subsisting on rations of bread, and water thinly flavoured with coffee grounds or vegetable peels; they fed their minds and nourished their communality with scraps of food memories recomposed into lavish feasts. Here is a terrible illustration of the generation of imagination through the combustion of food and loss.

In *Imaginary Feasts* as in Georget's earlier film, *Mina's Recipe Book*, the shocking contrast of the prisoners' stark alimentary reality with their elaborately detailed food fantasies is foregrounded, along with the reactions such disparities elicit from participating and onlooking captives and (in *Imaginary Feasts*), from latter-day theorists as well, ranging from anthropologists to psychologists, Holocaust scholars, food studies specialists, and chefs.⁵ Many of the interviewees, survivors and theorists alike, seek to explain the detailed reconstructions of recipes as a distraction from or compensation for the absolute desert of nourishment. Christiane Hinguoët remembers 'a different kind of hunger--not what you have when you wake in the morning but the hunger you have after two years of not eating, when you see yourself wasting away, so thin that your bones are poking out, when you have no strength...,' and she explains the recipe recitations as a moment of respite, 'our fantasy cooking behind barbed wire'.⁶ For her as for many of the survivors, the words of the recipes are bred from 'empty stomachs and desperate starvation,' as Edith Combust puts it.⁷ Another deportee, André Bessière, sums up the phenomenon as a 'gorging on dreams' in which words take the place of sustenance: 'They stuffed themselves with word feasts because they were dying of hunger,' he says, adding that he himself refrained from thinking about food because it was too painful. For others, the transformation of rations sourced in the diluted garbage of SS officers' meals into the verbal facsimile of familiar comfort foods could only be alchemical or magical, or, in the minds of those who were offended by what they experienced as absurdity and escapist mania, simply delusional and even obscene.⁸

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Ascriptions of obscenity crop up periodically in discussions of imaginary feasting. I suspect that such charges stem not simply from the stark nature of the oppositions that are put into play by the elaborate culinary rehearsals of those interned in extermination camps, but also, especially, from the fact that they echo the fundamental polarity of death and life. Obscenity, from the French 'obscène,' which some etymologies derive in turn from the Greek *ob skene*, 'offstage,' originally alluded to acts and events that could not or should not be shown directly on stage, prime among which was death. Paradoxically, the activity dubbed 'cooking with the mouth' by those who performed it or observed it has often been explained as a *defiance* of death, an act of life in the face of death.⁹ Resistance inevitably also acknowledges what it refuses, and so perhaps the perceptions of obscenity have to do with the very blatant staging of the contradiction of life and death, a *life-in-death* asserted and sustained to the end. Holocaust Museum Director Yehudit Inbar, Director

of the Holocaust Museum at Yad Vashem, tells of another phenomenon deemed obscene: children's games. When organizing an exhibition on children's toys in the Holocaust she initially met with shocked refusal. Yet children played on their way to the gas chambers, she confirms, much like women recited recipes, telling them, like stories, to each other.¹⁰

In both cases there is a clinging to life from the edge of death; a holding on that is almost a flaunting. For writer and literary scholar Jérôme Thélot, 'meals are a synonym of life'.¹¹ The evocation of aromatic cakes baking on hearths counters the smoke rising from crematorium chimneys; the remembrance of the intricacies of a recipe (the combining of distinct, pungent spices, the successive steps, the order) restores detail to a landscape of indeterminacy and chaos. As Holocaust historian and Rabbi Michael Berenbaum explains, 'We all presume the world makes some sense. That's why when the world does not make sense, it's frightening to us, it's chaos... Primo Levi said: "Here there is no why." It's absurd. And absurdity... doesn't allow you a sense of orientation'.¹²

Food scenarios in the death camps did not escape the generalized reign of absurdity. Bianca Steiner Brown recalls that at Terezín, shelves would be used one day for loaves of bread and the next, for corpses; Berenbaum reports that children rewarded with sweets one day would be killed the day after.¹³ Slavic Studies professor Luba Jurgenson proposes that imagining recipes defied such a loss of definition and meaning: 'Cooking... involves categorization: there's meat, there's fish, there's dessert. Food organizes our life and our time: morning food differs from evening food'.¹⁴ We might say, too, that recipes impose order and system through their narrative form: there is a beginning, a progression, and an end, each instruction unfolding in relation to the others. Recipes have an internal microstructure, and they imply a macrostructure by emerging from a past and opening onto a future.¹⁵

