Paradoxes of food nostalgia in Russian Israeli writing

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One of the effects of post-Soviet Russian Jewish emigration to Israel in the 1990s was the establishment of so-called “Russian supermarkets”. These became possible as a result of the economic and political reforms which allowed private enterprise’s emergence in post-socialist space, and which in turn enabled trade relations between Israel and the former Soviet Union. Another prominent reason was the response of Israeli entrepreneurs to an immigration of one million newcomers, some of whom, in 1990, established a chain of non-kosher supermarkets.[[1]](#footnote-1) While the immediate post-Soviet emigration to Israel dubbed itself as ‘a sausage emigration’, ‘*kolbasnaia emigratsiia’*, thus openly acknowledging that they left the former Soviet Union to avoid food shortages, the spread of ‘Russian food’ supermarkets in the following decades was to a degree the result of rapid growth in the food industries of the post-Soviet countries. The spread of the new supermarkets in Israel not only added diversity to its hitherto well-supplied food market; today, the supermarket chain ‘Keshet Teamim’ boasts on its advertising website that 30% of its clients are non-Russian speaking Israelis. It also claims the best assortment of sausage in the country. These supermarkets became not only a tool of cultural diffusion, they also helped to overturn the prevailing stereotype of a luxury-product deprived Russian Jewry. The popularity of Russian supermarkets amongst the various non-East European subgroups contributed itself to a growth of self-esteem amongst the Russian émigrés, which led in turn to their own assertiveness. As business successes, the supermarkets became a means to overcome stereotypes established by the Soviet emigration of the 1970s, the which was known as ‘the third wave’: the emigration that had projected its image as idealistic rather than materialistic. This “third wave” image was rooted in Zionist idealism, coupled with an inability to express their Jewishness in the USSR. Rather than opening supermarkets, that generation established Russian language cultural and literary periodicals on their arrival to Israel. Journals like *Vremia i my* were modelled on the traditional Russian and Soviet ‘thick journals’ – the platform for formenting the ferment of intellectual and artistic ideas. It was an expression of nostalgia. Nostalgia for a rich culture to which they no longer had access. For this generation, the language of expression was literary Russian, and with their linguistic limitations in the Hebrew speaking country, language was the site of their frustration with and trauma of their acculturation. Notably, this generation was equally deprived of Russian foods in Israel, but this deprivation only contributed to their nostalgia, rather than being translated into foodstuff enterprises. The successive ‘sausage immigration’, however, found its cultural expression in the more universal language of food. It was their arrival *en masse* in Israel, one million in number, compared to the only 250, 000 Soviet Jews that arrived in the 1970s, that acheived the critical mass to make the growth of Russian food supermarkets in Israel both plausible and possible.

My paper explores the thematic cluster relating to the dynamics surrounding food and foodstuffs in the context of migration, as well as traditional foods and the nostalgia associated with the transition between the old and the new worlds. In particular, I examine the response of the ex-Soviet Jews manifested in their buying practices, cooking recipes and the artistic representations in the writings of contemporary Russian-Israeli writers. I explore the role which foods are ascribed in the formation of their self-identity as defined against other cultural and ethnic sub-groups in Israel. At the centre of my investigation is the paradox of conflation; conflation of Russian-Jewish foodstuffs with top brands established by Soviet ‘light industry’ because of the prestige value of these brands in the Soviet Union. I argue that it is through this complex association with Soviet luxury brands that Russian émigrés in Israel established their Diasporic roots and define their dual Russian/Jewish identity. I focus on the cultural and historic context of foods like sweets and meats because they feature strongly both in self-identification of the Soviet Jewish émigrés and in the stock available in Russian supermarkets. These foods have also paradoxical symbolic significance as markers of difference, othering the Jews in Russian culture. I examine not only the continuity, but also the *discontinuity* in foodways and food stuffs between the two worlds, and explore the reasons why some traditional East European Jewish foods do not have presence in Israel. This gap in “know-how” is the result of a discontinuity in culture between generations of Soviet Jews. My thematic clusters conceive foodways as intersections of sociological, anthropological and literary material. My examples are drawn from Russian and Soviet culinary history, Russian language internet sites in Israel, in Russia as well as in successor states, and literary representations of foods as markers of cultural continuity and difference.

# Scholarship on food and foodways shows that humanity feeds not only on nutrients but also on signs, on symbols, on dreams and imagination. Fischler (1993) shows that the ‘principle of incorporation’ is an invariable element in the behaviour of eating. This principle has a double meaning. On a material level, ‘the eater becomes what the eater consumes.’ That is, you are what you eat. Eating - the integration or adoption of the qualities of the food one eats. But additionally, ‘the eater becomes part of a culture.’ (“You eat what you are”) Food and cooking, being culturally determined, both place the eater in a social universe, and in a cultural order. Eating habits are the foundation of a collective identity and, consequently, of alterity (Bessiere 1998). Moreover, having focused on the emotional significance of food in relation to nostalgia, a group of scholars conducting research on ‘comfort foods’, stressed that ‘The nostalgic longing and consumption of particular food items sustain one's sense of cultural, familial, and self-identity.[[2]](#endnote-1) When we are physically disconnected from a community, a family, or any primary group that defines who we are, our sense of self may become fractured. In these instances, consuming food items intimately linked with one's past may repair such fractures by maintaining a continuity of the self in unfamiliar surroundings. This may be especially true when one is maintaining an ethnic identity’ (Locher et al. 2005, 273).

