

The taste of trauma

Reflections of ageing Shoah survivors on food and how they (re)inscribe it with meaning

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Drawing on ethnographic research in the UK's only support facility for ageing Jewish Shoah survivors, this paper charts the 'foodways' in a Centre where satiety is experienced as an emotional as well as a physical need. How the experience of genocidal violence and displacement give rise to particular tastes of trauma is explored, firstly through the symbolism of bread which is metaphorically leavened with meanings and memories of survival – both in Judaism and for the survivors interviewed. Bread is positioned as a true reflection of lived experience for survivors of both ghettos and concentration camps, who construct a specific and salient relationship with food. This illustrates the perceived difference between them and members of the Centre who escaped the Nazi regime as refugees or by the *Kindertransport*. Foods associated with the concentration or extermination camps are (re)inscribed with new meanings, as a steaming bowl of Polish barley soup ultimately embodies the ingredients of memory but also the recipe of survival. It can also stew the nostalgia of pre-war lives for Eastern European Jews and their recollections of the *heym* (Yiddish 'home'). Food is a conscious strategy of care in the Centre that mediates the embodied trauma of participants, and this article draws on comparative examples to argue that refugee and survivor communities more generally may possess culturally-significant relationships with food that remain poorly understood.

Introduction

At the heart of a social and therapeutic Centre in London sits a busy and curious café, catering to a particular taste of trauma held by elderly Jewish Shoah survivors. As I am guided through the kitchen on the first day of my field-work in January 2013, it becomes obvious that the menu is a conscious strategy of care that is attentively crafted by the chef – who is himself a Jewish refugee of the 1992–5 Bosnian war.

From Monday through to Thursday he prepares fresh and familiar foods to offer the members both physical and emotional sustenance. The elders who

visit the Centre are typically Ashkenazi in origin and were violently uprooted from their lives in Poland, Germany and Hungary during the Nazi persecution of European Jewry. The menu is designed to reconnect them with their history and culture, but the camp and ghetto survivors are a particular clientele for whom 'tasteless food is an insult, but not enough food is traumatising'. (Support staff 2013)

Food in the kitchen must be kosher approved so that all Jews can eat in the café, but also because I am told the Centre's 'core members tend to come from religious or traditional families' (Support staff 2013). The meals served are *parve* (Yiddish, 'neutral'¹) and dairy, the latter of which must be *Chalav Yisrael*.² Smells of the *heym* (Yiddish, 'home') infuse the room and offer a sense of comfort, and I'm told the look of love which some of the members have when they see a piece of *shmalts* (Yiddish, 'chicken fat') is a sight to behold.

The field-site is the only support facility for elderly-Jewish Shoah survivors in the UK, also the first of its kind in the world. In respect of the anonymity promised to the Centre, I have replaced its real name with the Hebrew³ 'Bitachon', a term embodying a sense of security, trust or faith. Bitachon seeks to enable ageing members to feel secure in the space and service they use, and is widely regarded by members as a 'second home'. As a participant-observer in the Centre, I quickly became interested in understanding how an ethno-religious care organisation aims to meet the needs of an ageing and traumatised community of survivors through the study of foodways.

The *kehillah* (Hebrew, 'community') at the Centre is made up of camp and ghetto survivors, hidden children, and those who came to the United Kingdom by *Kindertransport* (which was the evacuation of Jewish children in Europe by rail) or as refugees from 1933 onwards, and membership is also extended to spouses. Although the different 'groups' of members are brought together under the shared title of 'survivor' by the organisation, there remains a

1 Not derived from meaty or dairy products, such as fish.

2 Dairy products that are produced under the supervision of an observant Jew. In compliance with the ritual separation of meat and dairy products, meat-derived meals are not available or permitted in the Centre's kitchen.

3 The therapeutic wing of the Centre has a Hebrew name which prompted me to use 'Bitachon' as an appropriate pseudonym.

'hierarchy of suffering'⁴ in the Centre, and food actually plays an implicit role in differentiating camp and ghetto survivors from refugees.

