

Her Beauty as a Sword

By Deborah Cass, originally published in *Etchings* magazine

My grandmother's recipe folder begins with a recipe for borscht.

'Borshet

5 Bittrott
1 Keret
1 Angen
½ Cabbegge
3 lemons
Sugar
Cef lives
Solt and peper'

My grandmother may have believed that she was the most beautiful woman in the world - or at least in the small Jewish community in Melbourne, which, after all, were one and the same - but in written English she did not excel. She came to this country as a young woman in her early twenties, and although she learnt to speak the language, she did not master writing, and certainly not spelling. When I was a child my mother used to go to my grandmother's house fortnightly to help her with her English, an arrangement that always carried with it a slightly clandestine air; an attractive woman of high social standing should not have to be tutored by her daughter.

Nana Shulman spoke with a thick, Eastern European accent. She would call out when I entered the room, even if I was standing only two feet from her, 'Hullo boobeleh. How vare you? Too busy to come and see your grendmother?'

As well as borscht there are lots of recipes for cakes. Honey cakes (six), chocolate cake (one), cheese cakes (three).

Slips of paper; like gold to me now. Her hand, her (mis)spellings, her tastes, her preferences. She loved cakes with fruit. Apart from cakes with chocolate, honey or cheese, fruit predominates. Prunes, plums and apricots nestled in thick folds of egg, milk, butter and flour. Softly cooked, oozing pink juice into the crumbly surrounds. I can see her face as she described to me how to make her dried fruit strudel, for which she was, justly, famous. 'It's simple boobeleh' she would begin. 'You just tek some pastry, end you coveh it with jem'. She would pause here, for effect. She would nod and arch her right eyebrow to make sure that I was listening. The only other time I saw women arch their eyebrows like that was in Hollywood movies of the thirties and forties. I imagined her standing in front of the mirror and practicing eyebrow arching.

Now, however, I just nod. Satisfied that she has my full attention, she continues. ‘Then you edd chopped P-runes, A-pricots, R-aisins’ she said, emphasizing the first letter of each word, ‘End. If you like. Nuts end coconut as well’. She stops again, and I nod again. ‘The-en’ she says singing the word, and she begins to gesticulate, miming in the air the action of folding the edges of the pastry along either side of a rectangle. ‘You tern the edges down, and you rrol it’ – and she finishes the movement with her fingers twisting a roll of pastry over and over in the air. ‘So you see darlink, it is simple’ she concludes, and here she lowers her right hand, brings it to her head, and smooths her hair down evenly. It is an action so natural, so regular, that you understand in that moment, that, to Nana Shulman, in cakes, as in life, appearances are paramount.

The recipes are held in a small green ring-binder. Some are sticky-taped on to the lined pages, but the tape has long worn of its ‘stick’, so apart from those that are written directly on to the folder paper, others are loose, contained in an envelope on which the words ‘Mrs. Shulman’ have been handwritten.

Much of what I have now is contained in a sheath of slightly browning paper, a bag of leaves, confetti in my hands. Most of the pages are small, torn out of notepads, or they are the back of old brochures. Women like my Nana, used to parsimony, needed little in the way of material for the recording of their secrets. The borscht recipe is on the back of a printed flyer that has been ripped in half. The remains read like something we used to call concrete poetry. Words and sentences are torn, along with the paper on which they were written:

‘Smorg
Delica
A new and ex
in Kosher Del
A full range of hot and cold
Yisrael), salads, traditional Je
kugels, bread, parve items
Everything prepared fresh
under the superv’

is all I have of it. A cut, a slice. A spy manual. Words that code for a particular community, in a particular place and time. Looking at it now I realize it is a brochure for a Smorgon’s shop.

The Smorgons. At the mention of their name my grandmother would raise her eyebrows as if to say, now that was a name to conjure with. Abattoirs, food shops, you name it, they owned it. And later, they donated to it. Hospitals, galleries, educational foundations, whatever. The delicatessen must have been new at the time, and even now a trace of excitement runs, like a current through my hands, in the shred of paper that I hold. Perhaps it was printed for the opening.