What kind of ‘old world’ then did the Russian food supermarkets in Israel represent? What kind of food from this old world did constitute this new field of desire and longing? Nostalgia for food is a component of sensory and cultural memory, and in turn is a formative block in identity-formation, especially in émigré communities separated from their old world by an iron-wall of politics. The Soviet Jew’s paradoxical nostalgia manifests itself in the fact that the same culture that deprived them of their cultural heritage through the absence of traditional Jewish dishes in its official menus, as well as in its stock of produce, and as well as in its cook books, had created the alternative ‘Soviet’ foods that this group then adopted as their own. This substitute food is typically represented by the kind of products that were difficult to obtain because of the food shortages associated with Soviet agricultural failures from the 1960s. Many of these products created the category of notorious ‘*defitsit*’ (shortages) produce and products. To obtain this food within the Soviet Union, one had to belong to the certain group of people who had special access to the complex map of ‘foodways’. One had either to belong to the high echelons of power (as only few Jews did in the period of post-Arab-Israeli war of the 1960s,) or one had to belong to, or have access to, the food distributors or suppliers, in order to gain access to the products that ‘fell of the back of a truck’, or were sold on the black market. In terms of the Soviet law, it was risky to belong to any of these groups, and it was often Jews who regularly fell victim to the peculiarities of the foodways system. Statistically, in the 1970’s, Soviet Jews ranked among the highestpercentage in the category “Accused of such Trade Crimes that involved Obtaining and Selling Food Items and Luxury Goods”. It has to be borne in mind that in Stalin’s time, penalties for such ‘free-marketeering’ were extremely harsh, and were treated as a sabotage of the socialist system itself; in the 1970s, the accused could spent up to ten years in prison. The culturally-specific status of both chocolate boxes, other sweet treats, and sausage acquired very specific connotations in the Soviet Union during the period of 1970 to 1990s. Their status of exclusive items brought them into the domain of items for bribes for important people, and in the infamous ‘shock-therapy’ policy that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, a big sausage could barter very well. These two kinds of foods thus became ‘super foods’, but in a very distinct time and place-specific situation.

What kind of foods then did gradually make their way to Israel, starting from the third wave of Russian Jewish emigration in the 1970s, and culminating in the spread of Russian food supermarkets in Israel today? Today, these supermarkets’ websites advertise themselves as having the biggest range of cold meats, salamis, and sausages in the country, in line with the self-identification of the ‘sausage immigration’ of the 1990s. The assortment of meat delicatessen comprises such famous Soviet brands, as ‘doktorskaia’, ‘liubitel’skaia’, ‘diabeticheskaia’ – all of which were standardised by the Soviet State organisation of standards (GOST). It is these meat products that constituted an important part of the Soviet urban population’s diet, and Jews in the Soviet Union were decidedly urbane. It is this category of products that one did not find an equivalent for in Israel’s kosher delicatessens, the reason being that the Soviets produced sausage and salami out of pork, and not kosher beef. Another assortment of Soviet brands that the Soviet Jews missed were confectionary products, such as dark chocolates and a number of cakes that were also patented and standardised by GOST. Indeed, the wide assortment of sweets and chocolates, as well as of wafers and cookies, cakes and pastries, on offer in Russian food supermarkets in Israel was, and is, staggering. Both these two categories of foods – meat delicatessen and confectionary - became favourite Soviet brands as the result of a centralised and concerted effort of the Soviet government in the 1930s. Back then, the introduction of wide and varied assortment of foods, including delicatessen-type foods like cold meats, salamis, sausages and confectionary, was an act of ideological and political importance; the new Soviet government under Stalin’s leadership was anxious to parade to the imperialist world the economic successes of the Soviet socialist system. Not only to be able to feed the masses, but to feed them well, to feed the masses with such fine products, the like that in the West and pre-Revolutionary Russia only the rich could afford, this was the goal. Amongst the first factories that were instituted in the 1930s stood the giant meat-processing plant, Miasokombinat, instituted in Moscow 1933, and two factories of confectionary, one likewise in Moscow and the other in Leningrad, both established 1936. The desire for these two forms of foods was actuated through their association with luxury, and particularly in the case of chocolate, refinement, sophistication and good taste. A a result of the role that Soviet culture ascribed to these two categories of food, and because the Soviet Jews were accordingly products of this culture, these two foodstuffs were foremost amongst those that found their way to Russian-Israeli food supermarkets in objects of desire and nostalgia. In what will follow, I will focus on these two categories of foods, and their role in the identity formation of Soviet and Russian Jewry. I will start from the history of these foods as Soviet brands with strong ideological underpinnings, and will show how they yet came to be a part of the Soviet Jews’ diet, and even to replace some traditional Jewish foods. I will then show how the Russian cultural discourse situated the Jews as the Other with the use of these two categories of foods - the meats and the sweets - and how some leading Russian Israeli writers engage with this discourse reflecting on their own new experience in Israel. I will conclude by reflecting on the role of Russian food supermarkets in the identity formation of Russian émigrés.

On Sweets: Chocolates, ‘Culturedness’, and the Erasure of the Jewish Traditional Cuisine

Before the importation of food from Russian and the other former Soviet Republics became possible in the 1990s, enterprising émigrés founded their small food producing factories in Israel and USA, factories which produced imitations of the famous Soviet brands. Significantly, those concerned with chocolates, an old European favourite food which, in the perception of the newcomers from the Soviet Union, did not have an acceptable equivalent in Israel. This is particularly ironic because the Israeli chocolate producing factory ‘Elite’ based its brand on a claim of “old European heritage”. Moreover, it was started by the owner of a famous Latvian chocolate factory, ‘Laima’ in 1934. The aim of Laima’s owner, Eliah Promchenko, was to produce chocolate of the same high quality as its European original. Yet low demand for this product in Palestine was a contributing factor to difficulties faced in the 1930s. In Soviet times, Latvian ‘Laima’ chocolates and other chocolate-based products became a celebrated Soviet brand. Due to the high demand for chocolate products in the Soviet Union at the time of developed socialism, that is, from 1950s onwards, Laima’s products formed a category of *defitsit* foods – foods not easy to obtain by the multimillion Soviet consumers. This demand was in stark contrast to Laima’s story in Israel, where it commenced a line of chewing gum in 1956 as a way to diversify and fit the demand of the Israeli market. The ‘Laima’ in Latvia, on the other hand, made a successful transition from the Soviet to the EU food market. Today, it meets the new food standards, and continues to be one of the top brands, exporting its products both to the former Soviet Union countries as well as all over the world.