This article was informed by Barbara Myerhoff's legendary ethnography, *Number Our Days* (1978), as an original example of conducting anthropological research 'at home', as well as being a study of ageing Jewish members of a day club, many of whom were refugees who left Eastern Europe prior to the Shoah. Similarly, Jillian Gould (2013) discussed the negotiations in 'public' and 'private' spaces of a residential care home by Jewish elders in Canada, and touched upon the meaning of being an 'immigrant'; which was a term perceived to be relative between 'real' immigrants from Eastern Europe and those who were second-generation. Gould (2013: 193) also remarked how the specific habit of taking tea with a sugar cube provoked memories of a pre-war childhood in Poland, whereas a cup of coffee evoked a taste of post-war life in Paris for one participant. However, this study is unique in understanding how food evokes particular memories of genocide, displacement and catastrophe for some ageing survivors of a religious community, within an ethnic sub-group, and particularly amongst a collective who consider themselves (and are considered) to have experienced the extremities of Nazi persecution.

Research methods

The research was conducted over a six month period between January–August 2013 when travelling to London from Durham (UK), with data eventually drawn from ethnographic methods, incessant note-taking and semi-structured informal interviews. Approval was granted by the administering care organisation of Bitachon to conduct this project, with research and ethical consent provided by Durham University. Twenty-three interviews were conducted altogether; twelve with camp and ghetto survivors; five with *Kindertransport* or refugees; one with a member's spouse; and five with associates of the Centre.

I initially visited the Centre to conduct participant observation and 'hang out', which, according to Russell Bernard 'builds trust, or rapport, and trust results in ordinary conversation and ordinary behaviour in your presence' (2011: 277). Being able to take part in activities at Bitachon meant that I could join structured sessions to observe the use of space and understand the ways in which the Shoah is sometimes discussed in everyday situations amongst survivors. I made sure to attend the same weekly activities so that my presence

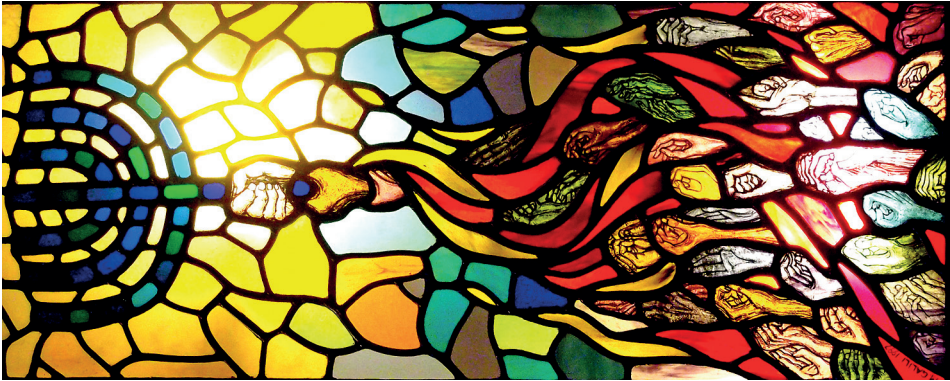
4 See also Freedland 2011.

would become familiar and add a sense of continuity to the relationships that were gradually being forged.

In particular, playing Bridge on Mondays became an informal 'research method' which enabled me to recruit research participants and develop their trust, and in turn, their responses over multiple interviews, during the course of my research. During the recess between games they satisfied their own curiosity about why I was travelling from Durham to play Bridge, and interesting discussions were provoked once the members learnt about my research interests and how they themselves could contribute to the study. The term 'Bridge' proved to be a beautiful metaphor for the Centre and its members, as playing cards brought survivors together to share their experiences of the Shoah with myself, a young researcher.

