

Breakfast With Bubbe...And Other Tales

By Lillian Breen

Clara Corman – Clara Zide Corman – Clara S.Corman. Funny that I didn't know until today my grandmother, grandma, nana – but to me my bubbe (yiddish for grandmother) had a middle name, middle initial S. what did the S. stand for? One of the many, numberless pieces of information I don't know. Her life, her story. The absence of that detail is a void that is only filled by who she was, who she is and who she will always be to me.

My bubbe was a safe harbor for me. Did I know as a child the words safety, comfort, unconditional love? Unconditional love....I could do no wrong. When I would inadvertently mix up the use of a meat utensil with a dairy utensil - a law of keeping a kosher home – I would hear: it's okay "mein kind" - it's okay my child. Did I know long ago that my bubbe's voice, her smell, her touch, the taste of her food, her image would permeate my senses – that these would endure, continue, remain & sustain?

Clara Corman was an immigrant from Russia-Belarus. Born in 1883 and died on May 31, 1969 at the age of 86. I was a part of her life for 27 years. In me she lives eternally. My most vivid experiences with my bubbie were to be repeated over and over during those first 27 years of my life. The same awakening of my senses would recur, time after time – an everlasting encore that would renew and refresh the shaping of my memories.

My visits with her, my grandfather & my uncle were frequent since I lived about an hour from them. The first of my most heartfelt memories was sleeping at my bubbe's house. It was magical and I was captivated by the rituals that surrounded me. My bed was two large overstuffed, brown frieze chairs placed seat to seat. A sheet – a pillow – a blanket - my cocoon, cradled in a warm, velvety womb that contained me during the dream-filled night.

The next of these memories I awoke to familiar sounds and smells and internal joy as I anticipated a breakfast that was truly food for my soul. Now mind you, my bubbe would not get an award from the American Nutritional Council but how much or what do they know of the divine & sacred purpose of food? A meal experience that could inspire one to incorporate into one's cells memory data that would endure for a lifetime?

Mashed potatoes and a cup of coffee. Not an ordinary serving of mashed potatoes and not an ordinary cup of coffee. My bubbe placed before me a bowl of mashed potatoes on top of which sat a stunning amount of butter. A heap of butter that I would watch soften, melt, dissolve and disappear into the craggy, white mound, no less a mountain of potato. And, my cup of coffee – Maxwell House coffee - laced with sweet, fresh milk. But it was the ritual use of cube sugar - "lump sugar" that moves me to reverie.

The lump sugar was not put into the cup of coffee instead; I took a tiny bite of the crystalline sweet – keeping it towards the front of my tongue to await the pungently rich, hickory flavored brew. With the merging of the two I experienced a delicate delight to my palate. The lovely sweet flavor slowly melted away only to be diminished by the coffee. A swallow and then I repeated the ritual until the cup of coffee and one lump sugar was gone.

What more can my childhood memories uncover? My bubbe provided me with more joyful memories than a heart can hold. The memories keep coming, flowing remembrances like her long black hair with touches of gray. My bubbe's hair was waist length that she wove into two braids and wore coiled around the top of her head which she would release when she went to bed. She rinsed her hair in vinegar after washing it to remove all traces of soap and applied pomade each day. How striking I can recall details that were never spoken of but only through careful childhood observation am I able to have the richness of her presence.

I remember, too, not being able to participate in my bubbe's daily hair ritual. I was not allowed to play with it, comb or brush it or practice my braiding on her hair. I don't remember ever asking or having heard her tell me I couldn't – I just knew.

After breakfast I would watch her as I sat on one of the two frieze chairs that had been my bed the night before. With deft and nimble fingers she began to unbraid her hair. Pomade, comb, re-braid & coil. I was mesmerized. Her hair was like silk with just enough body – just enough waves to give it life.

Have I come to the end of my recollections with my bubbe? Have I exhausted all traces of my experiences with her? Has the well that holds the familiar aromas, tastes, and touch, sights & sounds run dry? No, the final story has not been told.

I'm feeling, however, the need to encapsulate this part of my history with her. To keep contained the most powerful – although as more thoughts of my bubbe take front & center stage they, too, become just as powerful. But I do need to bring closure to this piece.

The aroma of my bubbie's pantry with dried dill which she used to make chicken soup, the variety stores she & my zadie, my grandfather, owned & the many hours I spent "hanging out" there. My adult uncle who was the best friend a kid could ever have...these, too, deserve the time & written words. They will come & will be part of the gift, the legacy I leave to whoever has the interest.