What we know about 'Holocaust recipes' today has a double dimension. There is the oral practice, in which capacity the recipes were performative, parsing time, creating social communicative space and pockets of meaning within madness. But the fact that the sessions of 'cooking with the mouth' were also transcribed, at great risk to the scribes and to anyone involved with spiriting out the manuscripts, adds another layer of significance to the phenomenon. The written form of recipe-telling in the death camps, the recording, compiling, and rough binding of what would otherwise have remained fragmentary food stories told in passing, indicates that they were meant to reach external eyes and ears, to communicate belatedly with a broader audience, and to be preserved over time. Such collections make recipes into books, whether they exist in manuscript or print form, and they should be read as such.¹⁶

Generically speaking, the cookbook is rarely accorded the status of literature or art, for much the same reason, I suggest, that hunger has been neglected as a philosophical subject; it has been devalued 'as empirical and as a lowly sign of human animality'. With

these words Jérôme Thélot explains the scholarly void that inspired his essay on hunger, *Au Commencement était la faim: Traité de l'intraversable* (*In the Beginning there was Hunger: Treatise on the Intractable*). Striving to join literature (and language) to its alimentary sources, he reminds us that many languages use the same word for speech and for the organ that participates in manipulating food as well as words, partaking of the pleasure of both.¹⁷ The tongue--or more broadly the mouth--is the junction of speaking and chewing, and the site of an overdetermined need. Hunger leads to language, says Thélot, our language comes from our hunger; from infancy forward, it defines both our subjectivity and our intersubjectivity, our need to receive from and to give to the Other.¹⁸ Leaning on Thélot's reinsertion of hunger into the philosophical and the poetic canon, I want to consider cookbooks--and Holocaust recipe collections prime among them--as texts: literary objects, art, writing, even Scripture.¹⁹ This makes a difference in how we read them; it suggests that we pay attention to their wording, their details, and also to what is omitted, as we do with the language of poetry, prose, and dreams. Chef Olivier Roellinger marvels, in Georget's film, at the degree of precision of the ingredient list in many of the recipes, the careful distinction, for example, between mace and nutmeg, two similar spices (neither of which, of course, would have been materially accessible to the deportees). And there are other aesthetic elements to be noted beyond the level of detail--most readily in Mina Pächter's published cookbook. The recipe writer often remarks on the appearance of the finished product, well beyond practical considerations such as signs of doneness. Plum Strudel, for example, should be 'high *and beautiful*,' while Chicken Galantine is 'plentiful *and pretty*'. There is also a nod toward the pleasures of culinary creation (and perhaps a touch of ironic humour as well) in the instruction for garnishing 'Cold Stuffed Eggs Pächter' to 'let fantasy run free,' or in the claim, for a basic dough that is tempered in water, called 'Waterbed Dough,' that 'one can do anything with it'.²⁰

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As in most texts, there are slips of the tongue recorded by the pen in these recipes, blunders or inaccuracies that might have gone unnoticed in the recitation but are conserved in writing. If for Freud a lapsus linguae betrays a psychic truth, here there are truths of mind and body; the tongue slips, so to speak, when it is unoccupied, stupefied, unable to perform its normal work of tasting and facilitating the mechanics of ingestion; it slips on an excess of saliva in the absence of food, it trips in the fog of a malnourished head. There are oversights or errors in recipes that give a glimpse of the state of the mind and the conditions of the body and its environment, even reaching back to the ghetto scarcities of pre-Holocaust cooking models. Hirsch makes the case dramatically: 'We cannot cook from these recipes (most leave out ingredients or reflect wartime rationing by calling for substitutions or making eggs optional)' while De Silva details the kind of mistakes consistently made, and survivor André Bessière calls to our attention the impossibly disproportionate amounts of chocolate or sugar, for example, prescribed in certain recipes.²¹