**Presently, some 70% of ‘Elite’s staff in Israel comprises of émigrés from the Soviet Union. This, however, does not attest the continuity in the assortment between the Soviet and Israeli brands. In fact, brought up on Soviet brands such as ‘Laima’, the Soviet émigrés from 1970s found the ‘Elite’ chocolate of Israel to be but a pale copy of the Soviet brands, and their European/Soviet hybrid identity demanded fulfilment with ‘real’ chocolate**. At this stage we should ask: How did chocolate became a building block of the Soviet identity? As it happened, the promotion of chocolate amongst the working classes in fact became a matter of state, and a propaganda campaign in the 1930’s ensued, labelled as ‘Kulturnost’’, or ‘becoming cultured’, “cultivation”. The man in charge was a certain Anastas Mikoian, Commissar of the Food Industry – who also oversaw the development of the Meat and Sausage Industry at the same time. In this era of high Stalinism, the Soviet masses were encouraged to shed off their old and drab proletarian rags, to step out, to attend art performances, and to begin eating foods more of a refined sort. The ideological underpinning of this campaign was to showcase the achievements of the Socialist planned economy. Good food and white clothes – the vogue colour of high Stalinism, emblemitised by Stalin’s ubiquitous peasant-smock *cum* military-cut white jacket, was a signal that the Soviet state had achieved its promise to the hard working masses, who now can commence enjoying themselves immensely in becoming stylish, sophisticated and elegant. In the sphere of food, the pinnacle of the 1930s ‘culturedness’ campaign was the publication of the cook book *O vkusnoi i zdorovoi pishche* (On Tasty and Healthy Food) in 1939. Prefaced by Mikoian, it included dishes of various ethnic groups and nationalities of the Soviet Union. Ironically but significantly for this discussion, this particular cook book was published during ‘the Great Terror’ campaign unleashed by Stalin against what was construed as “the enemy within” that cooperated with “the enemy without”. It is important to note that this terror campaign was not directed against the Jews, in contrast to the anti-cosmopolitan campaign of the post-WW2 years. Yet still, among the spy-mania of 1937-1939, enemies of the people were often dubbed as “Trotskites”. It is not surprising that Jewish dishes in the *Book of Tasty and Healthy food* were not named Jewish. Rather, they were gathered under the more palatable subtitle ‘Eastern sweets’, ‘Vostochnye sladosti’. Of note is the choice to represent Jewish cooking solely by a selection of baked pastries. The pastry dishes’ names being of Yiddish origin, they reflect their Ashkenazi roots: names like *zukerlach, kichlach, nuss broit, kamishbroit (Mandelbrot),* and *strudel* – are all distinctly Yiddish, obvious from linguistically Germanic, not Semetic, roots. These Yiddish delights are included amongst a few Iranian dishes, and although those meals of Iranian origin are identified as such, the Jewish dishes are notably unnoted in any way as Jewish. There is yet another striking feature of these dishes to be noted – they contain only descriptions of the ingredients to be used, but contain no method as to their use. Moreover, the exact amount of these ingredients also is not given. This is in sharp contrast to other dishes printed in parallel to these Eastern ones, such as Russia pancakes or rye biscuits – all of them having exact amounts of ingredients, as well as the methods of cooking. In contrast, the cryptic Germano-Jewish dishes are impossible to recreate from their descriptions. They function simply as foods praised for their nutritious value, but their enigmatic existence remains a mystery difficult to decipher. Of significance also is the absence of *teiglach* in the list of baked dishes in the book. One possible reason is that *teiglach* is associated with Jewish religious holidays, holidays like Rosh-ha-Shana, because it contains honey and interestingly, no dishes calling for honey are mentioned under in ‘Vostochnye sladosti’. Given then that there are no cooking methods manifest for these ‘Eastern dishes’, to mention *teiglach* then would have been particularly pointless especially as it is notoriously difficult to make. Strict adherence to rules is required in the preparation of this dish.

These dishes deftly disappeared from the pages of the cook book’s second edition, which came out in 1952 – a year before Stalin’s death, in the middle of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. Caught up in the logic of the campaign, it made a lot of sense not to include any Jewish cuisine: how can a group of ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ have their own dishes? This would mean to grant them continuity, a passing of knowledge and tradition from one generation to generation, the very notion of continuity that Stalin wanted to deny the Jews.

From *teiglach* to the ‘Cake Kiev’

I choose to elaborate on *teiglach* because it presents a case of discontinuity in foodways, both in the old and new worlds of Ashkenazi Jewish. This disappearance of *teiglach* recipes from the official Soviet cook book created a gap in the passing of cultural knowledge between generations. It created a gap not only in the Soviet Union but also in Israel, when the Soviet Jews were allowed to leave the USSR on a mass scale in the 1970s. Today this gap manifests itself in the absence of this food in Israel. Even in those cases when recipes are found, the loss of “know-how” results in the disappearance of the dish.