I requested permission to record interviews with a Dictaphone upon gaining informed consent, but I soon had to reconcile an ethical and practical consideration regarding anonymity. It was initially my intention that all participants would remain anonymous and their names would be replaced with pseudonyms, with a view to maintaining the highest possible standards of research integrity outlined by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (see ASA 2011). However, as many participants have been interviewed extensively by media about their experience during of the Shoah, some are accomplished writers, feature in publications, national television, or are publically linked to the UK's Holocaust Educational Trust (HET nd), some preferred their real names to appear in the work produced. I am convinced that giving participants the choice to remain anonymous versus publishing their names in the original study was particularly pertinent to the context of research, as Nazi camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, were places where personal identities were excised and the status of prisoner was etched in. This realisation led me to be flexible with guidelines for best practice in anthropological research, and could be an ethical issue that needs greater discussion amongst ethnographers working with prominent participants in the context of surviving genocide or violence more broadly. However, as much as I wanted to respect the wishes of participants who requested to publish their names, I maintained the right to anonymise statements appearing in subsequent publications in case they may have caused issues between other members within Bitachon.

The strong relationships nurtured at Bitachon and the process of developing qualitative knowledge was greatly enriched by my personal connection to the research topic, as my paternal grandfather and his sister survived the Nazi occupation of France and French complicity in the Shoah that saw the deportation of their mother to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In April 2013 I accompanied a



Artefacts symbolising the journey of survival at Bitachon. Photograph by Ben Kasstan.

number of the participants as they returned to Auschwitz on educational tours, which brought the research material considerably ‘close to home’, and was at times difficult to approach without feeling the weight of my familial connection. Moreover, I was able to quickly build rapport with elders by virtue of my Jewish heritage and knowledge of Jewish traditions and culture, and on one occasion arrived in fancy dress to the Centre’s Purim event. For these reasons I was undertaking anthropological work in the spiritual as well as the physical sense of the word ‘home’, and can be reflected in the rich interviews that took place (both at participant’s homes and at Bitachon), as well as the ethnographic notes drawn from my degree of involvement in the Centre’s activities.

To avoid the construction of qualitative knowledge being influenced by the extent of pre-exposure to the Shoah I had received prior to visiting Bitachon, I was careful to explore the effects of surviving genocide rather than focus solely on bearing witness. The extent to which some survivors have been approached for interviews or to recount their narratives raised an expectation that I was also pursuing Shoah testimonies, and instead my emphasis on understanding the challenges facing ageing victims occasionally took some members by surprise.

Embodied trauma

Understanding how past trauma is marked through taste is greatly aided through the notion of embodiment, which is deeply rooted in the complex philosophical tradition of ‘phenomenology’. In one of its developments that impacted most on anthropology, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty considered the body as a ‘disclosure’ of individual experience and the social world (2008 [1945]). The use of embodiment within anthropological

studies illustrates how the body is upheld as a true reflection of lived and social experience.

The phenomenology of embodiment described by Merleau-Ponty has since been developed to present human existence as temporally mediated, 'in such a way that our past experience is always retained in a present moment that is feeding forward to anticipate future horizons of experience' (Desjarlais and Throp 2011: 88). Embodiment is constantly in a state of flux and 'continually being constituted and reconstituted from one moment to the next' (Weiss 1999: 43), rather than being determined by a static or fixed experience.

The concept of the body as a disclosure therefore serves as a model to study the constant interplay between culture and the individual (Csordas 1999), and how these entities interact and are carried within the body over time. However, as much as embodiment is continuously determined by temporal events – memory and history are irreversibly inscribed on the body; as Didier Fassin notes, 'memory, buried deep, does not disappear. History relentlessly resurfaces' (2007: 28). The use of embodiment within anthropological studies of violence and suffering therefore illustrates how the body becomes a true reflection of lived experience when caught under siege, being shaped within – and by – particular social processes. It can be inferred that the embodiments of violence are context-specific, being 'shaped in important ways by the relations of power and domination in which the body is involved' (French 1999: 69).

