

## Our Shabbos in Shebreshin

As Ashkenazim—Jews of Northern/Eastern European ancestry—we called it Shabbos; for the Mediterranean Sephardim, the word was Shabbat. It was our Sabbath, and it started on Fridays—to be exact, about six o'clock every Friday morning. I would hear my mother get out of bed and prepare herself for the big event of baking the bread that was to last all week.

One day, as a young child, I too got up, announcing to my mother that I would go with her. She didn't resist very much. She pulled down my nightshirt, took my hand, and led me in my bare feet across the few yards to my grandfather's house. Grandma was already awake and moving about. The kitchen was brightly lit, the large brick stove and oven were fired up, and there were piles of sifted flour on the table. Some dough was already rising.

The kitchen was adjacent to my grandparents' bedroom, and the door was seldom closed. Zaida saw me coming in, smiled, and beckoned me to come join him in his bed. He put me on his chest. I buried my face in his beard. It smelled of spices. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth.

We watched the two women prepare the baking—sifting and kneading. First, the white flour for the twisted Shabbos challah and other white-dough baked goods; later, the dark rye

to bake in round loaves, sprinkled on top with caraway seeds. When fresh, the bread was soft and delicious. But because baking occurred only once a week, toward the end of that period the bread became hard and stale. It took a lot of garlic and onions to make it palatable.

The baking was for our entire family. My uncles lived nearby, and the baked goods were divided between all of us.

But first came the bialys (or, as we called them, *pletzlach*)—these were made from the first batch of rising white dough. My mother rolled and rolled until she was satisfied that it was perfect. Then she formed it into a round disk about the size of a plate, very thin in the center, soft at the edges. She sprinkled it generously with black poppy seeds and shredded fried onions, covering the whole bialy with sweet butter—then beckoned me to come and eat it.

It was the very best that any food ever tasted! To this day, I still can feel the warmth and aroma—and it has never been duplicated.

Next came my grandfather's turn. He got up, washed himself, went into another room, put on his *tallis*, and performed his first ritual prayer.

Finished, he took his favorite silver wine glass, filled it with vodka (about four ounces), drank it down straight, and sat near the table. It was already set with the buttered bialys, which he ate while sipping what we called “coffee”—hot chicory with some burned, crushed grain.

Satisfied and happy, he went into the woodworking part of the house and started to sharpen the tools and saws. There was no electricity; everything was done with hand tools.

Soon my uncles joined us, along with my father. They all sat down to eat the warm, baked treats. This was a Friday-only pleasure.

A little later, my mother extracted a fistful of dough from the dark rye mix and molded out what we called platkes. These were oval-shaped and longer than the white pletzel, and the centers were buttered and covered with sesame seeds. They were served to the helpers who worked in the shop.

My aunts and some neighbors came in to pick up their challahs and other breads. While there, they tasted some of the salty cookies and mandelbrot that were also baked only on that day.

As soon as the baking was finished, the kitchen was cleaned up. Everything was put away for the following week, and the ritual of preparing the Sabbath cholent started.

Since Jews couldn't cook on Saturdays, the main meal had to be prepared the day before. Hugh earthen pots were filled up with kishkes (beef intestine, stuffed with carrots, potatoes, chicken, beef, onions, and spices). When the pots were full they were covered, sealed, and put into the extremely hot brick oven.

Neighbors also brought in their pots, and all were arranged in the oven that was again, and finally, sealed.

The food was simmering constantly, and the oven was not reopened until the next day, when the Shabbos Goy (the Gentile woman hired just for this purpose) came to help with the work that was prohibited to us on a Saturday.

While the women were preparing the cholent, the men started to prepare themselves for the Shabbos. At about three o'clock Friday afternoon they would quit their work, and most went together down to the riverbank where the "Turkish" steambath occupied a very large building. Inside, it was hot and steamy. The men went up to the highest benches where the steam and heat were hottest. They took along scrub brushes, or occasionally twigs. They sweated, scrubbed themselves, and

made male noises of delight. I joined the men, but I stayed on the lowest bench, where it was cooler.

After about two hours, the men came out and immersed themselves in the cool river water that ran through the bath-house.

At last, clean and happy, with shiny faces, we emerged and went home to change our clothes to the Shabbos garments. The women had polished the shoes and boots and had also changed into their Shabbos clothing. Everyone looked clean and relaxed, as the men then went to the Shul to pray.

When they returned home, the women had already lit and blessed the candles. The kerosene-burning chandelier was also lit. The challah, covered in a satin cloth, was in front of the candles.

We embraced each other, wishing each person a good Shabbos. Grandpa recited a prayer, and we would sit down at the table. But first came the singing sanctification of Kiddush, followed by the tasting of the freshly made raisin wine. (Occasionally we had real red wine with a “Kosher L’Pesach” label.) Afterwards, freshly cooked fish, with the skin still on the outside, was served. Zaida blessed the largest piece of fish, and he often took the head for himself. Occasionally, he would pick out some special morsel and give it to me.

Then came the kugel; the noodle soup—hot and full of spices; the delicious chicken and compote; and finally, the tea and freshly baked cookies.



It was a glorious afternoon and evening, and a great meal. With smiles on our faces, we went to bed.