*Teiglach*, however, is well-known and loved in South Africa, and the explanation to this is found in the fact that in this country it remained part of a knowledge that was continuously transferred from generation to generation, dating back to the emigration of Latvian and Lithuanian Jews to South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. This generation left the ‘home-lands’ before the Soviet appropriation, thus transferring the knowledge of the old world to the new one without an idealogical disruption. The famous South African Jewish Cook book known as ‘*The Yeoville Cook book’* has three recipes on how to make *teiglach*, with both the ingredients and the method able to be tested. (However, not all of them work.[[3]](#endnote-2)) In South Africa *teiglach* is supplied twice a year, on Passover and New Year, by Selwyn Segal, a brand that also makes other Yiddish festive dough-dishes like *kichlach*. This brand supplies all the main South African supermarkets, such as Pick and Pay and Checkers. The brand’s recipe and method result in a product of wonderful quality, because the method of cooking has been passed without a generational interruption. Recently, a new brand of teiglach appeared on the South African market – Jenny’s, a pale copy of ‘the real thing’. It typifies the discontinuity in the passing on of knowledge in cooking. Jenny’s teiglach bears an uncanny similarity to those honey-ball recipes found on Russian language internet sites from various places in Russia and Ukraine. The situation is similar with the recipes in post-Soviet Jewish cook books, which, in Alice Nakhnimovsky’s analysis, show that Jews in Russia today do not have the knowledge of Jewish cooking because the recipes were not passed from one generation to another. She states that even the tone of the Jewish cook book is cold and clinical, and there are no mentions of personal knowledge or information learned from relatives. The sanitary character of this discourse follows the style of Soviet cook books that were issued by medical and health professionals who stressed the importance of health and hygiene in cooking.

It comes as no surprise that teiglach is not found in Russian supermarkets in Israel. Instead of this sweet delicacy with its distinct oriental flavour imparted by ginger, Russian supermarkets sell such deserts as ‘Kiev cake’ and ‘Napoleon’ – both importations from the old world. Both have dairy cream as ingredient, and both are hardly suitable as a desert in kosher Jewish kitchen. This is unlike *teiglach* that has no dairy component, and which is baked with *matzo* meal for the Passover version. Both ‘Tort Kiev’ and ‘Napoleon’ were among the most desired and prestigious deserts in the Soviet Union, comprising as they were the Soviet brands, especially ‘*Kievskii tort*’. Its history dates back to 1956, it was produced by the Karl Marx Kiev Confectionary Factory (named after sweet-heart Karl Marx), and patented by the Soviet Ministry of food in 1973 – ironically, the year when Soviet Jewish emigration of ‘the third wave’ was gaining momentum. Its iconic status as the Soviet brand was further valorised when Ukrainian Republic presented a huge ‘Kiev Cake’ to the General Secretary of the USSR, Leonid Brezhnev on his 70th birthday. For the Soviet Jews leaving the Soviet Union in Brezhnev times the cake was a desired luxury treat. It was one of the first deserts that enterprising Jews who bypassed Israel for USA started producing. Admittedly, what they called ‘Kiev Tort’ was not the exact copy of the original, because the Kiev factory guarded the recipe as a secret, so adding to the irony of Jews’ desire for the product that epitomized the Soviet State with its security apparatus.

In Israel, however, the production and import of the Kiev cake on a mass scale started only in the 1990s with the Russian Jewish presence achieving the critical mass needed to create a profitable consumer market for these kind of products to survive. Napoleon cake was easier to make at home, as it is a version of *fleur de mill*, or a custard slice. It is this cake that is a staple of Russian bakeries anywhere sizable diasporas live today, and its consumers include Jewish and non- Jewish arrivals from the former Soviet Union.

Nostalgia for these Soviet deserts is explained not only by their special status as a prestige food and as food difficult to get, even if one can afford it – two main reasons that are linked to their symbolic and totemic value. Another important reason for this choice is lack of cultural continuity in the passing of recipes and cooking methods from one generation to another due to the tragic history of Soviet Jewry.

The Loss of the *bobe-mayse*, or ‘grandmother’s story’ concerning *teiglach*

With a gap in inter-generational passing of cultural knowledge, with lost recipes, a whole cultural base of beliefs systems becomes erased. The case of teiglach presents one such powerful illustration. Because it is made by boiling the dough in hot syrup, its quality depends entirely on the pastry expanding into a light airy product. If the dough flops, it turns into a hard stone-like ball that is not edible. Its preparation therefore has ceremonial, ritual like character: doors and windows of the kitchen have to be tightly closed. Likewise must the lid of the saucepan be tightly closed. Nobody is allowed to talk, presumably because talking is linked to the breathing out of air and interfering with its flow in the room. Similarly, no noise is allowed in the kitchen, presumably because it too has a physical effect on air, on the stove and interrupts the even-heating process. One can detect echoes of mediaeval superstitions in the folk beliefs surrounded the cooking of teiglach, some of them originating in East Slav beliefs. The flopping of dough in bread-making is associated with a set of rules and superstitions. Teiglach’s dough is kneaded into a mini-*hallah* form, its raising thus parallels that of bread. In East Slav belief systems bread and bread baking are linked to a complex number of animistic beliefs, with raising of dough associated with spirits of ancestors. The stove was a place through which communication with these spirits was possible, and their spirits moved out through the chimney. The house spirit, the *Domovoi* who normally was full of pranks also lived near the stove. These beliefs could have influenced Jewish superstitions in the Pale of Settlement. Notably, in the case of the ritual of *hafrashat hallah* making, the last Lubavitcher rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson suggested that kneading as mixing of two distinct materials into a single dough signifies unity of matter and spirit, human and God. The raising and baking of bread in East Slav beliefs was linked to the idea of child birth. In a recently described ceremony of *hafrashat* *hallah* baking in Israel a well risen and well baked *hallah* brought fertility to a childless couple.[[4]](#endnote-3) Both East Slav and Ashkenazi beliefs may explain the nature of rituals and superstitions surrounding teiglach making. They could have been among the reasons for the Jewish women creating the set of prohibitions around the cooking of teiglach. It is quite clear that the ingredients such as eggs, honey and ginger were expensive, and the responsibility to cook a dish like this was big. Cooking the dish only on special occasions also contributed to tension as the process was not reflexive and ‘automated’. The fear of the evil one interfering in the dough rising also makes a plausible explanation. But what did the Jewish women themselves believe in? What were they afraid of? This layer of the teiglach making is lost in culture.