And although grilled focaccia and sun-dried tomatoes are commonplace now, and it seems unthinkable to recall a time when salads were unusual, there was such a time. A time when shops that stocked pickled cucumbers were called ‘delicatessens’, and milk-bars that sold anything other

than standard white bread bore the denomination 'Continental', an ambivalent word carrying both the sophisticated air of European charm and the slightly soiled association of the outsider, the foreign, the downbeat, the other. It was a time when I overheard my school-friends' mothers bemoaning the way Italians spoke their own language in the streets of Melbourne: 'I don't mind them speaking it in their own country, but if it's good enough for them to come to this country then it's good enough for them to speak English, like the rest of us'. Embarrassed, I lower my eyes, not wanting to disagree, but definitely not wanting to be accomplice in this act of betrayal, thinking of my grandmother, her friends, and my mother, and wondering what they can have done to earn the strident disapproval of these ordinary Aussie mums, who have just given me a glass of raspberry cordial and a fairy cake with white icing, two delicacies which, despite the bounty of my mother's cooking, we have never had in our house. I keep shtum, and the conversation meanders on.

I can see that my mother has written many of the recipes; I know her hand. And I can see also that she has simplified them. Complex instructions have been reduced to a few simple commands. 'Butter & sugar in mix master. When creamed, add eggs and flour with milk. Turn mixture into tin and top with apricots.'

My mother went to much trouble over her lifetime to assist her mother. Always wanting to make things a bit easier, even if her efforts were often met with a sort of feigned surprise, and very little, if any, outward show or acknowledgement of appreciation from my grandmother. 'Sherelech (my mother's name is Shirley) vot are you doing that for darling. I don't need for you to do it darling'. My mother went on doing these small things - copying recipes into a folder, picking up Nana's dry-cleaning, having the hems on her skirts taken up - regardless of her mother's apparent indifference, feeling, I think, underappreciated, and always overshadowed somewhat by her brother, Sam, and perhaps even by his wife, Gaby. Many of the recipes in the folder have come from Gaby. 'Apricot Cake Gaby, 'Butter Cake Gaby. Gaby loved cake: to this day when we serve it in my house we use Gaby's words 'have you got any cakey'?

My mother has told me that when Nana was close to dying, she called my mother to her one day. Something about the way she called made her think that Nana wanted her, my mother, to say something.

'I feel so awful about it. She wanted me to tell her that I loved her. I know she did.'

My mother stops speaking. Her brow is wrinkled and her breathing heavy from years of trying, unsuccessfully, to give up smoking.

'I just couldn't say it. I know she wanted me to. I just couldn't'.

When I relate this story to my sister, who has heard it many times, she says, 'oh that's just rubbish. Mum wanted Nana to tell her, Mum, that she loved her. Not the other way around. Mum wanted to hear that Nana loved her,' she repeats to make sure that I have understood. I do not know. I wasn't there. But I do know there is something in what my sister says, and I can feel the

reverberations of it here, in this recipe book, when I look at the neat hand of my mother transcribing these recipes so carefully in this folder, which she, my mother, has undoubtedly bought as a gift.

The recipes speak of the 1960s - of products that no longer exist, of the Americanization of the Australian palate, of a time when fancy eating meant something resembling a children's tea party. Here is one, transcribed by my mother, without a title.

1 lemon jelly
1 cup pineapple juice
1 cup Tom Piper orange juice
1 lemon juice
2 tabs caster sugar
2 tabs water

Bring all to boil. Cool. Whip tin Carnation milk. When thick, gradually add cool jelly. Crush ½ packet chocolate biscuits. Line plate with biscuits and pour on mixture. Chill.

There are recipes for Passionfruit Sparkle and Pineapple Chiffon Pie. Sometimes Nana herself has annotated them with 'v.good' at the top, or the name of the person who gave it to her, 'Mini Bekfeld'. A newspaper cutting carries the report that 'Toni Lamond has been lent to Channel 9 for three weeks to play the feminine lead in Tunnel of Love, the next play at the Princess Theatre'. " 'I'm a Doris Day fan' blonde Toni said yesterday. 'If I ever have even a quarter of her success I'll be satisfied'".

There are recipes for matzo balls, knedlaich. Two cake recipes are written on notepads taken from international hotels: the Hotel Nassauer Hof Wiesbaden (frangipani), and Shangri-La of Singapore (butter). Misspellings abound, a 'pond' of butter, a 'peket' of margarine, a cup of 'serfrising flower'. I can hear her voice as I read them, so close are they to her mispronunciations.

Recipes with noodles, eggs and cream are common. There is even one called simply Noodles Baked in Sour Cream. I find the eponymous recipe my mother has always referred to but I thought was a Jewish joke. 'How did you make that cake Rochel?' one woman says to another, 'Simple Chana' the other woman answers, tek ten eggs'.... But here it is in black and white, no title again, but the instructions are clear.

'10 eggs
½ lb walnuts' etc.

