

Eat, my children, eat

Elisa Morera de la Vall

Copyright©2011 Elisa Morera de la Vall. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

Abstract: Food has many functions and meanings. It is, indeed, necessary for our nourishment but since human beings are related to one another, food is a symbolic form of communication, too. It can also play other roles. It can be a ritual, it can transmit values, norms of conduct and beliefs, it can trigger nostalgic childhood memories or, by recreating lost worlds, have a healing effect.

Keywords: food; nourishment; communication; memories; ritual; cultural and healing roles.

As far back as 1989 “The Australian Jewish News” published a short article by the writer Serge Liberman under the title “Eat, my children, eat.” It was a beautiful eulogy of his mother and, by extension, of mothers in general, suggesting that the food pressed by mothers on their children is a symbol of selflessness, “a surrogate for nourishment, for health, for life itself (...). Perhaps [the writer added] there is something of the tribal and the atavistic in all this” (Liberman 1989, n.p.).

Juan Cruz, in his well documented book, *Alimentación y Cultura (Food and Culture)*, comments on the subject of food as symbol. Since people are social beings related to one another, he argues:

food is a symbolic form of communication, be it from mother to child, be it from the individual to the community. Through food a person channels patterns of behaviour, norms or religious prohibitions, hierarchical models and the limits of roles (Cruz 1991, 13).

Cruz’s statement would then support the thesis that there is something atavistic in the eagerness of mothers to give everything to their offspring, including their own selves, and that food acts as the symbol of that eagerness. Communication through food, however, would not be exclusive of mothers but could be from individual to individual or from individual to the community. Cruz adds that:

an individual does not see in food just something nourishing that gives him pleasure, but something that has a symbolic meaning, too, the meaning conferred to it within the culture (customs and usage) where he lives and where he communicates with others (Cruz 1991, 14).

Since food plays such a relevant symbolic, social and cultural role, it is, understandably, a repeated topic in literature. Judging by the work of Jewish immigrant writers in Australia, it can be said that, in the case of migrant literature, this topic is strikingly recurrent. Caught between a stern determination to remain faithful to their origins and identities and the pull of the new country to conform to it, immigrants tend initially to cling to the traditional food culture that travelled with them. Some will never renounce it but others will eventually adopt the cuisine of their land of adoption, an easier step more frequently taken by the generation born or raised in the new land.

In the literature of Jewish immigrants in Australia descriptions of food and meals abound. The work of Judah Waten, born in Odessa and raised in Australia, can be taken as an example. In his novel *Distant Land*, the traditional Jewish food is profusely represented, sometimes with almost sensual overtones. The novel covers a long period, from the early twenties to past World War II, beginning in a Polish village and ending in the State of Victoria. The two main characters are Joshua and Shoshanah Kuperschmidt, later Joshua and Susan Cooper. Living his first years in Europe, Joshua's first taste of food is that provided in the parental home: "On the table there were two Sabbath loaves covered by a small napkin. The fragrant smell of freshly baked bread filled the room" (Waten 1978, 13). As a young man, and in the course of a formal visit, he meets Shoshanah and her food: "An aroma of cinnamon and raisins filled the dining room. The table was laden with freshly baked biscuits and cakes" (Waten 1978, 31). They had all been baked by Shoshanah and, inevitably, Joshua falls in love with her and with her baking.

Further on Waten provides a list of the dishes served at Joshua's and Shoshanah's wedding feast: "golden yellow broth, gefilte fish, stuffed spring chicken, roast duck, warm fresh rolls, home-made honey cake and strudel" (Waten 1978, 35). The novelist will later give details of the rich food that Shoshanah, "a versatile cook", prepares for her husband: "roasts, stuffed goose neck, chopped chicken liver, gefilte fish, tsimiss, and chicken soup with kreplich" (Waten 1978, 38). Intent on winning her husband's will to migrate to Australia, she spares no efforts in the kitchen and even lapses into an atavistic pattern, "speaking to him like a mother to a child: 'Eat, eat, my dear'" (Waten 1978, 39).

On arrival in Australia, some relatives give Joshua and Shoshanah a welcome dinner, which a son of the hosts promptly criticizes as not appropriate for the Australian climate, thus providing a clue of the tendency of the young generation. The Coopers will soon encounter a very different—and indifferent—kind of food, "the national food" (Waten 1978, 67), then heavily indebted to British cuisine: grilled steak and onions with Worcestershire sauce (Waten 1978, 67), and alternatives of "steak and onions, steak and eggs, chops, sausages and fried whiting" (Waten 1978, 68) or, for a change, mulligatawny soup and "roast mutton lying in thick brown gravy and steamed pudding covered in thin, yellow custard sauce" (Waten 1978, 73). No wonder Shoshanah's food smelled like paradise to Joshua (Waten 1978, 88).