But the most powerful textual element of the recipe books created during the Shoah may well be that of transmission, of connecting the present to the past and to the future. Whatever we can learn from the pages of cookbooks from the Holocaust about the role recipes played in the everyday lives of prisoners confronting probable death, whatever we can intuit from a turn of phrase, an affect-tinged instruction or comment, a detail, or a gap, is amplified by the implications of the written format in the context of its historical reality. It is true, as *Imaginary Feasts* relates, that similar culinary artifacts have surfaced from the Russian Gulag and from Japanese prisoner of war camps: captives in other extreme situations have had similar instincts to rehearse and record culinary memories in moments of extreme crisis. What distinguishes the Holocaust cookbooks, as Michael Berenbaum points out in this film, is the propelling sense of an annihilation extending beyond the individual: ‘These people understood they were being destroyed. There would be nothing left.’²² The recipe compilations were more than an escape, or a therapy, or a catharsis; they were the diffusion of a culinary tradition with all that it might communicate of a disappearing culture, a cancelled way of life. As art historian Marni Reva Kessler reminds us, ‘Food has the capacity to tie us...to our memories, our families, our traditions... to reveal how the present is always steeped in an enduring past.’²³ These recipes rememorated a perhaps vanished past and recorded it for the future.

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When we think about what a legacy is conventionally considered to be (children, money, art--either made or collected--, the fruits of whatever bit of earth one has planted and tended), this one is rather extraordinary. It must have been clear to most concentration camp detainees that their offspring could neither receive their inheritance nor be it. Prodigious efforts were made to do whatever was possible to preserve the lives of the interned children: at Terezín, for example, the group compelled by the Nazis to administer the internal business of the camp, the Council of Jewish Elders, decided that children had to be fed more than others, since they represented the future.²⁴ Yet as Berenbaum explains, the young were usually siphoned off to die very quickly, for that very reason. Of the European Jews who were children in 1939, only 11 percent were alive at the end of the war.²⁵ Only rarely would the books of the Holocaust dead pass on to surviving children or grandchildren; the heirs were more likely to be anonymous and collective.²⁶

A Digest of Trivia and Other Essentials

Bellyaching: The activity attributed to my grandmother by my grandfather when she nagged at him to do something, or to not do something that annoyed her. ‘Stop bellyaching!’ was the refrain of their quarrels, which consisted largely of her complaints or grumblings and his rumbling protests of her complaints.

Borborygm: A rumbling or growling sound made in the stomach and intestines by moving fluid and gas, especially when one is hungry. Jérôme Thélot refers to the monosyllabic

repetitions – ‘Dinn! dinn! dinn! dinn!’ – of Arthur Rimbaud’s poem ‘Fêtes de la faim’ (‘Feasts of Hunger’) as ‘borborygms or mumblings... the first sounds of hunger speaking’ (‘[des] borborygmes ou bredouillements, ...[des] premiers bruits de la faim parlante’).²⁷

Breakfast/Cemeteries: In Mitzi Goldstein’s 1996 documentary film *Hatred*, the Australian Jewish filmmaker accompanies her German-born father, Bernard Goldstein, back to his East German hometown of Dessau from which he fled in 1939.²⁸ Combing through streets which have all changed name, searching for the house in which he lived fifty years earlier, disoriented, he lapses from English back into German and confuses two words, telling his daughter that they will later go ‘to the Jewish breakfast’ (*Frühstuck*) when he means to say ‘to the Jewish cemetery’ (*Friedhof*); realizing his slip of the tongue, he begins to laugh uncontrollably, attributing his mistake in turn to feeling frozen, drunk, in a fog. See *Frühstuck/Friedhof*.

Concentration Camp Survivor: The metaphor used in my family and others to describe the skinny profile of adolescent American girls flirting with anorexia. Used as a scare tactic, it usually did not have the intended result of bringing them back to a full fat diet.

Frühstuck/Friedhof: See *Breakfast/Cemeteries*.