While I for one was fortunate enough to hear the stories about what one *must not do* when cooking teiglach, I was not fortunate to be taught by them what one ought to do in making *teiglach*. I heard the stories from a few Latvian Jewish women who survived the Holocaust, yet I was either too young, or the women too old and frail. In one case the woman who knew how to make teiglach left for Israel in 1968, when I was still a teenager. When she came to Israel, she opened a small eatery, but she did not cook teiglach; rather she produced Israeli style fast food – the kind of food for which there was a demand.

Contemporary Russian language internet food discussion sites in Israel bear witness to the amount of interest in the way to cook teiglach – people are searching incessantly for a recipe that works, and yet cannot find it. Significantly, as one woman puts it, searching on the Hebrew language internet she did not find a recipe. This is a typical situation that evidences the lack of cultural continuity between the old and the new worlds. The generation of Latvian and Lithuanian Ukrainian Jews who knew how to make it was either wiped away or assimilated in Israel to the dominant non-East European dishes. Only those East European dishes that were easier and less tricky to make survived; dishes where no complicate method and no secret to the cooking was involved.

‘It dawned on me that I have never came across teiglach in Israel. I started googling in Hebrew internet and practically did not find anything related to it, no memories. Imberlach, lekach, kugel – there are plenty of those, as many as you wish and in many versions, but teiglach is not mentioned. I then phoned my friend who is about 60 years old, of Polish-Russian extraction, she is the fourth generation in Israel. I asked her whether she knows. It turned out that yes, of course, she remembers, because her father cooked it, but has not seen it since then (from some 50 years ago). In English there are lots of recipes and mention, in the book of my favourite author Claudia Roden there is naturally a recipe, but almost nothing in Hebrew.’ (Подумалось вдруг, что в Израиле я и не встречала тейглах. Пошла гуглить на иврите, и не нашла практически ничего, никаких воспоминаний. Имберлах, леках, кугель, сколько хочешь и в разных видах, а тейглах и не вспоминается. Позвонила приятельнице лет 60-и, польско-русского происхождения, четвертое поколение в Израиле. Спросила, знает ли она. Оказывается, что конечно помнит, ведь папа готовил, но с тех пор не видела (это лет 50 назад) На английском полно рецептов и упоминаний,в книге моей любимой Клодии Роден, естественно рецепт имеется, а вот на иврите, почти ничего.)

<http://rozik1965.livejournal.com/60753.html>

An important point in this discussion is that the recipe is found in an English language cook book, significantly because it came from a place in the new world relatively untouched by Stalin’s purges and the Holocaust, in English speaking countries with significant Jewish populations of the former Russian Empire, such as USA and South Africa where the continuity between generations was not interrupted and the cultural knowledge was able to be passed. The irony of the reference to Roden’s *The* *Book of Jewish Food*: *An Odyssey from Samarkand to Vilna to the Present Day* in connection with *teiglach recipe* is that there is evidence from those who have followed it that it in actuality does not work. Following both the recipe and the method scrupulously does not result in a raised and light product, but simply a clump of hard sticky balls, according an American blogger in her rubric ‘Adventures in *The Book of Jewish food* by Claudia Roden’. Could it be that because Roden was born in Cairo, and was not part of the family know-how tradition of *teiglach* culture that her recipe does not work? Even an anthropologist like Roden writing up a recipe from bookish sources cannot recreate that which is lost in culture. http://open.salon.com/blog/rivi1/2010/10/26/day\_77\_in\_which\_i\_make\_teiglachb

*Teiglach* is also a subject of discussion on various Russian language food internet sites in Russia and Ukraine, where various people suggest various recipes. A signifying feature of these recipe sites and discussions is an uncertainty concerning the ingredients and the method of cooking. Even those who claim to have their grandmother’s recipe, often admit that they forgot to mention one or another important ingredient, such as honey. Some claim that the dough has to be deep-fried before being boiled in honey, others say that it has to be baked in the oven before being boiled in the honey, and some will say that they distinctly remember that the dough was cooked in the syrup, without being fried or baked first. Of special importance is that most of these recipes omit its most important ingredient – ginger – that which gives the piquant taste necessary to the dish and adds to its exotic quasi-Eastern flavour. Its twisted shape of a knot, a mini-*challah* is also remembered only by some, most suggest the shape of little balls cooked in honey. The recipe is a site of memory lost. It turns to be distorted precisely at the juncture where the mystery and mysticism meet – in the rising and growing of the dough that does not contain yeast or sour base. The disappearance of its quasi-oriental ingredient – ginger – relates not only to food stuff but also to foodways – the history of gingers’ travels as part of the history of Jewish and non-Jewish trade and migration. As many spices from the Orient, ginger in Europe was not only a marker of refinement, it’s aroma was believed to be a breath wafted from Paradise over the human world.[[5]](#endnote-4) The history of ginger in Europe is also a history of interaction of Jews with various cultures through centuries.

