

Cookie

Family Stories

Munkacs, Klucirke, Khust, Volovets, Nizhni Veretski. These were words I heard before I knew my full name. They were the birthplaces and surrounding towns of my parents in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Austria-Hungary before WWI, then Czechoslovakia until 1938, the region is now in Ukraine. Some of the villages have changed names, some no longer exist and for sure, most have no Jews.

It was not until I was about seven or eight that I realized the bedtime stories I heard were different from those of my neighbors in suburban Kansas City. Most of my friends were surrounded only by English speaking relatives and friends. Death and Loss was not a typical dinner table conversation, their meals commonly had names in English, and they did not learn to count by reading the numbers tattooed on their parents' arms.

So of course, I felt deprived. All I wanted was to have a regular family history, not events that even by first grade I knew were too scary to tell my friends. Not paying attention to all of the music around me, bored with hearing about the Carpathian peasants who lived nearby, all I wanted was to submerge myself in stories of the Wild West and tales of the Plains Indians. Something that would wash away that always present taste of paprika and salt.

Only in my adulthood, after the birth of my first child, did I realize the richness of the sources that were literally under my feet. All of a sudden I wanted that music under my own fingers again, and this time not because I was forced to play a Yiddish or Gypsy tune for one of my parents' friends, but because those familiar sounds were now welcome in my fiddle case.

So I would sit with my father and coax him to tell me about his childhood. I learned that Nizhni Veretski is at the base of the Veretski Pass, the mountain pass through which the first Jews who settled in Hungary traveled (settling first in Munkacs). And the Magyar tribe that settled Hungary crossed this pass in the 9th Century. With all of these migrating people came the rich music of their cultures. Ruthenians, Hungarians, Czechs, Gypsies and Jews made up the population of this small town of 3000. Mendel Chaskels, the local Jewish fiddler, could play a *Ukrainian Kolomeyke*, a *Hungarian Czardas*, a *Polka*, and all the repertoire of the Veretskier Jews.

Soon I began to grill my father and his brother Moishe more about Mendel. Did he play with Gypsies? Did he play in the surrounding towns? Who was in his band? I would ask, how did Mendel end his Jewish tunes? Was it like this? No? How about like this?

I also learned that when my parents came to the U.S. and settled in New York, they were immediately welcomed into the Munkacs/Veretski *landsmanschaft* - a social club for people from the same towns of Europe - and that "family meetings" as an extension of these social clubs were common. As a matter of fact, klezmer clarinet legends Naftule Brandwein and Dave Tarras played for the Segelstein family meetings in the Bronx. My uncle still tells stories of "Nifty's" antics, like the time he put his clarinet down and refused to continue playing until the caterers [stopped "clinking glasses."](#)

So once again, I play the music that first initiated my fiddle. Only this time not by force, but with the leisure of someone slipping into their favorite tattered but familiar easy chair.

Five Things

When I moved away to go to college, I began to miss the smells in my parents' house. The smoke from my father's pipe, the smell of garlic and butter frying, the oil from the sewing machines in our house. So when I found that the local diner served Chicken Paprikas, I was thrilled. I ate it a few times, and though it was nothing like my mother's, it was passable.

When my mother came to visit me, I took her to this diner to sample their attempt at this Hungarian dish. She said that I should order it for myself because although she made it at home, she wasn't interested in having the diner's version. She preferred a turkey sandwich and some lentil soup. So I ordered the Paprikas and when it arrived, the owner came by to see how everything was. He knew my mother was Hungarian as I was a regular there, and he asked her whether she had tasted the stew. She replied that she had, and smiled.

"Well?" he asked, "How is it?"

She did what she always does when she is going to impart sometimes unsolicited wisdom on a stranger; she asked for his first name which he gladly revealed.

"Bill," she said, "it needs five things."

He quickly ran to get a pencil and paper. "Yes ma'am," he said, "tell me what they are and I promise I'll change the recipe."

She grinned. "You don't need a big piece of paper for this list."

As he stood ready to write the precious formula, she leaned towards him and said slowly, "Five caraway seeds."

Lilly's Chicken Paprikas

2-3 TBS vegetable oil

1 chicken (around 4 lbs) cut into 8 pieces with some skin

1-2 TBS flour for dredging

Salt and pepper

1 red or green pepper, seeded, chopped coarsely

1 large onion, chopped coarsely

(Optional) 1/2 tomato chopped

3-4 TBS sweet paprika

5 caraway seeds

Water and/or chicken stock to cover

Heat the oil in a stock pot on medium heat. Season chicken with salt and pepper and lightly drizzle with flour. Brown the chicken about 5 minutes on each side in pan, remove and set aside. Lower heat and add onions and pepper, cook about 5 minutes until soft. Stir constantly as the flour will stick. Add tomato if you want (usually we don't), then add paprika and caraway seeds. Add a little stock or water, stir again. Add chicken, toss to coat, and add enough water and/or stock to almost reach the top of the chicken (usually between 1 and 2 cups). Cover and simmer until chicken begins to fall off the bone. Adjust seasonings as necessary. Serve with egg noodles or dumplings mixed with a bit of the gravy and parsley.