Grandma Cookies: The name we gave to my grandmother’s recipe for a confection she often made with her young grandchildren, and later made herself, mailing them in brown paper wrapping to college dorms, alternating with roast chickens. The dough was made of flour, sugar, Crisco, an egg, baking powder, and vanilla, then divided into small balls depressed in the middle with a thumb in whose place a spoonful of jelly was dropped. Mina Pächter’s book has a similar recipe (albeit a healthier version, with oatmeal added) for such cookies, there called ‘Kisses’.²⁹

Robert Jay Lifton: An American psychiatrist and author whose work centres on the psycho-history of war, political violence and other extreme situations. I worked part time for him in Paris as a translator-assistant when I was a graduate student. We interviewed a number of French-speaking medical survivors of concentration camps, many of them pressed into service under Mengele, for his book *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. The work consisted largely of simultaneous translation of the witnesses’ testimony; as I repeated their words to him, changed into English but retaining the first person, there was an uncanny sense of momentarily taking on the experience with the pronoun. See *Mengele*.

M&Ms: Inspired by a candy given to British volunteers fighting in the Spanish Civil War, they were first produced in the United States in 1941 by Forrest Mars, scion of the Mars candy empire. After the U.S. entered the war, the small pill-shaped chocolates encased in hard, coloured shells were sold exclusively to the military for the duration. Distributed as snacks for soldiers, they were prized for their heat-resistant and easily transportable

characteristics. Later used in some households as aids to potty training, these tiny remnants of World War II were fed to at least a few post-war babies to reward their early losses.

Mengele: Josef Mengele, SS captain and chief physician at Auschwitz, called 'the Angel of Death' for his cool and implacable demeanour during 'selections' that decided which prisoners would be sent to the gas chambers and which retained for work. He was known too for his cruel and often lethal medical experiments on Jewish and Roma twins. Mengele was infamous for his ability to flip imperturbably from acts of apparent kindness to murder: one day he would give candy to children and the next he would send them to be gassed.³⁰ See *Robert Jay Lifton*.

Recette: The French word for 'recipe'; same derivation. See *Recipe*.

Recipe: Derived from the past participle, *recepta*, of the Latin verb *recipere*, 'to receive'. A culinary recipe, notes Thélot, is 'what is received. The person who gives us a recipe received it from someone else. And those who invent a new recipe must do so on the basis of a tradition that has no beginning'.³¹ See *Recette*.

Starving Children in ... [Place Name]: A common rhetorical device used by food-secure post-war American families in the 50s and 60s to encourage recalcitrant children to finish their meals. The full utterance runs something like: 'Think of all the starving children in [Place Name];' with the bracket filled in with the proper name of a non-first world country or continent (India, China, Africa) or a historical referent, such as 'the Holocaust,' or 'the concentration camps'. In American Jewish families, the latter terms are frequent, though in my own family, they were not used; India was the comparand of choice.

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Stella: The given name of a first cousin once removed, referred to infrequently now and only in lowered voices; the skeleton in the family closet (which here takes the form of a seventh-storey stairwell accessed by a rarely used and barricaded rear door). Stella was my grandmother's niece, the daughter of a much younger sister, close to the grandchildren in age, though since childhood inhabiting a closed and impenetrable world. In her late forties she began living in my grandmother's apartment with her. Stella disappeared after my grandmother's death. Some weeks later the building superintendent discovered her emaciated body along with her clothes and a note on the landing. She had starved herself to death.

Talking with the Belly

What was the place of the Shoah in my family of origin? The facile answer is that it lay somewhere outside, distant in space and time. Like film director Mitzi Goldman, an Australian of Eastern European heritage, I am tempted to say that for me growing up in 1950s and 60s New York, the Holocaust was 'ancient history, not my life'.³² I might even add that it had fairy-tale aspects for me; horrific stories of people shoved in ovens coalesced in my child's mind with Hansel and Gretel, and I had terrifying visions of ogres making

lampshades of human skin. But they were stories that did not touch my immediate family and their friends. I was born third and second generation American on my mother and father's respective sides. No relatives or friends, to my knowledge, had lived or died in concentration camps. I was educated about the Holocaust from an age I cannot pinpoint, beginning perhaps with the diary of Anne Frank, who was for me a legendary heroine, like Joan of Arc --one of a handful of exceptional women whose biographies my mother brought home to me.