As Bessiere noted in her work on heritage food, ‘The transmission of culinary know-how is, furthermore, not what it used to be. There is a frittering away of skills. The daughter or granddaughter no longer inherits secret family recipes. Modern home cooking goes beyond the traditional family dishes, in turn creating nostalgia for the food eaten in one’s childhood and adolescence. Newly-found aspirations translate this nostalgia into the desire to go back to culinary roots, as if this were a return to the beginning. It is as if eating were a quest for nutrimental truth, **an essence hidden** within a dish’. It is the essence hidden within the dish that perhaps holds the key to the mystery of *teiglach*, both its production and the appeal it holds for the contemporary Jews descended from those of the Russian and Soviet Empires. Is it possible that the women who insisted that the lid, the kitchen windows and even the doors have to be almost hermetically tight whilst *teiglach* was cooking, had reason to do so, that it did have an essence, a spirit, a *ruakh*? In such a case they were guarding against the flowing away of this *ruakh*-air through the lid into the outer spaces, and what they were guarding against was situated not outside of the pot but inside the pot? The dough then becomes a kind of living organism that in order to grow, must find a life and an essence of its own. And while in the words of Bessiere, we treat heritage food as containing an essence and ultimate truth, the contemporary *teiglach* recipe searchers express nostalgia in varied forms, one of which is to define their individual and collective Selves in the old and the new worlds, in the Soviet Union and Israel, both of which have a role to play in the discontinuity of their micro cultures.

Between sweets and meats: Writing food, defining the Self, constructing the Other

Among those who lament the cultural discontinuity of food of Russian Soviet Jewry is a highbrow Russian writer, active in Israel, Aleksandr Gol’dshtein. What he laments he terms the loss of Ashkenazi cooking in Israel, and though belonging to the post-1990 emigration, he did not become a proponent of the food found in the Russian food stores in Israel. For him, the loss of Ashkenazi cooking in Israel was a matter of loss of, what he conceived as, culture far superior and more refined than the dominant Maghribic cuisine in his contemporary Israel. Well-read in the post-modern theories of body politics, Gol’dshtein made controversial and politically risqué statements with a provocative intent. He dubbed Maghribic food as coarse and ultimately plebeian, and much inferior to the Ashkenazi dishes. Of interest in his construction of food typology, typology creating a binary between Maghribic food on one hand, and the refine food of European Jews on the other, is the parallelism between the Maghribic tastes and those of the non-Jewish migrant labourers from Eastern Europe in Israel.

“Sweet and sour meat stews, gefilte fish, chopped herring, honey biscuits, the conformists (the majority of the Israel born Ashkenazim) gave preference to the Maghrib pita dough which blots stomachs with its rough filling made out of chickpeas; those collaborators like football and beer “(25).

He not only used Maghribic food as a foil of his Ashkenazi self, he also turns upside down the anti-semitic stereotypes of Jewish food in order to bring the glory to Ashkenazi cooking.

To illustrate the construct of Jewish foods and its Othering in Russian culture I turn to the example from N.V. Gogol’s stories ‘Taras Bul’ba and ‘A Terrible vengeance’, set in the place in Ukraine where Jews lived after the annexation of Poland by Katherine the Great. Gogol’s representations of Jews set the foundation for the stereotype of the Jew in Russian realist prose of the 19th century. However, as a native of the Pale of Settlement, Gogol came into contact with real, rather than virtual, Jews. Whilst he depicted them in a rather grotesque key, he also supplied his Russian readership with a list of ethnographical terms as an addendum to his fiction; the list related to both Jewish, Polish and Ukrainian words and customs, and thus disseminated some cultural material. It is for these reasons that the examples from his texts illustrate what was constructed as Jewish and non-Jewish foods by the dominant discourse.

“Don’t give us pancakes [pampushki], honey buns [medoviki], poppy rolls [makovniki], and other such *pundiks*; bring us the whole lamb and a goat and mead forty years old! And don’t forget moon-shine, not fancy moonshine with raisins and other frippery, but pure frothy moonshine that hops and heaves like it’s crazy.”

As Alice Nakhimovsky (2006) notes, ‘The foods that Taras finds unsuitable are sweet foods, cut-up foods, mixed foods, and foods made with flour. To his soldier’s mind, these are complex, feminine foods; and while he doesn’t note the fact, both the proscribed foods and their manner of preparation fall to the Jewish end of the Slavic food repertory. None of the foods that he requests are foods that Jews—who in Russian culture were always seen as unmasculine—were associated with at all. The

same is true of the alcohol’(66).

The Cossacks likewise construct Jewish food as feminine food, as food too fine and therefore not suited for a true Cossack and his masculinity. Gol’dshtein uses examples of both Maghribic food and peasant-warrior food as being functional food, food for filling stomachs, neither to be eaten in pleasure nor in enjoyment. Goldshtein here establishes trans-textual links with stereotypes of the Ashkenazi Jews and then plays with these caricatures. He brandishes it in the face of what he sees as the culture dominant in Israel. The construct of Macho masculinity parallels the Israelies with the Cossacks, and their selfsame preference for coarse food and drink is the signifier of this parallelism. In the same text he notes that grilling meats is also a marker of masculinity, seen as ideal in Israel.

