

Preface

Having realized that, with the exception of cholent and flódni (a Jewish multilayered poppy-seed pastry), she knew nothing about Transylvanian Jewish cuisine, Kinga Király set out on a three-year project to fulfill her own cravings for authentic flavors – but, more profoundly, to learn about prewar recipes and customs and to find out what remained of kosher households in Northern Transylvania. She conducted some three hundred hours of participant-observer interviews, sometimes spiced with cooking sessions, with ten survivors who had experienced the Holocaust as teenagers or children. These survivors represent the last witnesses of a generation that is about to die out and leave us with the question of what to remember, and how.

Because most of Király's subjects had been too young to know how to cook before the war, and their mothers did not survive, they could often only piece together recipes from scraps of taste memories. The life stories they eventually recounted alongside the recipe talk were also often anecdotal and associative, so Király ended up organizing her work around how memory functions – that is, around the themes to which memories cling – in order to try to bring to life both the nostalgic and traumatic memories of her subjects. The recollections of the ten survivors range from the fragmentary to the very eloquent testimonies of two important figures in Transylvanian Jewish life: Lajos 'Laló' Erdélyi (Marosvásárhely 1920 – Budapest 2020), a journalist and well-known photographer; and public intellectual Júlia Szilágyi, the youngest of the group (Cluj/Kolozsvár 1936 –). Erdélyi recounts that his family observed Jewish dietary customs superficially, and they even cooked pork at home, and that his father was in the Zionist leadership. But they did keep kosher plates for visitors, and, if the grandparents visited, they pretended to be religious. Szilágyi also recounts that her mother didn't keep kosher, which caused great tensions with her mother-in-law when they were forced to live together during the war. She also recounts being on a bus as a small child, on her way to a dentist appointment with her aunt, who was married to a gentile and not required to wear a yellow star. Her aunt removed the child's star, in response to which a man who recognized her called out: *Julika, szereted a choletet?* ('Julie, do you like cholent?'). Erdélyi and Szilágyi also authored memoirs worth consulting in conjunction with reading this work: In 2006, Erdélyi wrote *Túlélés. Egy fotográfus visszaemlékezése* (in English translation *Survival: A*

Photographer Remembers, 2014); and Szilágyi is the author of *Álmatlan könyv* (Sleepless book, 2014). Also worthy of mention is the touching memoir of Sárka Székely (1936-2011), who had already died before Király's research began, or she would surely have been among the interviewees. Her book *Szurika, Éva Lánya* (2007), in addition to being a Holocaust memoir, focuses in some depth on culinary folk customs in the author's poor Jewish family in Gyergószentmiklós, with particular discussion of cholent (called *csolet* in Transylvania and *sólet* in Hungary) and of *falcs hal* (false fish), in other sources called *falsche fish* or *bailik fish* ('cheap fish'). The dish was an imitation of the Sabbath *gefílte fish* prepared by poor Jews from poached ground chicken when fresh carp was either not available or unaffordable. While this dish, today essentially unknown, clearly could not have tasted like fish, it was prepared in the same way and looked similar, and curiously it is also recalled fondly in other memoirs. Both of these dishes, along with others such as *kremsli* (potato pancakes) and *zsidótojás* (Jewish eggs), are discussed by several interviewees. It should be added that, while these foods often kept their Yiddish names, the native languages of all these survivors was Hungarian, with only one in the group stating that her mother spoke Yiddish.

Because Király herself is from Marosvásárhely, she started her interviewing there, but expanded it to a number of other towns in Northern Transylvania and even to Budapest. She learned about the prewar culinary customs of her interviewees, but in talking with them about ordinary things, maybe asking questions about things nobody had ever asked them, and also by cooking, sometimes for them, sometimes alongside them, she found that bits of the past were suddenly unlocked in relation to their traumatic Holocaust experiences, as well as the subsequent struggle to live a post-Holocaust life under the Ceaușescu dictatorship. The fragmentary micro-histories, plus the forty-one recipes that Király collected – and augmented with appropriate historical, literary, and cultural vignettes, as well as with arresting visual images – form a collective biography of ten loosely linked individuals, who are representative of their region and era. Ultimately, the collection amounts to something larger, to what Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich – whose own works deal with historical crises through the voices of ordinary people based on interviews – called emotional chronicles of life – that is, not merely a narrative of events but of the emotions of those involved in them, and also of what is remembered and what is forgotten. Or, as the Holocaust historian Annette Wievocka has argued, and as Király's work illustrates, the value of Holocaust testimonies is not solely as sources of evidence about historical

events, but should be understood as a means of the transmission of the memories of survivors' own, retrospective, personal stories, which are themselves a part of history. In this sense, *Recipes for a New Beginning* straddles the fields of sociology and folklore, and at the same time it is a contribution to the cultural history of Transylvanian Jewry, all brought together through an evocation of prewar gastronomical nostalgia. Krisztián Nyári, in the preface to the original Hungarian edition, rightly concludes that the question ultimately raised in Király's work is the question of what remains today from the shattered culture of the Transylvanian Jews.