But I wonder, now, as I think back through my family's food stories, if my Holocaust education took place also, less officially, and even in subtle, unintended ways, around the dinner table and its proxies. Were the de-ritualized Friday family dinners simply end-of-the-work-week celebrations ushering in the weekend, or were they also shadows of ceremonial religious dinners? Was the culinary bounty on the table and in the mail a way of staving off indirect experiences of hunger and malnutrition? How did the alimentary barrage respond to what my family must have known about starvation and other killing regimes in transit barracks and death camps? What did I absorb from my family about the repercussions of famishment during the Shoah, wordlessly, or from ill-chosen metaphors displaced to the effects of weight loss, or from names of sites of famine diverted from Eastern Europe to the farther shores of India and China? Or were the culinary idiosyncracies of home distantly tied to much older traditions that might also have had associations with the recipe recitations of the interned Jewish population of the Shoah?

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The author/son in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* takes in his parents' Holocaust trauma from his survivor father at the table, with his meals, in a familial space where the past can be transferred, 'internalized without fully being understood,' in Marianne Hirsch's words.³³ In her book about the work of 'postmemory' (which other writers have alternatively called 'absent memory,' 'vicarious witnessing,' 'received history,' 'haunting legacy') Hirsch explores 'the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before--to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grow up'. But their parents' experiences 'were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right'.³⁴ What is at stake is not a legacy of literal memory, but the transmission of affects and psychic effects that attach to such memories.

In borrowing from Hirsch's pathbreaking work on postmemory, I want to take great care not to make any claims for my own or my family's reception of Holocaust history that would imply an arrogation of memories we do not own or experiences that are not ours. As a daughter of survivors, Hirsch voices a caveat for herself and others, asking 'how can we best carry [the victims'] stories forward, without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them?'³⁵ So let me be clear. I am not the daughter of survivors, and I have no postmemories

of experiences my parents and grandparents never lived. But as I try to understand the heritage of my grandparents' life in food I keep returning to the possibility of the reverberations of trauma within our family, like a lateral psychic force pressing upon the table and transmitted across generations.

Ross Chambers introduces the concept of cultural hauntedness in his re-reading of the scandal created by the so-called 'Wilkomirski Affair': the revelation that Binjamin Wilkomirski's alleged Holocaust memoir of 1995 had in fact been written by a man named Bruno Dössekker who did not personally live the events he describes in the book (including internment in Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau).³⁶ *Bruchstücke* (translated in English as *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood*) takes its title from the notion of memory scraps, but also, Chambers argues, from an episode in the book in which the interned child is covertly led through the camp to see his dying mother, who gifts him a piece of stale bread.³⁷ In all likelihood Dössekker was suffering from personal delusions, yet his book and its reception bear witness, suggests Chambers, to the 'hauntedness of a culture of aftermath': one in which 'an individual can mistake the collective consciousness of a painful past for a personal memory.'³⁸

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After the discovery of the hoax, the book was quickly withdrawn from circulation in the U.S. as in Germany, and its publication suspended in the U.S. despite widespread early acclamation as an extraordinary childhood memoir, a masterpiece of Holocaust literature. Chambers proposes that the (fictive) child orphan Wilkomirski, the child who could not speak, stands in symbolically for all the non-survivors, for all the testimony that did not survive. He posits that the Wilkomirskis, or orphaned memories, haunting the collective consciousness 'need a Dössekker--a "host" --to be made vivid and to be heard and acknowledged as the ghosts of our culture who cannot be laid to rest.'³⁹ Through Dössekker's pathological self-identification with Wilkomirski (who apparently never existed as such) he takes on 'his' memories derived from collective memory and fosters them in writing. 'Foster writing,' for Chambers, both offers a surrogate home to what is homeless, and ushers the culturally homeless into culture, making recognizable, through the pain of reading, the memories that collective culture would rather forget, in a broken, fragmented form that lies somewhere between imagining and remembering.⁴⁰