He is also polemical with the food stuffs in Russian food supermarkets opened by and for the ‘sausage immigration’. ‘Sausage’ by self-definition, this group positioned itself as carnivorous, physically active and in need of high protein food. As such it stressed its masculinity, proclaiming itself as “the Muscular Jew” – the very realisation of the Zionist dream. Paradoxically, it also linked itself to those who initially created the stereotype of a physically weak, pale and feminine Jew: it establishes its lineage from Cossacks like Taras Bulba, the very same ones who participated in the pogroms of Bogdan Khmelnitsky. Moreover, it was thanks to the Soviet project of food abundance that they were able to become these “muscular Jews”, sausages and other meat produce not being a food of daily consumption by Jews in the Russian Empire before the Revolution. The sausage’s closest counterpart in Jewish cooking, *kishke*, stuffed intestine, or *kishka* in Russian, was eaten only once a week, on Sabbath, and even then many could not afford to feast on this festive dish. Notably, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his *Two Hundred Years Together* makes a controversial claim, in that his father provided meat to his agricultural workers on a daily basis, whilst the father of Leon Trotsky did not. I am using these iconic names - Solzhenitsyn and Trotsky for an economy of space, so as to avoid having to give examples from an expansive literature which attests to the fact that Jews, before the Revolution, could not afford to eat meat more often than on Sabbath, and even then most of them had to resort to offal such as liver. Solzhenitsyn’s claim exhibits a methodology of instrumenting foods in political formation, but instead of making it a class issue, he turns it into a racialised, antisemitic one, alluding not only to the myths of exploitation of Russians by Jews, but also contributing to the myth of “the Miser Jew”, the enemy of the Russian people. Cultural differences do not come into the picture, and it is precisely importance of these cultural nuances that I try to take into account in this discussion.

As regards the meat-eating ‘sausage emigration’ identity, a reflective writer like Gol’dshtein, constructs his own discursive menu. His menu is selectively international, in which hot baked rolls, *rum babka* from a French bakery, Dutch cheeses and elegant slices of pineapples meet in a collage that is distinctly non-Soviet. His menu is non-macho and is removed from the construct of the muscular Jew. Yet, he too is a product of the Soviet discourse, and his approach to judging the degree of cultivation in a fellow has an uncanny similarity to Anastas Mikoian’s Soviet project of the 1930s. In this way, albeit on a micro-level, he continues the Soviet Empire’s ideological war, the difference being that the war of “Us” versus “Them” is now being conducted in the state of Israel, on Jewish soil.

The writing of Dina Rubina presents a discourse of Israeli patriotism of a Soviet Jew in Israel, one that while expressing the nostalgic aspects of food, still frames it not as a part of Soviet brands. In a story devoted to her daughter joining the Israeli army, she describes the girl’s complaints about the kind of food she is made to eat. It turns out that what she really misses is her mother’s home cooking, in particular, the way she fries her potatoes. This longing expresses a particular continuity in method, rather than in recipe. Rubina makes her daughter recount the kinds of food that she is given in the army. The list is long and varied, stressing how well soldiers are fed. It includes chicken, a variety of vegetables, yogurts, cheese; it speaks of a healthy diet. The daughter stresses that the food is hygienic, highly so, and fresh. As with Gol’dstein’s, Rubina’s narrative is political. Its purpose is to show that Israel’s youth is well taken care of by their state, but still what her daughter misses most is home cooking – a perfectly universal variety of nostalgia.

Examples from Gol’dstein’s and Rubina’s texts show that food is an important component in the establishing of the self in the new worlds. And while undeniably for most Soviet Jews an access to the Soviet home brands has had a healing effects in the process of adaptating to Israel, the two writers show very different attitudes to the role of food in defining the self and the other. Goldshtein’s separates himself from both the Soviet brands and what he sees as a dominance of non-Ashkenazi foods in Israel, thus demonstrating his individuality in any collective, be it Soviet, émigré or Israeli. His new world is a fantasy of acquiring individual freedom and self-expression, and he expresses it in a menu of elitist foods, constructed from literary worlds and the world of aristocracy. His pineapples can be traced to the Russian modernist texts, such as Igor Severianin’s refrain ‘Ananasy v shampanskom (Pineapples in Champagne) in ‘Overture’, 1915 wherein they stand for the luxury of a refined and distinctly cosmopolitan poet, that or associated with an old world which is destined to die, the world of the stinking rich as in Maiakovskii’s famous prophet-aping lines from ‘Vladimir Ilych Lenin’ (1924), in which he declares: ‘You bourgeois, eat pineapples, chew grouse, but your last day is coming’.

While Goldshtein incorporates Russian high culture by composing his menu from these literary foods, he treats his nostalgia for the culture that can stay within him, both via materialist and intellectual experience. It is culturedness that he appreciates in food, and it is culturedness that he denies both the Maghribi foods and the Maghribic Jews. In Rubina’s case the association with the old world is epitomised by the humble potato. A trope of real food eaten by masses of Soviet people, including the majority of Jews, who had to eat in order to survive and work, it unifies the Soviet collective. It is not unreasonable that her husband names their daughter ‘bourgeois’ when she complains that the Israeli Army diet is unsatisfactory. For him food is a class issues, an issue of economics, not of ethnicity. The humble potato’s motif indicates that there is a gap between the abundance of foods and being able to have access to these foods, thus acknowledging that food as a fantasy domain. While the abundance was a cultural construct, the access of Jews to these Soviet luxury brands was also a construct. The construct was paradoxical, because on one hand it fed the antisemitic stereotype of a dishonest Soviet Jews who subverted Soviet socialist economy, and on the other hand became a self-aggrandising fantasy for the majority of the Soviet Jews who started emigrating from the 1970s. This latter fantasy of eating superb food in their old world was often exchanged in verbal interactions within and outside the émigré community. It helped the ex-Soviet Jews in the 1970s to assert themselves in the new world where most of them were much poorer than the majority of their non-Soviet neighbours. The fantasy helped them to feel more adequate; nobody likes to feel as a ‘bednyi rodstvennik’, ‘a poor relation’. In all of these cases we find the illustration to Fischler’s noted point that eating reveals fundamental imaginary structures (Fischler 1993).