Researching the tastes of trauma within a community of Shoah survivors is epitomised by Gail Weiss' (1999) notion of 'intercorporeality', which describes embodiment, not as a private or isolated entity, but moulded by everyday interactions with others. How 'intercorporeality' is envisaged through foodways at Bitachon is relatable to previous studies of embodiment in Judaism, as Jewish people are a religious and social collective known for being the 'people of the body' as well as of the book (see Eilberg-Schwartz 1992).

Subjectivity and intersubjectivity

Subjectivity is a process that enriches anthropological conceptions of embodiment, as it offers a means of evaluating self-reflections and autobiographical experience. Subjectivity provides a basis for human beings 'to think through their circumstances and ... to inwardly endure experiences that would otherwise be outwardly unbearable' (Biehl *et al.* 2007: 14). Intersubjectivity describes how the individual relates to their collective and social worlds, and is exemplified in this article by a community of survivors who use a shared social and therapeutic centre. Engaging with subjectivity in the context of genocide and

embodied traumatic memory with age is essential, because ‘even when violence has lapsed, the memory of violence permeates the subjective experience of any number of people around the world’ (*ibid.* 11).

Anthropological work has become both theoretically and ethnographically drawn to the lingering and subjective effects of violence and war as of late. According to Didier Fassin and Estelle d’Halluin, the ‘body has become the place that displays the *evidence of truth*’ (2005: 598). Fassin claims that it is obviously the case that torture leaves a physical imprint on the body which testifies to lived experience of violence – but even in the absence of a physical trace of torture – ‘wounds of the soul’ can speak of exposure to suffering – now clinically recognised as ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (Fassin 2011: 287). Studies have also shown that the traumatic experience of violence can manifest at a collective and individual level for target groups who are alleged to constitute an ‘other’ during war and conflict. For example, Doug Henry (2006) found ‘heart problems’, especially a ‘spoiled heart’, in the Sierra Leone–Guinea border conflict to be a common emic category used to describe a heart that is torn apart by trauma and suffering. It has been noted by some anthropologists that the impact of suffering with age remains insufficiently understood (see Hinton 2002), and this article consequently offers an insight into the embodiment of violence seventy years after the liberation of Nazi concentration and extermination camps.

‘The bread of affliction’

Beside the kitchen in Bitachon sits a plate of bread which is freely available. It is not uncommon to see the slices wrapped into a handkerchief and slipped into a handbag, or to find rolls of bread bulging out of blazer pockets ‘just in case’. This is a learned survival strategy from a time when life and death were hinged on having bread in your hand, and resonates with many iconic testimonies – particularly the pioneering work of Primo Levi (1987 [1947]). However, the free bread in the Centre has its own vernacular, and is served in a range of flavourful and recognisable forms – including rye bread with caraway seeds or braided rolls (*challah*) at lunch, as well as sweet cakes and *rugelakh*; a pastry typical of Ashkenazi baking which is often rolled with a sweet filling such as chocolate.

Conversations with members who came to the UK by *Kindertransport* affirm the particular significance of food for camp survivors rather than refugees, illuminating the graded difference between the members of Bitachon. This can be attributed to the severe hunger enforced in the ghettos and camps, where those incarcerated received a ‘ration that wasn’t for living but for dying’

(Shoshannah 2013). The following reflections illustrate the fundamental role that, specifically, bread performs as a taste of trauma – as well as marking the threshold of life where Shoah survivors once stood. It also introduces the gradation of suffering that the camp and ghetto survivors feel towards the refugees who share the Centre.

For Rifkah, a Polish survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the meanings attached to bread are inextricable from the years spent in incarceration. She says:

[Here] they have a plate of bread for people to help themselves, it is a reminder that at one time we didn't see any bread and it was the difference between life and death.

I waste a lot of things in the kitchen, but when it comes to bread I do anything with it but I can't throw it away because people were dying for a *crust* of bread. (Rifkah 2013)

Drawing on her memories of working in the orphanage of the Lodz Ghetto, Chaya shared similar sentiments about bread. She recalled:

On *Shabbat* [the Sabbath] the children didn't work and I used to tell them the story of Hansel and Gretel. The only difference was that instead of these children finding a lovely house made of chocolates and sweets in the middle of a forest, the house was made of bread and they could just go in there and eat as much bread as they wanted.

