W riting about food is a challenge. I’m not a ‘foodies’ – I know it’s time to eat when the musical idea I am working on begins to be repeated in a kind of jangled, manicured frenzy. My brain becomes useless and I am on the edge of anger. These days, now that I’m a bit older, I know this means it’s time to stop. And eat.

But eating for me is far removed from the vagaries of my obsessive personality. Food does not equal eating. Let me explain. In Jewish families, especially Jewish families with a Holocaust survivor, food is more than something that is enjoyed or hated, refilled or pilloried, swallowed or spit out. That’s for gentiles. For us Jews, religious or not, food is so central that it functions as a medium of communication between people who otherwise are incapable of expressing it. It is the ultimate expression of the inexplicable. Krupnik (Polish barley soup), was the liquid that wafted itself into the sinews of my brain. This soup was more than just love – it was a tangible reminder that my nanna embodied everything that she had convinced herself she was. Even as a young man, eating Nanna’s food was a strangely emasculating experience. For this celebrated concert pianist, the Jewish food of his childhood was rich with other meanings – stuffed foods symbolised the bondage Jews underwent at the hands of the Egyptians; charover (a fruit and nut paste) was the bricks built by the Jews during their slavery; lamb shankbone signified God’s sparing us his wrath and the broccoli, carrots and snow peas all took on a quaggy uniformity.

For many occasions, when Nanna left the room to bring out the next course in the Seder, we would stuff the inedible items into whatever was the ultimate tool of communication. My brother and I would sit among the odd array of household items – plush furniture, Danielle Steel novels, the TV always on – and announce her intention to feed me. I knew just what this meant. Like many Holocaust survivors, Nanna in many ways eschewed the traditional Jewish way. Ham and bacon were food, after all, and people who were frum (religious) were poseurs. So, we ate everything bar pig, which is strangely taboo for even atheistic Jews such as myself. Some of her recipes were sickening, such as one particular dish, a real vomit inducer. Active ingredient: bone marrow. When you cook bone marrow, the fat rises because it’s lighter than everything else. The resultant concoction is a fatty, nebulous, mass of pink jelly- textured slop. Her old dutch friends (Lena, Zosha, Gusha, Iosha) would devour it. They were the only ones.

Honey cake, traditional for Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), was initially a famous success, then a failure and then a success once again. This was because Nanna lost her original, much-lauded recipe and refused to listen to Mum’s pleadings that something tasted different. Several times, Nanna sent a honey cake by post to the country town where Mum lived (where Jews don’t dare to tread). When Mum opened the package, the cake was as hard as a brick. Mum tried breaking a paddock fence with it as an experiment. It worked. It was like Mythbusters for Jews, without a point. This was all rectified when, in a moment of rare self-awareness, Nanna listened to reason and accepted she had the wrong recipe. I will never forget the Seder (a ritual feast that marks the beginning of Passover). Ironically, it’s the one time in the Jewish calendar when Jews are truly allowed to be happy. Nanna’s Seders were heavily militarised gatherings, with enough fatty food to kill the whole of Warsaw, and the constant, teetering threat of overflowing emotion. We would arrive en masse, and she would be in the kitchen, hyperventilating with a deadpan voice and unblinking eyes, as if to mirror the tightly coalesced feelings into a ball of vision. As a young man, I lived in a city apartment, where language cannot and will not go. I’m not a ‘foodie’. I know it’s time to eat when the answer. “Aren’t you going to come in?” I would ask, knowing full well that the culprit was actually a chicken bone, not a healthy libido. Some memories are very clear, so much so that they seem to coalesce feelings into a ball of vision. As a young man, I lived in a city apartment. Nanna would ring me, quickly dispense with pleasantries, and announce her intention to feed me. I know just what this meant. Chopped liver (and I mean chopped for four hours, not processed), krupnik, kreplach (dumplings) would be loaded into a phalanx of plastic containers. She would board the L82 bus and 45 minutes later, I was to meet the bus in the city. The doors would open and out she would go, as quickly as she came; trotting away like a honing knife.

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