The Table

Yes, having a father who was a tailor and pattern maker, and a seamstress mother spoiled me regarding clothing repair. And knowing that anything could be altered - let in or out, shortened, relined - made me an expert bargain shopper. Often I would buy a garment that in no way resembled my size, only to have its dimensions remedied by one of my parents.

When I was a small child, my father made all of my winter coats. My younger sister and I were always wrapped in his satin-lined wool creations. Since keeping warm was the prime directive in these garments, fur or fleece often lined the collar and pockets.

The ritual would start like this. We would be ushered into the family car and driven to Woolf Brothers, a fine department store in Kansas City. My sister would remind my father that after we chose coats he promised to take us for ice cream, and he would nod in agreement from the driver's seat.

As we entered the palatial store front, my father would caution us to act like young ladies, and if we had any remnants of lunch on our hands, to wipe them on the handkerchief that he brought for just that purpose. Even though our mother had supervised our post meal cleanup at home, we knew he would not be at rest unless we made sure to remove even molecular residue. So we would dutifully wipe our hands on his brown and white striped cotton square. After he folded it and replaced it in his pocket, he would reach for our hands and we would begin to climb the wide marble staircase to [our first stop: the](#) women's suit department.

Since he designed women's coats and suits, he periodically looked in ladies departments to see what the new lines were and to inspect the workmanship. Often times a salesperson would approach him to ask if he required help, to which he would reply curtly, "Nope."

He would run his hands along the seams, examine the buttonhole work, feel the nap of the fabric. He would sometimes shake his head and mutter,

"How can they let this on the floor..."

and then show us a criminal pucker, a poorly laid zipper, or the worst offense, a sloppy seam that distorted the line of the garment. We of course knew that he was not talking to us.

After he was satisfied that he had seen the season's line, we would head to the great staircase again and climb to the third floor, where the children's clothing was sold. As we approached the coat department, my sister and I exchanged glances, silently praying for divine intervention to guide my father's hand to just buy them off the rack this year so we could look like everyone else.

But it was not to be. We would look through the selections, and each choose one we liked.

Often times he would say,

"No, [that's too thin,](#)" or "No hood, no way."

Finally, when our choices met with his approval, he would look at the design, jot a few things on a piece of paper, and we would leave. He only need look at a coat to immediately understand its pattern, know how improve on its cut and for sure make it warmer. To my sister and I, this meant that what emerged from his workshop would only vaguely resemble the coats we had chosen for him to copy.

And once again, six weeks after our trip to the department store, he would ascend from his basement workshop with two wooden hangers, on which hung snugly tailored (with room for a sweater underneath) expertly made winter coats. So we were doomed to once again be the only two kids on the playground with coats that had premature bust darts.

Bust darts. My father developed a formula for bust darts in the early 1970's. He was frustrated with the way bust darts were often in the wrong place on a garment, and not adjusted in patterns carefully and flexibly enough to accommodate different sizes. So the coats that he designed began receiving attention for being very well fit. In the early 1980's he got an invitation from a coat factory owner in New York to visit his operation, and possibly work for him. My father accepted, on the condition that he see all aspects of the line from the designers' studio to the final products. The owner agreed, and flew him east.

Since my brother and I were already living close to New York, we drove into the city to see him. As we ate dinner at an Italian restaurant in Midtown discussing the possibility of my father moving back to New York (after arriving here in 1947), he made it clear that it was next to impossible.

“I would need enough money to be able to live comfortably, and I will have to bring my table.”

My brother and I looked at each other and then my brother said,
“Dad, you can get another table.”

The table was a 10' by 5' worktable that [he had had custom built](#) in his basement. The carpenter who built it worked closely with my father, listening to his exact specifications. He realized that it threatened to be much bigger than the doorway through which it would have to pass, so it was decided that it should be built on site. It had two levels, one on the bottom for storage, and the top for making patterns and cutting fabric. It was covered with fine green cork, and there were two large rolls hung on racks at one end, one with muslin and one with thick pattern paper. There were assorted tools, threads of all [colors and thicknesses](#), cutting implements, T-squares and patterns for each member of the family at several stages of growth. These were all neatly stored on hooks, on pegs, and on the great shelf below.

This table was where he created his best designs, where he smoked his favorite pipes, and where he could work in peace without the chaos of the family. Since this was built to his desire, he was often most at home leaning against it with his leather apron carefully tied around his waist, hovering over a current project. [“This table,” he would say, keeps me alive.”](#)

“Without it I will perish,” he would promise.

