

My Childhood Fish – Political and Personal

By Kaja Weeks

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The distinctive fish of my childhood arrived by way of my parents, who arrived as refugees to America from Estonia, a tiny country on the Baltic Sea. Fleeing a Soviet military invasion during World War II, they survived ghastly years in war-torn Europe and eventually were granted a trans-Atlantic voyage with entry to the United States, my birthplace. Along with their homeland's rich but brutal history, I also absorbed something that first appeared to be a simple fact: Estonia was a land that took fish culture seriously. It's true that water surrounds half of the land – the Gulf of Finland to the north and the slate blue Baltic Sea to the west, with some 1,500 offshore islands and an interior flowing with over 2,500 rivers. But that devotion to fish was about something more.

My mother grew up in *Pärnu*, a coastal town on its own white, sandy inlet, and during my childhood she persistently and dreamily reminisced over some fish that she called a *Räim* and that I could never identify in English. It turned out to have been some gentler herring found only in the Baltic Sea. Decades later, I found out that it had truly been a privileged palate-pleaser during her youth. Folk-beliefs about it abounded, including an historic ode lauding it as *Pärnu's* savior and hero, to the point where a prospective groom should know at least 100 ways to prepare this beloved salty fish.

In 2007, six years before my mother died, the *Wall Street Journal* published a front-page story with a headline that could be seen as only partly tongue-in-cheek in Estonia's growing bid for national identity. *Russia Beware*, it

began, then continued, *Estonia Chooses a National Fish . . . Baltic Herring submerged under Soviets Wins*. I couldn't believe it – (first, that they were actually choosing a “national fish,” though I shouldn't have been surprised), but then that the fish to which they referred was none other than the *Räim* my mother had so nostalgically recalled!

She never did taste it again, since Russia's nearly fifty-year long occupation quashed her return.

During my childhood, however, an important variant of herring emerged – open-faced anchovy sandwiches made on buttered dark bread, topped by cucumber, dill and a slice of hard-boiled egg. The special significance that this delicacy took on while Estonia remained behind the Iron Curtain cannot be emphasized enough. These were the times of taut antics – Khrushchev banging his shoe at the United Nations; of military tension – Brezhnev's arms build-up; and later

still, crackles of hope while Yeltsin swigged shots of vodka as the Soviet Union disintegrated. All the while, my parents' people continued vigorous protest of their homeland's occupation; and fish was never far behind.

Symbols of ethnic pride and resolve,

these little fish sandwiches were traditionally curated and ubiquitous especially after ceremonies remembering Estonian independence (first declared in 1918).

Year after year, our commemorative occasions were peppered with greetings and proclamations from Eisenhower and Kennedy, Johnson and Bush, even Jimmy Carter. We sat in auditorium rows, hands folded, fittingly half-solemn-half-smiling, grateful for the support that affirmed America's official non-recognition of Soviet occupation. These presidential edicts evoked

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great hope and yet, given the grip of Soviet rule over the Baltic countries, also seemed like the tiniest morsels for continued survival. But afterwards, in the rooms of the Estonian Civic Club on Manhattan's East 34th Street, elder-ladies unfailingly set tables with white tablecloths, flowers, percolated coffee – hot, dark and strong – and always platters of these little fish sandwiches.

Moreover, the refugee community would go to unbelievable lengths in order to procure the correct semblance of homeland fish and bread. Bakeries and factories were actually created in order to

produce the authentic grainy dark bread. One was in Toronto, and I recall my brother crossing the

Canadian border as U.S. crossing guards stared into his jammed-packed car trunk at *Rooneem Pagari* dark sourdough bread – a mound of eighty loaves! But our anchovies, in truth, were the poor-exile's substitute. In Estonia, the oily fish of choice for such snacks was (and is now) the marinated sprat (*kilu*), but in 1950's and

60's America we didn't have access to fish-rich Baltic seas. Such foreign delicacies were sought but almost never found; hence, the frequent use of premium jarred anchovy fillets instead. But rarely, my parents did manage to acquire authentic tinned sprats at an unlikely place, in Hackensack, New Jersey, at Packard-Bamberger's or "BAH-kaard BOMB-behr-gehrs" as my parents pronounced it with their old country accent. An enormous, peculiar store that opened in the 1930's in a former wallpaper factory, it held furnishings, eclectic fashions and more. Down oily, wood floors that sloped

unevenly and were covered with sawdust, I would slide and traipse behind them to what was optimistically labeled the "Gourmet Pantry"

corner. The precious item procured, my mother would then go home to begin the process of chopping off the tiny heads and tails, cleaning the innards and slicing the pinkish-silver flesh into tidbits for their sanctified destination. The combined scents of its marinade – coriander seeds, bay leaves, salt, sugar and black

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pepper – wafted up as I sat beside her, tasked with slicing the cucumbers. I was endlessly rebuked for not cutting them thinly enough – tender, green quivers they were supposed to be.