Food is a recurrent topic throughout the novel. Waten takes occasion of a welcome party and of the celebration of the Passover, to expand on the delicacies elaborated by Shoshanah. The description of both occasions brings to mind Cruz's comments on food and its role. Through the welcome party, offered to some Jewish families newly-settled in the town where the Coopers live, communication, cohesion and socialization are achieved. This is the function of Shoshanah's cooking efforts: "the chopped liver, the fried and gefilte fish, the blintzes, the little cheese pies that were eaten with sour cream" (Waten 1978, 109), they all made up the welcome.

Later on, the celebration of the Passover, which includes the ritual meal of the Seder, will be an adequate occasion for transmitting norms, religious convictions, those patterns of behaviour that Cruz speaks about. The transmitter is not just the Seder food itself: the matzos, the celery and cucumber, chopped eggs, sliced apples and nuts, plus the glasses of wine that precede the feast proper. All this is just the stage, a fitting environment for the transmission of customs and beliefs. Thus, we see how the eldest son, Ezekiel, is prompted to ask the 'Four Questions' and how he is encouraged to take an active part in the religious service which is actually the reason for the celebration (Waten 1978, 120-21).

Years go by and children become adults. After Shoshanah's death and the subsequent period of mourning, her youngest son, Benjamin, expresses his intention to marry a non-Jewish girl, Thelma, much to the disapproval of his brother Ezekiel and sister Ruth, who are very much against inter-marriage. The tolerant Joshua will accept the marriage, though he is somewhat apprehensive about Thelma's non-Jewishness, as reflected in her cooking. Before the couple marries, Joshua visits them on a Sunday:

It was the Sunday lunch of roast lamb with gravy and mint sauce and roast potatoes and pumpkin she had cooked that somehow emphasised she was not Jewish. It was gentile food; it had an alien smell about it (Waten 1978, 218).

The medical advice given to Joshua by his son-in-law, Reuben, about following a diet to avoid overweight, leads to praise of the late Shoshanah's cooking. Reuben laments that his wife Ruth "can't emulate her mother's cooking. She cooks the Australian way although she knows one or two dishes that her mother taught her" (Waten 1978, 221). These words prompt Joshua to reflect that most of the meals served at his daughter's were:

what he would have called gentile cooking -- mostly grills, salads and cold roast meat. It was an ironical thought after his reflection on Thelma's cooking. Jewish girls in Australia did not cook the way they did back home, more was the pity, despite what Reuben thought about overweight (Waten 1978, 221).

Of the three Coopers' children, then, Benjamin's diet will not be Jewish at all, Ruth's cuisine will be hardly Jewish but rather plain Australian, less appetizing than her mother's, if maybe less fattening. As for Ezekiel, his strict beliefs will influence his ideas on food, leading him to keep a strict Kashrut. A surprised Joshua asks his son: "What do you do when you go on holidays? Don't you eat anything that hasn't been stamped kosher?" "No, I do not", Ezekiel said" (Waten 1978, 223), and that sounded final.

The passion and nostalgia felt by many immigrants for the food of their homeland is not exclusive of Jews. Another novel by Waten, entitled *So Far No Further*, depicts the parallel lives of an Italian immigrant family, the Avanzos, and a Jewish one, the Falksteins. A Sunday meal at the Avanzos' begins, inevitably, with spaghetti:

Maria placed the large bowl of steaming spaghetti in the middle of the table. Giuseppe's eyes glistened with pleasure. He loved spaghetti, religiously eating it every day. He preferred it with meat sauce and cheese sprinkled on top of the sauce (Waten 1971, 128).

Not surprisingly, the house always reeked of "the same familiar smells of wine, spaghetti, cheese and meat sauce" (Waten 1971, 103).

The 'petit madeleine' in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* and the tea in which it is soaked have the most extraordinary, pleasurable effect on the narrator, triggering a childhood memory of the little crumb of madeleine dipped in tea that was given to him on Sunday mornings. Food can bring back buried memories, the nostalgia, the hurts or the delights of infancy, or of any time past. This idea has been cleverly used in recent times in an animated feature film, *Ratatouille* (2007) produced by the Disney-Pixar factory, where a Mr Ego, a conceited, inflexible 'critique culinaire', on the verge of writing a scathing review on a haute cuisine restaurant, is given to taste a dish of ratatouille, a vegetable dish, a peasant dish—but superbly cooked. The minute the critic savours the first morsel, his eyes roll up, and he is transported back to a childhood episode when a tasty dish of ratatouille is offered to him by his mother. There is delight in the boy's face; there is astonishment and delight in the face of the haughty man he has become. His opinion of the restaurant is reversed in an instant by a dish of ratatouille and his planned review will be reversed, too.