We were always hungry, we were dreaming of bread, not luxurious food. I love bread now, I never waste bread because I still remember how important bread was during this very difficult time. (Chaya 2013)

As Chaya recalls, she was 'dreaming of bread' in the Lodz Ghetto because of the sustenance it offered during a time of enforced starvation. The extent of hunger in the Lodz Ghetto can be seen in the iconic tale of Hansel and Gretel – itself a story of hunger and survival – retold to orphans under her care – orphans who were all later sent to Chelmno extermination camp along with her father.

Chaya's further reflections then imply how bread can be considered a fundamental marker of difference in experience between ghetto survivors and those who escaped Nazi persecution before 1939. She said:

I could never speak to my husband [about the ghetto], he left Poland in 1939 but he could never understand it. As a student [in England] he had no money. He was telling me sometimes for lunch he had to have a bar of chocolate and that's where our differences started, when I was telling him about bread, and then he told me about chocolate! (Chaya 2013)

Bread was most extremely represented as a weapon of survival through Marah's quote, where access to bread saved her life at the expense of another's. She recalls:

I was sitting with the other crooked people who [Dr] Mengele had thrown out [during the *Selektion*]. Then suddenly I saw my sister was there with the bread that the other transport had had to leave behind. My sister was so insistent and she asked who wanted to change my place for bread. So we changed places and somebody instead of me went to the gas. (Marah 2013)

Not only is Marah's statement shocking to hear, but I was entirely unprepared for its impact during the interview. Imagining bread as a weapon of survival can be drawn from published and iconic testimonies, such as Primo Levi's, where he wrote that "The law of the Lager said: "eat our own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour" (1987 [1947]: 160) – to the less well known, such as, Sam Pivnik, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, who wrote:

The bread ration was supposed to be one loaf to every four prisoners, but ... At Auschwitz-Birkenau, we killed each other by percentages. (Pivnik 2012: 113)

Bread is then metaphorically leavened with meanings of trauma and survival for these elderly Jewish members who lived through the ghettos and camps yet remain affected by their lived experience of violence and harrowing reflections of hunger. Although metaphorical rather than etymological, the analogy of bread with life is made implicit within the *Tanakh*, also embodying an ancient Jewish journey of survival. The Hebrew terms bread (לֶחֶם *lechem*) and life (חַיִּים *chaim*) are arguably interchangeable, for as much as *lechem* denotes bread, it holds a more general meaning of 'sustenance', which itself is used in conjunction with 'life' in the Book of Proverbs ([*Tanakh*] 27:27):

For thy food,
For the food of thy household,
And life for thy maids.⁵

By looking at meanings within the Jewish holiday of Pessa'h (Hebrew, 'Passover'), it is clear that from the time of the exodus to the extermination of the Jews – bread is the enduring 'taste of affliction' in Jewish history.

The ritual celebration of Pessa'h demands not only that unleavened bread – known as *matza* – is eaten, but also that traces or derivatives of grains such as wheat, barley, rye, oats or spelt are completely removed from the home prior to the Seder dinner which marks the beginning of the eight day event. Eating unleavened bread recalls the divine deliverance of the Israelites from enslavement by the Pharaoh King of Egypt, who took their dough before it had leavened in their haste to leave. It now relives the hardship and memory faced by the Israelite community as they wandered endlessly and despairingly out of Egypt, proclaiming to Moshe and Aaron: 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread' ([*Tanakb*] Exodus 16:2–3).

