

On Homesickness and Sausages

by

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I grew up in a sleepy suburb of Pittsburgh, where the Stars and Stripes swung lazily from the porches, and lawns were cared for like fine carpets. On summer Saturdays, the dentist across the road used to sit in the shade of his old oak, listening to the ball game crackle from a transistor radio. In this hothouse of liberty and apple pie, the hum of the lawn mower was oddly comforting – a sort of suburban “all’s well”!

You would never have guessed that the Cold War was in full swing back then; or that a whole other continent glimmered from across the Atlantic Ocean. How could this possibly have mattered to the dentist under his tree? He had lived and dreamed in the same place all his life. But for us, a family of Czech and English immigrants, the cold sheen of the Iron Curtain, and the vastness of the ocean, patterned our lives. Our dreams were forever escaping over the sea to remembered shadow-worlds in Europe.

Immigrants were rare fauna in our suburb in those days. Lawn mowers fell silent at the sound of a foreign accent. Not that we weren’t welcome. It’s just that our habits were suspect: we didn’t celebrate the Fourth of July; we never went to church. We didn’t even own a flag, for heaven’s sake. It didn’t help matters that my father threatened to hoist the Union Jack on Independence Day, pointing out, with his irreverent twinkle, that he represented the opposing side in that conflict.

We were foreigners adrift on a sea of Americana, and there was only one vessel hardy enough to navigate this strange new tide: the kitchen. Standing on deck, wooden spoon in hand, my mother was supreme commander of this ship. On her watch, everyone found a harbor; amidst the moist aromas of old Europe, homesickness found its cure.

Her artistry was a unique blend of Czech and English cuisine. On the stove, a tenderloin with parsnip and sour cream sauce might be bubbling, while in the oven a Victoria sponge cake puffed weightlessly. The smell of this most un-American alchemy wafted over the picket fence and went some way in winning over the neighbors. But the

flavors mystified them; and they looked on, baffled, as we happily sipped hot tea in the sauna of a Pittsburgh August. Still, everyone smiled with that bright, glossy familiarity, even if they didn't understand us. What they didn't realize was that we could see ourselves in that gloss; and reflecting back was the double life of the immigrant: the semblance of belonging, while the heart is straying elsewhere. Surely a recipe for homesickness if ever there was one.

Back to the kitchen for therapy: marmalade and clotted cream for my father; Prague sausages for my mother. But where was one to find these fancies in western Pennsylvania?

My mother foraged like a huntress. She tracked down a German delicatessen on the far side of the river. (By the way, a Czech has to be really desperate to resort to German sausages.) She roamed the soulless alleys of American supermarkets, searching for her own soul food. On rare occasions, she would bring back native specimens from her hunts - cake mix in a box, icing in a can, a bottle of root beer. These foreign objects would be placed on the counter, and we would circle them warily, as if our experiment might go horribly wrong, and the culinary gods of old Europe would mete out some sort of arcane punishment to those who bought their food in a packet.

Once a year, the mailman delivered a parcel from far-off communist Czechoslovakia. Scuffed brown paper, sagging string. It was as if a lost relative had returned from the front. Inside were dried mushrooms, hand-stitched doilies, and the tangy, anise-flavored specialty of my mother's hometown. She would set to work at once with the mushrooms, throwing them into marinades and soups - even into the Thanksgiving gravy.

Yes, we did, eventually, get the hang of Thanksgiving.

But we stood firm against the tide of roasting turkeys: we ate tenderloin and mince pie instead.

For we were pilgrims, after all, in our own fashion; and for us, the New World would forever carry a taste of the old.