The process of bringing back buried memories can be healing. This aspect is treated by Arnold Zable in his novel *Café Scheherazade*. The title of the novel corresponds to the name of a café-restaurant in Acland Street, Melbourne, a real place in a real street with real owners, Avram and Masha, who talk in the novel to a fictitious journalist-narrator, the author, as they all eat chicken schnitzel and potato latkes, drink borsch and wine, and finish with cheese blintzes and cups of tea spiced with lemon (Zable 2001, 4).

The journalist notices how émigrés stroll in "for a bowl of apple compote, a bite of almond torte", while they recall their past (Zable 2001, 8). He will gradually become friendly with a group of Jews, survivors of the Holocaust, who exorcise the old demons of their past by the telling and re-telling of their stories. The food served at 'Scheherazade' helps in the curative process by bringing back memories of the food at home and of the delicacies that could be found, in the old days and on the other side of the world, at Wolfke's, the most popular restaurant in Vilna:

In Wolfke's you could get the best Sabbath cholent in Vilna (...) Such a mouth-watering stew! (...) and, for a snack, you could order a beautiful chopped liver. (...) A pure delight. With beaten onion and egg, floating in chicken fat (Zable 2001, 30).

These survivors show similar admiration for the food served in 'Scheherazade', an admiration which they put in words as they savour a schnitzel:

'Scheherazade' is a (...) schnitzel's paradise. It has the best. And every variety (...) Or you can order your own, the way you once had it, over there, home made, in *der alter velt* [in the old world] (Zable 2001, 132).

Sitting to a bowl of steaming cabbage soup, in the course of his first visit to the establishment, the narrator had been informed that the soup was:

based on a recipe Masha gleaned from her mother. In Poland [Masha had confided] I would never have believed that one day I would be recreating my mother's dishes (...). I always thought I would be a doctor (Zable, 2001, 13).

In friendly talks, night after night, the journalist will gradually learn how 'Scheherazade' became what it became, the secret of its success: The clients were always met with friendliness; they could speak Yiddish (the 'mamma loschen', the mother tongue), or Russian, or Polish... And the offer of food?

A glass of borscht? Some barley soup? (...)What do you want for the main course?: A plate of latkes? A chicken schnitzel or vegetable stew? (...) And (...) for dessert? An apple compote? A plate of cheese? A cup of coffee? A lemon tea? (Zable 2001, 169-170).

"This is how it started" explains Masha, who remarks that she and her husband had no previous experience as restaurateurs. But they had met the need of solitary men, whose families had perished in the Holocaust and needed the friendly atmosphere and food provided in 'Scheherazade':

They came in search of a Yiddish word, a familiar smile (...) Their longings determined Masha's cuisine. Slowly it returned, her recall of recipes, the ingredients she had helped her mother prepare on a wood-fuelled fire in a Siberian camp (Zable 2001, 170).

It had taken a long time to create the kind of restaurant that Masha and Avram had created—and where Masha, perhaps not even aware of it, was actually fulfilling her ambition to be a doctor—but it was worth it, for: "In Scheherazade survivors were regrouping, old worlds were being recreated, and festering wounds were being healed" (Zable 2001, 171).

Works Cited

Cruz Cruz, J. (1991). *Alimentación y Cultura: Antropología de la Conducta Alimentaria*. Eunsa: Pamplona. (trans. quotes E. Morera de la Vall)

Liberman, S. (1989). "Eat, my children, eat". *Australian Jewish News* (16 June, n.p.): Melbourne.

Coolabah, No.5, 2011, ISSN 1988-5946, Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Proust, M. (1915). "Overture": *Swann's Way* (1915), Vol. I of *Remembrance of Things Past* [later *In Search of Lost Time* (1915-1927)]. Gutenberg E-Book 2009.

Walt Disney Pictures—Pixar Animation (2007). *Ratatouille*. Walt Disney Studios: USA.

Waten, J. (1971). *So Far No Further*. Wren Publishing: Mount Eliza, Vic.

Waten, J. (1978) (1964). *Distant Land*. Angus & Robertson: Sydney.

Zable, A. (2001). *Café Scheherazade*. Text Publishing: Melbourne.

Dr Elisa Morera de la Vall is a former Associate Lecturer of the English Department at the Universitat de Barcelona and currently the Public Relations Officer and Publications Co-editor of its Australian Studies Centre. Her areas of interest and research are in the cultures and literatures of former British colonies and her main research area is Jewish fiction writers in Australia, which she formalised in her PhD (2003) on this subject. She has taught history, culture and literature of Nigeria, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean, and has presently taken an interest in Afghanistan. She has presented papers at conferences both home and abroad, published articles and papers in various journals, and contributed a chapter to the book *Anglophone Jewish Literature* (Routledge 2007).