History

The leitmotif, as it were, of Király's study is the preservation, or in some cases the attempted recreation, of traditional Jewish recipes, which then leads her interviewees spontaneously to relate traumatic details about their lives. To understand the historical complexity and tragedy of the lives of pre- and postwar Transylvanian Jewry, a brief historical sketch is useful. It is a history articulated across the breach of the Holocaust and unique in that it is part of both Hungarian and Romanian history. Up until World War I in Transylvania, which belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary and which was located along the linguistic and religious fault lines of Central Europe, residents spoke many languages and belonged to many faiths. The area included a large and vibrant population of Jews, many of whom lived in poor, Orthodox communities, coexisting with more modern, acculturated and reform Jews, as well as with a strong Zionist movement, which believed that Jews would never be an integral part of Hungarian society, either in Hungary or in Transylvania. After World War I, the multiethnic Kingdom of Hungary was divided by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, and millions of Hungarian speakers were left outside the new Hungarian borders, including those in Transylvania, which was ceded to Romania. During the interwar period, the Jews of this area lived in a double-minority status, both among the annexed Hungarian Christian population and within Romanian society. By their historical heritage, cultural roots and language, most Transylvanian Jews remained tied to Hungary, while the socioeconomic and political realities bound them to Romania. During World War II, the alliance of Hungary with Nazi Germany allowed it to regain, through the 1940 Second Vienna Award, a fraction of its territories

lost by the Treaty of Trianon. The northern part of Transylvania came back under Hungarian rule, while the southern area remained part of Romania. Many Transylvanian Jews were initially happy to rejoin Hungary after having been under Romanian domination for twenty years, where they had always lived with different degrees of legal insecurity regarding citizenship and economic and professional rights – all the more so, given the ever-increasing Romanian anti-Semitism they had suffered in the second half of the 1930s. Many Transylvanian Jews also suffered from nostalgia for the era of Kaiser Franz Joseph and cherished the illusion that the return to Hungary would denote a return to the “golden era” of prewar life.

According to the 1941 census, over 150,000 people of Jewish faith again found themselves under Hungarian rule in Northern Transylvania. However, the subsequent anti-Semitic measures affected 164,052 people in the area, since these measures applied to anyone who was legally regarded as Jewish according to the anti-Jewish legislation that had been established in Hungary, and which was now enforced more strictly in Northern Transylvania than in the mother country itself. It is one of the ironies and tragedies of history that the Jews living in the areas allotted to Hungary in the division of Transylvania in 1940 fared far worse than those remaining under Romania. Murderous rampages were conducted by the Hungarian authorities as early as July 1941 against some 16,000 to 18,000 “alien” Jews from all over Hungary who were unable to prove Hungarian citizenship and who were deported to Nazi-occupied Kamenets-Podolski in Galicia (today’s Ukraine), where most were shot to death. A forced labor service program was started up by the Hungarian Army in 1942, and approximately 15,000 Jewish men were deployed in the first line on the Eastern Front in Ukraine, where most perished, although there exist no reliable data on the Northern Transylvanian Jewish casualties in the forced labor system. Despite all these horrors, and despite many other warning signals in the form of political and economic laws and decrees issued by the central and local Hungarian government authorities, many Hungarian-speaking Jews, especially the assimilated ones, retained a basic confidence that the Hungarian state would protect them. Some of the few who perceived the danger tried to cross the border illegally into Romania.

The most brutal and murderous final turn of events in Northern Transylvania commenced, just as in the rest of Hungary, after the Nazi occupation on March 19, first with ghettoization and then, from May 25 through June 1944, with the bulk of the community being deported to Auschwitz, making the area officially

Judenrein. Of the total of 165,000 Jews deported and killed, more than 90 percent of whom were of Hungarian culture and language, more than three-quarters perished. After 1945, some survivors re-established vestigial Jewish communities, but many others chose to emigrate. With the communist takeover in 1948, Romanian Jewish life ended, and in the next decade 40,000 left for Israel, while many who remained assimilated to Romania or later emigrated to Israel or Hungary. After 1970, Jewish community life virtually ceased to exist in small-town Transylvania. History teacher Gyuri Diamanstein, aged seventy, the son of one of Király's interviewees and one of the youngest practicing Jews in Târgu Mureș, predicts that in twenty years there will be no more Jewish community. Ultimately, modern Jewish identity in Transylvania, such as it exists, for the most part no longer builds on a religious community but rather on ethnic affinity. Of course, as is also true elsewhere, Jews are not needed for anti-Semitism to continue: recently, vandals smashed headstones in Târgu Mureș, while others defaced the childhood home of Elie Wiesel with scrawled graffiti, reading "public toilet, anti-Semite pedophile...Nazi Jew lying in hell with Hitler."