The meanings ascribed to bread by members of Bitachon, as well as its significance in Judaism, draws on signature studies of culinary narratives in anthropology. In her 'culinary ethnography' of a Buddhist population in Northern Thailand, the Tai Yong, Ing-Britt Trankell noted how rice cultivation has shaped feelings of locality and attachment to the land as being the 'basic ingredients of identity' (1995: 37). Not only is rice considered to be synonymous with food, but it is thought to be sacredly bestowed: it is imagined as a transformation of 'the self-sacrificing mother who dies in order to be able to feed her children' (Trankell 1995: 133). Rice therefore embodies the elements of being human and is thought to be the essence of life, the consumption of which becomes a connective ritual between family members and their ancestors, and also 'defines you as a human being' (*ibid.* 24).

Janet Carsten (1995) has argued that the mobility of some Malay communities on the island of Langkawi has given rise to fluid and mutable bonds of kinship and relatedness through the sharing of food, especially rice, rather than a sense of identity being bestowed through descent or birth. The importance of kinship is essentially placed on living and future relations rather than those of the past (*ibid.*). Commensality of rice acts as a process that redefines

5 Your own sustenance comes first, before the sustenance of your household, and life for your maidens (see Epstein 1948: 472).

newcomers to Langkawi as kin, which makes food and migration inextricable to understandings of social organisation for this particular community in Southeast Asia.

The way in which rice binds an individual to one's ancestry is deeply reminiscent of bread's symbolic value for survivors and its prominent role over Pessa'h. Moreover, it is obvious in Judaism that taking certain foods into the body is a physical act of remembrance, as the Hebrew term 'to remember' – *zakhar* – entails action rather than thought alone (Berlin and Brettler 2004: 315). This discussion indicates that the consumption of foods, staple grains in these instances, enable uprooted minority groups to connect or reconnect to a locality, community, or ancestry, evidently in the context of embodied trauma.

Krupnik soup

Whilst the bread is free of charge, lunch at the Jewish Centre is prepared at a subsidised rate. Rifkah recommends that I try the *krupnik soup* – which is her own Polish barley recipe. She says:

They enjoy my homemade barley soup downstairs; it is thick and nourishing, and what did we get in the camp? Water with a piece of turnip swimming around – if we were lucky. (Rifkah 2013)

The soup is metaphorically ladled with the journey of survival. As Rifkah notes, the soup in the camps was weak and without nutrition, colour, or texture but now at the Centre, survivors can enjoy a rich, warm, and wholesome *krupnik* soup which represents where the members have come to. The Polish barley soup symbolises the *heyem* beyond the physical sense of the term 'home' – and is also used as a metaphorical reference to place of origin, time and pre-war life for, by and large, Yiddish-speaking Jewish survivors of Ashkenazi origin.

It is therefore arguably the case that the soup epitomises a conscious strategy of care which is not only made culturally appropriate but in some way also produces a 'historical' counterbalance or re-inscription for this specific ethno-religious group. Through a taste that is recognised and relished, the soup becomes the antithesis of suffering experienced by members and embodies the ingredients of memory, but also the recipe of survival.

Although available with nuanced differences in composition, Rifkah shared her personal recipe for Polish barley soup. An interview conducted with a member of staff raised the importance of 'legacy' for survivors and how this is imagined through the above soup recipe for Rifkah. The energy that some

survivors invest in bearing witness to local, regional, and national audiences is a remarkable and clear example of how important preserving the memory of the Shoah is (see HET nd), and the Centre fully supports its members in doing this. I was also told that:

Legacy can be interpreted as anything; it could be, for example, the cookery and the recipes. The soup recipes come from Rifkah: the mushroom and barley is the most amazing soup! Now she would have got that recipe from her mum [who died in Bergen-Belsen] and therefore the continuity that her mum is never forgotten because there are 700 people eating the soup every month and that's really powerful. (Support staff 2013)

This illustrates how food is perceived as a culinary legacy amongst displaced communities and survivors of genocide, as the soup served in Bitachon is as much an act of 'continuity' as it is a sharing of experience and historical narrative. Rifkah's staple recipe at Bitachon indicates the role that gender and age play in preserving memories of the *heyms*, as well as nourishing camp and ghetto survivors of Polish origin both physically and emotionally. As food is deeply rooted in topology and tradition, age-related care settings should thus be considered an environment that attempts to blend and reconcile these entities together.