We awakened early for the big day. The Shabbos Goy was already performing her chores. She lit the stove, turned off the chandelier, and put away the previous night's dishes—tasks prohibited to Jewish women on the day of rest. She also unsealed the oven and took out the various sealed pots.

We did not go out to Shul on Saturdays, because a small congregation came to our home, where an ark with two Torahs stood in a corner. Around 35 men prayed and read from the Torah, while the women stayed in the next room with the doors open so they could listen and participate.

After the service was over, the room was cleared, the big table was covered with the Shabbos tablecloth, and the main meal of the day commenced. (On Saturdays we all ate in the same room.) The pots of steaming cholent were brought out and served along with gefilte fish and more and more goodies.

While food was being served, my grandfather, who had a pleasant voice, was always singing zmiros—songs of praise, thanking God and the wives and families for making the Shabbos such a wonderful holy day. I loved the zmiros, but alas, I never had a good singing voice. I tried, but Grandpa just smiled.

Right after the heavy meal, the men retired to their bedrooms and closed the doors behind them. Soon, the wives silently followed, this time locking the doors. (I once heard a nasty little girl saying—with a wink—that her parents go into the bedroom to pray for more sons.)

The very small children played hide and seek after the meal, while the older ones went to the marketplace, sat on the fence near the church, flirted with young passersby, and gossiped a little. The young men and women went to the library or to political meetings.

Parents reemerged after their siesta. They were generally smiling and looked happy. The men sat around a table on our veranda. The women brought out hot tea and plates filled with cookies and other goodies that had been baked on Friday.

We had an understanding on Shabbos: never talk about work or any unpleasant subjects. Saturdays were for joy and rest, and to be very content.

If it was a warm day, my cousin Nathan and I were summoned, given pitchers, and ordered to go and bring back soda water.

Across from the hospital, where the highway made a very sharp turn, there was a corner shop where we could get sodas. The shop was in a cellar. The cool room was above a sub-basement filled with big blocks of ice that had been cut from the frozen river in mid-winter. Covered with sawdust, these ice blocks lasted all year. Between them were long cylinders filled with gases connected to a faucet; it dispensed the soda that created the bubbles that always tickled my nose.

Saturday was the biggest business day for this merchant, even during cool weather. People came in and ordered sodas for themselves and their companions. Everyone treated someone else. On a shelf were many jars filled with jams and juices. The shop worker would put about two teaspoonfuls of the colorful, fragrant fruit products into the bottom of the glass, as customers smacked their lips with pleasure.

No Jew was allowed to handle money on a Saturday, and it was also prohibited to write down what was purchased. So everything was on an honor system. It was expected that on Sunday or Monday people would return to settle their bills, and they did.

Nathan and I rushed home with the sodas. The women served their men using our own ingredients—putting in a lot

of syrup and jams, mostly strawberry, blueberry, and blackberry.

Occasionally, Nathan and I were sent to the spring to bring back the purest cold water. There were very tall hills across from the flour mill, but below was a small depression and spring. The water oozed out very slowly, forming a small pool that drained under the road and into the river.

We never used the water from the pool; instead, we put our jars to the very mouth of the spring where the water emerged—crystal clear, pure, and ice-cold. We then sprinted home, to our parents' delight and satisfaction.

Sometimes we heard there was a *maggid* (itinerant preacher) in the prayer house next to the Shul. All the men would go to hear the visiting lecturer, who was usually a good storyteller; the place was full of attentive listeners. The *maggid* told stories from the Talmud and Midrash (the latter featured allegorical writings), but mostly he delighted his audience by telling about the strange Jews he had visited all over the world.

One *maggid* described jet-black Jews (only their palms were white), Jews with slanted eyes, Jews who owned palaces and thousands of acres, Jews who were heads of government, or actually rulers. Then he stopped and looked at the congregation, revealing that since the prohibition against polygamy didn't apply to some of these strange Jews, the men had many wives. He even knew of a man with 500 wives! This brought howls from the audience and shouts of, "Why couldn't this happen to me?"

We came home and told the women what had been learned from the storyteller. The next day, this *maggid* went around to the Jewish homes with an outstretched hand, begging for money toward his daughters' dowries. A few days later, he would go on to the next town.



As each Saturday waned, we started to watch the sky—waiting for the first star to announce the Shabbos was almost over. The stars continued to appear, and—reluctantly convinced that the day was indeed over—we all sighed and came inside. We waited there for Grandpa to start the Havdalah—the prayer separating the end of this holy day from the remainder of the week.

A multicolored candle—actually a twist of several thin, multicolored strands—was used only for this occasion. The head of the family lit this candle and sang the Havdalah. He poured some of the Shabbos raisin wine onto a plate, then extinguished the flame in the wine. We again embraced and wished each other a “Good Week.” The spice box was lifted from the table. Ours was silver, carved in the shape of a medieval castle about twelve inches high; on top was a flag, about four inches wide. At the center, a door opened to an interior filled with aromatic spices. This was passed around for each person to smell, as we reflected on the good Shabbos that had just passed.

We sat down at the table, and some food was warmed up—most of it left over from the day’s big meal. Once again, we all wished each other a good week.

After this full, happy day, I went to bed. I awoke the next morning to the sound of my grandfather in his shop, a small file in his hands rhythmically sharpening the bandsaws.

I felt warm and secure—assured that soon enough there would be another day of rest.