“Look, once you’ve got them thin enough you can make small *schlitz*,” she would slip into the German word for “cut” from her Displaced Person camp days. “And, so, twist the whole slice like this,” she’d show me, curling the circle into itself and finally laying a delicate ornament onto the sprat with an approving nod of her own head.

Clearly, we were creating works of art, reverent symbols.



There was another memorable childhood fish, as well. But though I admit that all of us liked to eat it, each of my parents’ individual relationship with fish – and with me – was unique. My father was a volatile man. Sitting at the dinner table with him often meant an encounter with terror or, consequently, my lapse into a near-dissociative state. Therefore, a relatively *good* experience could be considered when, instead, he undertook one of his speeches. Of his repeated monologues, one

intricately described the lost republic of Estonia’s fishing industry. Indeed, forty-years later an Estonian childhood friend who occasionally had visited us in those days, recalls with still-puzzled amusement, “Remember how your father used to recite the data and history of Estonian fishing!” To me, that he wasn’t hurling a plateful of fish but, rather, monopolizing dinner table talk about it was a relief.

It was my mother who prepared the fish I think of as my personal fish. That prized meal was a lightly-floured, pan-fried perch. She was a creative and accomplished cook and probably absorbed these skills from her own mother, Miili (Emilie). Miili was born in 1892 on a family farm in southwestern Estonia when the country was in one of the many earlier under-the-Russian-empire phases. However, it had just been roused by a “national awakening” and Miili, an adventurous spirit, took off with a girlfriend to study at a chef’s school in St. Petersburg. She returned to live in Estonia, bringing not only perfected cooking skills, but also the ability to support her family by growing all her own vegetables and herbs and selling them at the local market; she was well-known for her green thumb, even creating innovative late winter greenhouses in their back yard that yielded early seedlings.

By the time my mother was born in 1919 Estonia had just won its independence. In *Pärnu*, the resort town bathed in northern light, with its parks, concert shells, spas and a beach that sloped slowly into clear waters, her youth was vibrant. But when World War II unfolded my mother said good-bye to her mother at the pier. Although

bombs exploded in the sky and on land, they believe that separation would only be for a short while – until the war ended and the German and/or

Russian occupants withdrew. The occupants did not withdraw, and mother and daughter never saw each other again. My mother's voice would soften when she reflected that the garden-lettuce she served with the perch she made us was infused with flower scents because her mother had taught her to grow flowers and greens side-by-side in their *Pärnu* gardens.

My mother's perch was lovingly made, the just-warm, salted, golden fillets arranged on a plate with twisted slices of lemon and fresh parsley sprigs. Often, she did this on evenings when my father was working nights

in the city, a time I thought of as our "freedom nights" because we were without trepidation of his rage. As I watched old movies in the adjoining living room my mother, calling out about this or that, patiently turned each fish with two forks to preserve the delicate crusty coating. Breezes from the kitchen door, opened

to the fresh night air, carried their lingering scent.

In later years, before I returned to college after short visits, my mother would pack a serving of these warm perch,

enfolded in foil for me to take. I could usually drive no further than a block, stopping mid-street before I had to rip it open. She is gone now, and I have not yet reached perfection in trying to replicate my mother's ocean perch, though there is both an aching as well as satisfaction when I give it a try. As soon as the aroma of sizzling fillets rises, I am both filled with and empty of her. My nostalgia anchors deeply, like her lost childhood-herring.

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About the Author



Kaja Weeks is a poet, essayist and classically trained singer. As the daughter of WW II refugees, she often contemplates identity through the lens of inter-generational history. Her works have been published in The Sugar House Review, Ars Medica: A Journal of Medicine, The Arts and Humanities, The Sandy River Review, and elsewhere. "Voices," a poem inspired by Estonia's renowned Song Festival, was published by Estonian World, a global online magazine. Her essay, "A Girl's Singing Nirvana, My Mother's Voice" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize (The Potomac Review, 2015).

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