Russian food supermarkets in Israel are a cultural paradox. Albeit in the post-Soviet era, their abundance is an emblem of Soviet success in ideological and political projects. The staggering assortment of fine foods becomes a matter of pride of ex-Soviet Jews, who have appropriated the culinary achievements of the Soviet Union as their own. As such, the Soviet food brands have become important markers of high culture on a par with Russian classical literature and art, and an integral part of Russian-Jewish identity. The success of these supermarkets shows that the notion of abundance and diversity in food stuffs can be used not only as measurement of ‘culturedness’ but as a weapon in fighting a war of self-assertion. The place that these supermarkets conquered in the Israeli consumer market speaks not only of the enterprising abilities of the Soviet Jews, but also of the appeal of the shops’ stock to the broader Israeli population. The Russian food supermarkets in Israel have helped the ex-Russian Jews to claim their cultural adequacy and even superiority, and to raise their sense of self-worth in a complicated process of what Israeli bureaucracy terms ‘absorption’. On a broader level, Russian supermarkets, with their wide varieties of food, are a realisation of the eternal exilic longing to return to the land of plenty, the land of manna, of milk and honey. It is, however, lamentable that the Ashkenazi honey balls, teiglach, the very emblem of this dream in Diaspora, are no longer part of Israeli culture.

Appendix:

[Gogol’s text provides another example of a construct of Jewish food, in this case by a Cossack warrior. It shows the mechanism of Othering through food and foodways, ostensibly associating Jewish food with fancy doughy dishes. In the gothic tale ‘A Terrible Vengeance’, a Cossack identifies noodles as Jewish food, ’Zhidovskaia lapsha’, (‘Yid noodles’). *Lapsha*, in turn, is juxtaposed to the Christian food like pork meat (dumpling). The man who refuses these Ukrainian Christian pork-based foods, and prefers noodles, is an incestuous changeling and old wizard who had spent time living among the Turks, and functions as a crypto-Jew in this Orientalist fantasy. The Russian word for noodles, ‘Lapsha’, or *lokshen* in Yiddish, is a word of Turkic origin, it came to Russian from the times of the Tatar-Mongol yoke, and features already in the canonical 16th-century Russian Orthodox family set rules *Domostroi.* Notably, the Yiddish word ‘*lokshen*’ reflects the Russian dialectical version of this word, ‘*loksha*’. The well-known Yiddish dish *lokshen pudding* is a replica of the Russian *lapshevnik*, thickly cooked and backed in an oven noodles with raisins. Ironically, Gogol’s 19th century text uses noodles as a metaphor for Orientalism, of everything that is not native to the Cossack war-lord who makes a living out of fighting the Turks on the outskirts of the Russian Empire. What is important is that both food and foodways create an intersection of Orientalism and anti-Semitism in a kind of food that is not of Jewish origin and yet is constructed as Jewish. Food thus becomes a construct that parallels the construct of the Jew as the Other.

Further Othering of noodles is reflected in the second layer of linguistic and etymological roots of the Russian and Yiddish words for noodles, if grounded in Ukrainian paremiological material, such as proverbs. Etymologically, Russian dialectical ‘loksha’ or ‘laksha’ and its Yiddish derivative, ‘lokshen’, correspond to the way this food was eaten – lakat’, to eat like one eats soup, the verb used to describe the way dogs eat from a dish, slurping it in. One Ukrainian proverb conflates Jewish faith with that of dogs’, making a connection between such religious Others as Catholics and Jews, and further conflating them with the dog: ‘Zhid, Liakh i sobaka – use vera odnaka’. The variants of this proverb were registered in the end of the 19th c, and are found in other Slav cultures. The ‘foodways’ surrounding noodles show complex mechanisms involved in the creation of ethnic stereotype. The underlying impulse is the separation of the self from the Other, where the Other can be constructed as a cluster of most paradoxical yet heterogeneous elements. Indeed, what do Poles, Jews and dogs have in common is a rhetorical question that can be answered only as part of politically motivated discourse that brings together Catholicism and Judaism, as well as Poles and Jews.

There is yet another, historically factual correlation between Gogol’s lapsha as Jewish food and teiglach. This correlation is established through the history of teiglach. According to Gil Marks’s *The World of Jewish Cooking*, this traditional Rosh Hashanah fare in the Ashkenazi community in its origins date back to the times of the Romans who made strips of fried dough in honey called *vermiculos*. Italian Jews adopted the custom of making vermiculos but this dish disappeared from their repertoire in the middle ages. It was in the twelfth century that Franco-German Rabbis mentioned eating a dish of fried or baked strips of dough covered in honey called *vermesel* or *verimlish*, at the beginning of the Sabbath meal. There is a linguistic link between *vermesel* and Russian word for very thin noodles, *vermishel’*. The word entered Russian in the 17th century from Italian, and today is described in Russian etymological dictionary as Italian equivalent of lapsha. Its etymology in Italian relates to little worms, because of the shape of these thin noodles to these species. When Gogol dubbed lapsha noodles as Jewish food he showed not only the association of doughy foods with Jewish kitchen, but even established a historically provable origins of this style of dough, which is at the base of teiglach.]

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1. ‘Tiv Ta’am’ supermarket chain was open in 1990, it sells non-kosher meats and is open for 7 days a week, all year round, except for Yom-Kippur. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiv\_Ta%27am [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a group analysis of 250 people in the USA, the results showed that they experienced a very real association with particular brand names and foods consumed in the family. See Julie L. Locher et. al., 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Tamar El-Or. ‘Temple in Your Kitchen: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Ritual as a Public Ceremony’ , 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. Schivelbusch describes the belief in Europe that ginger and cinnamon were hauled in by Egyptian fisherman casting nets in the floodwaters of the Nile, which in turn had carried them straight from Paradise. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* tr. David Jacobson. NY: Pantheon Books, 1992, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)