Might there be such a thing as fostered postmemory? Tapping the broad lines of Chambers's brilliant and subtly limned analysis, I want to submit the possibility of an unintentional handing down of indirectly transferred traumatic experience; that is, a lateral acquisition, through identification, of the extreme suffering of others that would then be transmitted generationally. I think of this process as it might have played out in my family and perhaps in others, *mutatis mutandis*, as a foster feeding rather than a foster writing: a nurturing of ghosts who have lost their place and their sustenance, through the more quotidian scenes and modes of nourishment that are set in childhood around a family

table. Of these, only fragments of memory later remain, as small as M&Ms or as broken as *Bruchstücke*, the shards of memory or crusts of bread that Wilkomirski/Dössekker writes into being. These crumbs of remembrance retrieved or reimagined break the fast of oblivion, like the early morning morsel, *Frühstück*, that a slip of the tongue calls back from the grave, *Friedhof*, in the mouth of German refugee Bernard Goldstein, reminding us that although life and meals may be synonyms (as Thélot contends), death and meals cannot necessarily be kept apart.

Coda

As I was finishing the body of this paper, I joined a remote session in the N.Y.U. 'Fast and Famine' series in which food writer Reem Kassis was interviewed by Food Studies Professor and writer Krishnendu Ray about her new book, *The Arabesque Table: Contemporary Recipes from the Arab World*.⁴¹ Asked by Ray for commentary on the appropriateness of discussing culinary culture in a time of catastrophic socio-political crisis (alluding to the near-coinciding breakout of the book and the latest Gaza war) Kassis responded vehemently in the positive, using arguments that uncannily echoed the analyses of the various experts called to witness in Georget's *Imaginary Feasts* of the Holocaust. She recounted personal communications from friends in Gaza who, amidst the bombings and destruction overlapping with Ramadan, had little access to ingredients called for in the traditional recipes for cakes heralding the end of the holy month. Nevertheless, they adamantly maintained these cultural-familial traditions, altering the recipes when necessary, but forging ahead with culinary ritual 'to retain a sense of normalcy.' Kassis called this persistence 'an act of resistance' in terms that strikingly repeat, almost word for word, the testimony of Georget's commentators about concentration camp recipes. The commentary of Georget's numerous interviewees about the relevance of the culinary imagination to surviving and chronicling the catastrophe of Shoah concentration camps, and the replies of this Palestinian author about the pertinence of culinary culture to the Palestinian crisis, concurred in their emphasis on the importance of protecting food traditions for generations to come. A member of the audience brought to bear on Kassis's remarks a reference to the new Netflix series, *High on the Hog*, and its witnessing of foodways in African-American history as 'a space of resistance, dignity, creativity, community,' even--and perhaps especially--in the case of extended oppression and crisis.⁴² In closing, then, I want to juxtapose these Palestinian and African-American examples of gastro-opposition with my own meditation on Holocaust recipes-as-resistance. I will invoke here too Marianne Hirsch's proposition that memory may be harnessed, even generations later, '*and affiliatively readopted across lines of difference...in a bold act of connective politics*,' to urge us to continue to think these parallel struggles together.⁴³