With a history such as this to contend with, it is not surprising that many survivors, most of whom were teenagers and young adults at the time, chose not to remain but attempted to start new lives elsewhere. As Dora Apsan Sorell, a native of Sighet, the hometown of Wiesel, stated eloquently in her 1998 memoir – one written, however, in a different memory world, in a new language and geographical context:

"What little family we had left after the war did not stay around for long. The old way of life, with its traditions, the Yiddish language, the community, the grandparents and children, were all gone. Only a few young people were around, and even they, after brief reunions, often left, searching for new family ties and a new life. Sighet, our birthplace, had become a memory, a reminder of recent tragedies, evoking images of the prewar liveliness superimposed on empty houses, burned synagogues, and deserted streets and schools, devoid of familiar faces. I didn't feel like visiting. I tried instead to turn my mind to the present and future."

Culinary Nostalgia

Anthropologists talk of the intricate relationship between food, eating habits, and human culture, and of food as one of many areas where a basic activity is invested with symbolic social meaning in both the individual and collective memory. A major cultural function of food and eating is to link the individual to the social sphere, first through the mother and the family, and then in relation to the larger social group. The flavor of prepared foods is humanity's greatest universal. It is the power of the unconscious odor that dominates flavors, and flavor is among the most complex and powerful of all human sensations. Flavor perception is also closely linked in the human brain to systems for learning, memory, emotion, and language. The memory power of food derives in part from synesthesia, the crossing of experiences from different sensory registers. Such odor- and taste-evoked autobiographical memory has come to be known as the Proust phenomenon, or Proustian memory, as Proust's hero depended on the subtle taste and smell of madeleines to recall the events of his past. Experiments have confirmed that such memories tend to be stronger, more emotional, and more effective reminders of past experiences originating from earlier in life than memory cues from other senses.

Scent-cued food memories can also form an important component of deep memory and of nostalgic memory, as well as having a connection to post-traumatic stress disorder. The study of foodways then naturally intersects with the Holocaust, as I have studied elsewhere – in Holocaust recipe collections compiled even in the camps and slave labor factories during the war, as well as postwar by survivors. However, the only such memorial volume published in Hungarian that antedates Király's work is Mrs. István Endrei, Hedvig Weiss's (1914–2012) *Szakácskönyv a túlélésről* (Cookbook About Survival, 2014), edited by Szilvia Czingel, a folklorist and musicologist who participated in collecting oral histories from survivors for Centropa, an organization that investigates Central and Eastern European Jewish life from the turn of the last century to today. The 'olfactory experience' of Jewish life was deployed more recently, in 2010, in the Jewish Museum in Camden, London, where the museum created a typical immigrant kitchen, from which the smells of chicken soup waft across the museum. The stated purpose of the exhibition was to contribute to the experience of recollection via the sense of olfaction, and to create an olfactory archive within the human body.

Memorial Book and Necrology

In the above title, I refer to *Recipes for a New Beginning* as a “culinary memorial book,” because both in its content and its organization into prewar life, the Holocaust, and postwar life, it can also be classified as a memorial or Yizkor (remembrance) book. All the major, but even the smaller Transylvanian Jewish communities have memory volumes, part of the series of Yizkor literature that has been compiled since the Holocaust. Already in the interwar period there existed memory books in response to the extreme personal and communal losses suffered by Jewish communities, and these earlier collections then established the pattern for the post-Holocaust books, which are written monuments commemorating the life and death of a place and its people. Such books typically contain memoirs, testimonies, tales, community documents, illustrative materials, poems, and other ephemera, and follow a four-part structure, from a description of the town and its people to before the Nazi period, during the Holocaust, the postwar years, and a final necrology. The earliest Holocaust memorial books in the first decade after World War II came out of numerous countries, but from the 1950s, most appeared in Israel, usually in Yiddish and Hebrew, with the peak being in the 1960s and 1970s.

Culinary nostalgia often encompasses immigrant and diasporic memories, which are distanced geographically and temporally from childhood homes, with food providing a nostalgic restructuring of the displaced home. It is not therefore surprising that there also exists a subcategory of memorial books that link the Holocaust with Jewish culinary memories. Two such examples are *The Holocaust Survivor Cookbook: Collected from Around the World* (2007) by Joanne Caras, a US-born daughter of survivors, which contains untested recipes, as she received them, with one hundred stories; and *Recipes Remembered: A Celebration of Survival* (2011) by June Feiss Hersch, which provides readers with a collection of eighty tested and altered survivors’ recipes, along with their family stories. Király’s collection, however, stands apart from such works because she has compiled her material not from survivors or their children living in emigration, but from the very few and now disappearing survivors who stayed in their Transylvanian homes.

Yizkor books traditionally end with a necrology for the shattered past of a whole community. Király’s study ends with the news of the death of one of her beloved interviewees, Helena Kain, or *Lea néni*, from Érdengeleg, who tells how

her mother, born in 1883, talked to them mostly in Yiddish while the children answered in Hungarian. She recounts several food-related anecdotes, including a very Jewish way of making garlic goose liver. She hadn't talked for seventy-four years about her lager experiences. Although living in Szatmár, she could not obtain kosher meat, and she had kidney disease so was unable to eat most things anyway. She is *Lea néni*, who held onto her beliefs until the very end and kept a kosher kitchen "*Szatmár falu szélén*" [on the edge of the village of Szatmár].

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