We were used to his dramatic exclamations, but never underestimated the importance of this sacred table, and when my brother commented on the possibility of replacing it, he quickly added,

“Or we could have it taken apart and shipped.”

After this dinner, I stayed overnight with my father, and went with him the next morning to meet with the factory owner at his office. We all exchanged pleasantries at an almost extravagantly catered brunch. Then my father said, “Well, shall we get to business?” The owner looked at me and suggested that I wait in the lobby of his office so they could speak business, to which my father replied,
“She stays with me, her English is better.”

This was only partially true. Although he had an accent, he spent his free time reading dictionaries and encyclopedias, but I understood that I was to accompany him to help translate any slang or idioms used in this negotiation. So we all proceeded to the factory where we began a tour.

First the designers' and patternmakers' workroom, then the cutting room, then the quality controller's office. My father asked the controller to show him a project from beginning to end. So we went back to the patternmakers' workroom where the controller showed us a pattern and a muslin mock-up on a mannequin. We then proceeded to the cutting floor, where layers of fabric on big tables were being rapidly cut by professionals with electric scissors attached to power strips above. Then to the sewing room, where hundreds of operators worked at rows and rows of sewing machines.

This took about two hours, at which point my father asked for some coffee and a place to sit and talk. I knew this was to be the time they would discuss salary, and I was going to be sent to another area to read the book I brought with me. So I was ushered into a small employee

lunchroom with vending machines and a television where I waited for about an hour. When my father and the factory owner returned, my father said to me,

“Let’s go, Cookele, we are done here.”

I looked at the two men, and noticed that the owner was fidgeting with his watch controls and adjusting his sleeve.

“Thank you Mr. Segelstein,” he said, “ and remember, please call me if you reconsider.”

We walked back towards my father’s hotel and stopped at a coffee shop to have a late lunch.

After the salads arrived, I asked,

“So?”

He told me that the owner started the negotiation by asking what salary would make it possible for him to relocate to New York. My father replied with the same answer he gave my brother and me the night before; that he would need enough to live comfortably in a place big enough to house his table. When they came close to agreement on a fee, my father reminded the owner that he still had to tour the showroom. There he would see the finished product of the pattern he had seen on the designer’s table and mannequin.

After they walked through the showroom and my father inspected the racks, he told the owner,

“Young man, you can’t afford me.”

The owner promised that they could further discuss the salary, and possibly come up with more money. But my father said that not even the Queen of England could offer enough to pay him to work amidst such poor quality control.

“No matter how good my designs are, what ends up on your floor has nothing to do with the patterns I deliver.”

The owner then asked my father if he could at least buy his bust dart formula to which he replied,

“You especially don’t have enough money for that.”

We finished lunch, I accompanied him back to his hotel room, watched him pack and hailed a cab to take him to LaGuardia. As the cab pulled away, I saw a sense of relief in his stature, and imagined him to be thinking of whatever project lay at home in the basement on his table.

Hem Tape

As I rounded my forties, I decided that I should finally grow up, find a seamstress or tailor closer to where I lived, and stop sending my alterations halfway across the country, already pinned to my specifications. My parents were getting older, my father often had custom work to do, and my mother was closing her alterations shop. So I asked around until someone told me of a tailor in town and raved about his “[Old World quality](#)”.

I was thrilled and took two jackets and four pairs of pants. Basic hems, I told him, no cuffs, just shorten the sleeves on the jackets and of course, move the sleeve buttons. A simple enough task, he indicated, and told me to come back in two weeks.

When I returned, and for the first time in my life paid for the work done on my clothes, I decided to inspect them before he wrapped them up. I was disappointed to see that the hems looked like they had suffered thread anarchy, the sleeves on my jacket had no facing to keep them stiff and the buttons had not been moved, completely destroying the line of the sleeve. I quietly wrote out the check, thanked him for what I knew was to be the last time, and drove home.

I immediately wrapped the clothes in a box, taped it shut and drove to the post office, where I shipped them to my father. I then called him and sheepishly admitted my folly.

"He didn't even use hem tape," I said.

"Kalyike..." (Yid. *cripple*), my father grumbled. I was not sure if that was intended for the tailor or for me.

About a week later my dad called me.

"It's done. I sent it this morning."

Then silence.

Then puffs on his pipe.

Soon came a sigh that began what I knew to be one of my father's famous Veretskier set-ups.

"This tailor," he began, "his shop is downtown?"

"Yes," I replied, "right downtown."

"A lot of people go by there?" he asked.

"I would think so," I said.

"And it's on a busy street?"

"Yes," I answered, "a busy street."

"Busy like here or like New York?" he asked.

"Busy like New York, Dad. Right downtown."

Another small silence.

"And cars and buses go by there?"

"Yes, Dad. A lot of cars and buses. It's a real busy street..." I said.

"Well," he finished, "You tell this tailor that he should take his sewing machines, and go outside. And he should get hit by a bus, because THAT was not a hem!"