I rifle through more paper. I find a recipe for meringues written in my little girl, cramped, 'running-writing', which ends with the words 'Good luck', and an exclamation mark. There is a phone number on the back of one piece and I have to quash a strong desire to call it. The name of her sister is scribbled on another alongside a reminder to buy wax paper. A list of names with numbers. Has she been toting up donations for a WIZO dinner? Is it the scores for a card-night they held, when they unfolded wooden tables and chairs and set them artfully on the lower deck of their split level living-room in South Yarra, with the doors that opened out onto the garden?

‘Charlston Dinner Consultant, 2pm Thursday 5/4/84’ is written in neat careful print, by someone who has taken much pleasure in the long, straight, downward slants of the slashes between the figures. Who is going to this meeting? Is it my grandfather? He owned the Winston Charles, one of the first discothèques in Melbourne. I have a vague recollection of black and white; was this what the entrance looked like, or are these the colours people wore on opening night?

Is the money still there? My father has always sworn that Papa told him he hid \$60,000 - a king’s ransom in those days – to avoid tax. Instead, he was taken to hospital with pancreatic cancer. Are the bills still buried within a tree trunk? Did they blow away? Rot?

From the first moment I can remember I have been aware that my mother has adored her father and had a difficult relationship with my grandmother, her mother. Nana is a beautiful woman but she wears her beauty like a sword. In one photo from the forties she is surrounded by other (less good-looking) women, and she has an expression on her face that is close to delight, delight in being at the centre, being the tallest, wearing the most noticeable hat, on the jauntiest angle, on being the most beautiful of them all. You can see it in her eyebrows that are, as ever, raised; in her eyes, which are gleaming; and in her smile which is fixed.

It was a look she went to great lengths to protect. What child could forget the sight of her elegant grandmother preparing for bed at night, wearing men’s pajamas, beehive hairdo wrapped turban-like in toilet paper, and face shiny with night cream?

I was, of course, not there when my mother was young but, by her accounts, my mother’s presence was never entirely pleasing to Nana. Perhaps watching a girl blossom into a young womanhood she could only memorialize was not to her liking.

‘I cannot imagine my mother bearing me’ my mother says to me one day, eyes laughing cheekily. ‘Did she really give birth to me? Did she really give birth to my brother’. We begin to laugh and laugh, unable to contain the hilarity that arises imagining Nana in any of the birth states that we know she had to have experienced. Being in labour, being shaved pubically, expelling a small living human being, feeling your insides being dragged out. How could clean, beautiful, never-a-hair-out-of-place-a-fingernail-unpainted Nana have experienced the mess that is childbirth?

The urge to dig is strong. But no earth to excavate. The funeral mound where she is buried is a sorry little affair, located alongside my grandfather, in the clean, but meaningless grounds of Springvale cemetery. My mother and I drive there – it takes us an hour and a half from Carlton – and when we get there we cannot find the gravesites despite following the detailed directions on every signpost we see. Finally we retreat back to the Information Centre and ask a staff-member who says the plot is in the block of graves we had just driven past. Disheartened, we drive back to the same set of neat squares, festooned with rose bushes, surrounded by a low brick wall, and indeed find the little square plaque with her name on it. So small, so unadorned. The tin she kept her bobby pins in was more elaborate. The grounds themselves are blank, lacking in the grandeur, grimness or spookiness of cemeteries of old.

We go home and when night falls I sit beside my children in their beds and sing them a lullaby, the same one I sing each night, the words of which I make up from memory:

‘Unter Rachel and Rebecca’s svigele
Schtate viesser sigele
Se sigele geoforren handlen
Roszhinka mit mandlen.
Under Rebecca and Rachel’s cradle
Sits a baby goat
The baby goat goes out to the shops
And buys raisins and nuts.’

I have no idea whether I am singing it correctly or not, or whether my Yiddish pronunciation is accurate. ‘Where did you learn that?’, my aunt asks on overhearing me one night.

‘From Nana Shulman.’

‘Of course. Jewish. The minor key.’

I drive up Orrong Road. The leafy branches of the trees touch in an arc of vivid colour overhead. I turn left on Toorak Road. I am in her territory. I cannot be here without her. Her louder than loud voice, her purple leather and wool, close-fitting jacket, her burnished red-gold hair, her long manicured dark-red nails, her bright lipstick in a little leather tube purse that she snapped shut as she smacked her lips to set them with colour.

Lately my mother has begun making strudel. I don’t know why. I’m not sure that she likes it.