Notes

1. *Les Recettes de Mina (Mina's Recipe Book)*, dir. Anne Georget, France (2007); *Festins imaginaires (Imaginary Feasts)*, dir. Anne Georget, France (2015).
2. Helen Rosner, "The Best Cookbooks of 2020" in *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/2020-in-review/the-best-cookbooks-of-2020>. Accessed December 23, 2020.
3. In one of the few philosophies of hunger I know, its author, Jérôme Thélot, suggests that "hunger gives rise to consciousness, hunger is the origin of consciousness, and its affect is the foundation of verbalisation" ("La conscience tient à la faim. *La faim est l'origine de la conscience, l'affect fonde la verbalisation, l'épreuve affective de soi est la condition transcendantale du rapport symbolique à soi*" [Thélot's emphasis; translations here and throughout are mine unless otherwise indicated]). Jérôme Thélot, *Au Commencement était la faim: Traité de l'intraitable (In the Beginning there was Hunger: Treatise on the Intractable)*, (Fougères, La Versanne: Encre marine, 2005), p. 59.
4. There are a few men's voices heard as well, shortly after the beginning, and as the film unfolds it is clear that the activity of reconstructing recipes was not confined to women, though it was much more common among them, for the obvious reason that women have traditionally tended to the hearth and maintained culinary tradition.
5. Georget's *Mina's Recipe Book (Les Recettes de Mina)* documents the retrieval of a single Holocaust cookbook by the family of its deceased author, Mina Stein Pächter, some thirty years after her death, and traces its trajectory from the impulses that prompted it to its eventual emergence in print; her *Imaginary Feasts (Festins imaginaires)* is a longer and broader documentation of a group of such cookbooks, and secondarily, similar compendiums of recipes created in Japanese POW camps and Russian Gulag prisons, interspersed with interviews with survivors and with scholars.
6. *Imaginary Feasts*, Christiane Hinguët; her effort to explain a hunger unlike any most of us have known echoes Primo Levi's contention that "We say 'hunger,' we say 'tiredness,' 'fear,' 'pain,' 'winter,' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger, and knowledge of the end drawing nearer." Primo Levi, quoted by Cara De Silva in *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* ed. Cara De Silva, trans. Bianca Steiner Brown, foreword by Michael Berenbaum (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc, 1996), p. xv.
7. English translations from Georget's films are based on the subtitles; in some cases I have altered the translations slightly to retain the literality or the flavor of the French, as needed.
8. *Imaginary Feasts*; Edith Combus speaks (in excerpted letters) of the women as "désespérément affamées" and having "[des] estomacs vides."
9. *Ibid.*, André Bessière. Bianca Steiner Brown, a survivor interviewed in *Mina's Recipe Book*, explains that when she was kept awake at night by the women talking, comparing, for example, how much sugar, how much chocolate went into a Sachertorte "I was furious. They lived in their own kind of a fantasy."
10. De Silva relates that Susan E. Cernyak-Spatz, a survivor of Terezín and Auschwitz, "describes people in both places as speaking of food so much that there was a camp expression for it. We called it 'cooking with the mouth,' she says. 'Everybody did it.'" De Silva, *In Memory's Kitchen*, xxviii-xxix.
11. *Imaginary Feasts*, Yehudit Inbar.
12. *Ibid.*, Jérôme Thélot.
13. *Ibid.*, Michael Berenbaum.
14. *Mina's Recipe Book*, Bianca Steiner Brown; *Imaginary Feasts*, Michael Berenbaum.
15. *Ibid.*, Luba Jurgenson.
16. An extreme example of a future orientation is pointed out by psychoanalyst Géraldine Cerf, who reads a recipe that advises canning extra portions of a seafood dish so it will be on hand to pop in the oven when someone drops in unexpectedly for a visit. *Imaginary Feasts*.
17. That most are not easily accessible does not change my argument, though it complicates our readings. Mina Pächter's book is the only published Holocaust cookbook I have been able to read, though I have seen facsimiles of the handbound manuscript cookbooks used in *Imaginary Feasts*, for which I am extremely grateful to Anne Georget and to her conversation in Paris in July 2015.

18. Thélot, *Au Commencement*, p. 86.
19. *Ibid.*, see especially pp. 25, 59, 63, 146.
20. In Georget's *Imaginary Feasts*, Yehudit Inbar compares the recipe recitations to prayers: "It was the women's prayer. They had no other." In her introduction to *Mina's Recipe Book in In Memory's Kitchen*, Cara De Silva calls the cookbook "forceful testimony to the power of food to sustain us, not just physically but spiritually," reminding us that gastronomic traditions, "the foods and foodways we associate with the rituals of childhood, marriage, and parenthood...are critical components of our identities" (p. xxvi). And chef Olivier Roellinger is so overcome with awe and emotion when unfurling a large piece of cloth inscribed with a jumbled mass of penned recipes that he compares it to a burial shroud. De Silva makes the case for considering Holocaust cookbooks as art: "half a century after the Holocaust, when we thought we were familiar with all the creative ways in which human beings expressed themselves during the long years of the horror, at least one small genre, the making of cookbooks, has gone largely unnoticed." *In Memory's Kitchen*, pp. xxxii-xxxiii.
21. De Silva, *Mina's Cookbook*, in *In Memory's Kitchen*, pp. 28, 51, 52, 32.
22. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 178. De Silva gives some additional details: "Whether because of illness or disorientation, an unsettling interruption, or the discovery that a contributor's name was on a transport list, a number of the recipes are muddled or incomplete. In some an ingredient is left out (the bean torte, for instance, usually requires an egg; the cream strudel has no dough); in others a process is omitted (dumplings are made and sauced without ever being cooked). Steps are inverted, and punctuation, too, is often nonexistent or perplexing." *In Memory's Kitchen*, p. xli. André Bessière's remarks are from *Imaginary Feasts*.
23. *Imaginary Feasts*, Michael Berenbaum.
24. Marni Reva Kessler, *Discomfort Food: The Culinary Imagination in Late Nineteenth-Century French Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. xvi.
25. De Silva, *In Memory's Kitchen*, p. xxxviii.
26. *Ibid.* I owe the statistic to Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 181.
27. In Mina Pächter's case, what allowed the book to be transmitted to her daughter Anny (albeit three decades later) was that Anny had fled Prague with her family, reaching Palestine in the last transport out, (and later New York), while Mina had declined to leave, believing that her advanced age would protect her. In cases of surviving family members who received recipe books of deceased relatives, they usually donated them to museums. The credits following *Imaginary Feasts* identify the various museums to which families have donated inherited cookbooks.
28. Thélot, *Au Commencement*, p. 60.
29. *Hatred*, dir. Mitzi Goldman, Australia (1996). I am grateful to Hirsch, *Generation*, for bringing this film to my attention.
30. *Mina's Cookbook*, p.61.
31. For this anecdote, see Berenbaum in *Imaginary Feasts*. On Mengele, see Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) or for a summary presentation, "Josef Mengele" in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (United States Holocaust Museum), <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/josef-mengele>. Consulted May 27, 2021.
32. *Imaginary Feasts*, Jérôme Thélot.
33. Mitzi Goldman, *Hatred*.
34. Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* vol. 1: *My Father Bleeds History* and vol. 2: *And Here my Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973; 1986); passim. Hirsch, *Generation*, p. 31. When Hirsch suggests that "*Maus* locates the scene of transmission in the bedtime connection between parent and child," she is referring to "the three-page first *Maus*, published in 1972, [that] begins as a bedtime story... [in] the child's bedroom...a seemingly safe scene in which the father can evoke for this son the most brutal stories of wartime violence and persecution, fear and terror" (p. 29). Here I am referring instead to the full-fledged graphic novels *Maus* I and II, which show the son collecting his father's narrative fragments for the most part at the table during meals (and occasionally when the father is on his exercise bike). But the point remains the same for childhood bedtime or for shared meals: in both

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- cases the space is familial, a place where “the language of family, the language of the body” (p. 34) can take place easily and the past can be transmitted across generations (p. 31).
35. Hirsch, *Generation*, p. 5.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 37. Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Bruchstücke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), Trans. Carol Brown Janeway as *Fragments: Memoirs of a Wartime Childhood* (New York: Schocken, 1997). Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: Aids Writing, Testimonial, & the Rhetoric of Haunting*, Chapter 5, “Orphaned Memories, Phantom Pain: Toward a Hauntology of Discourse: 189-243 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 194.
 38. Chambers, *Untimely Interventions*, p. 209.
 39. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-95.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 197; Chambers’s emphasis.
 41. *Ibid.*, pp. 200--203.
 42. Reem Kassis and Krishnendu Ray, “The Arabesque Table: Exploring the History of Arab Cuisine,” *Feast and Famine* Series, NYU Steinhardt Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, May 26, 2021. All citations are from this program; Reem Kassis, *The Arabesque Table: Contemporary Recipes from the Arab World* (London: Phaidon, 2021).
 43. “The Arabesque Table,” Chat comment by Fabio Paresecoli, N.Y.U. professor of Food Studies and writer.
 44. Hirsch, *Generation*, pp. 248-249; my emphasis.