Annemarie Mol's (2010) account of 'nourishing care' illustrates the importance of food preparation, distribution and consumption amongst the elderly and related care-settings. Here, she argues that the nutritional value and palatability of foods are 'in tension' as much as they are 'interdependent', also demonstrating that food is a critical factor of 'good' care in her ethnography of Dutch nursing homes (*ibid.*). It can therefore be inferred that food is central to discussions of ageing and embodiment, and is arguably a reflection of lived experience in that 'food ... can be viewed as the prism that refracts all-important cultural concerns into their elemental components' (Jochowitz 2008: 305).

The potential for the *krupnik* soup at Bitachon to counterbalance feelings of displacement parallels broader studies which explore how the culinary traditions of minority-religious groups are marked by a taste of trauma following the experience of displacement and severance. Sidney Mintz has pioneered anthropological work into the political, economic and cultural forces that shape eating habits and the meanings held within foods (Mintz 2012; Mintz and Du Bois 2002). However there has been less focus on the foods which embody traumatic memories of displacement or genocide for marginalised or minority groups, despite the fact that foods are literally and metaphorically brought into

– and become – part of the body (Lien and Nerlich 2004: 6).

This notion is clearly found amongst studies of Palestinian refugee communities following the Nakba and Israel's 1948 declaration of independence. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev (2004) notes that the Nakba is likened to a natural 'disaster' by some Palestinians, to the extent that certain plants can evoke memories of a former homeland and are also perceived to nourish and symbolise the growth of a nation state.

Her study charts how Palestinian refugees make 'return visits' to their former villages and rural landscapes, or traditional Arab cities such as Akka and Yaffa, in order to collect organics such as wild herbs, mushrooms and fruits to prepare dishes that are shared with friends and family (Ben-Ze'ev 2011). For Muslim elders born before 1948, such visits to former Arab villages are likened to the Hajj – the Holy pilgrimage to Mecca that is viewed as an obligation in Islam (*ibid.* 108).

Ben-Ze'ev clearly illustrates the nostalgia that food can evoke and its importance within the present for people who remain painfully disconnected from their place of origin, as ingredients both reminisce and recreate an imagined Palestinian homeland after past catastrophe for Muslim refugees and their descendants. More specifically, comparing the aforementioned discussion of bread and soup for Shoah survivors with organic life and the Nakba exemplifies how food embodies a certain experience of calamity and can determine how past traumas are remembered and reflected upon.

We can see how bread is eminently divine in Judaism, with each crust serving as an ancient and salient reminder of Jewish suffering and survival from the time of the exodus to the Nazi extermination camps. Through Rifkah's recipe and culinary legacy,



Rifkah's Polish Barley soup. Photograph by Ben Kasstan.

Rifkah's recipe for Polish Barley soup

Glass of barley
 1 onion
 1 leek
 1 carrot
 2-3 celery sticks
 ½lb mushrooms
 1 Chicken stock tube
 Tblsp dill
 Salt & pepper

Simmer for two hours (at least)

memories of the weak and watery soups of Auschwitz are stirred with renewed meanings of familiarity, sustenance and pre-war memories of the Ashkenazi heartlands of Eastern Europe. In a comparable way, the Palestinian 'return visits' epitomise their relationship with a sacred land perceived to have been lost through a catastrophe, and by consuming familiar herbs and plants, perhaps they physically ingest and internalise the memory, loss, and land of Palestine itself.

This trail of thought also leads to the ongoing inter-ethnic violence in the Central African Republic (CAR), where recent news reports imply that former Muslim Peul communities, which have either migrated or been razed to the ground, remain demarcated by the profusion of unpicked mango trees (Whewell 2014). Here it indicates that the scent of food could also perform a culinary role in igniting memories of dispossession, as blooming trees stand above a withered way of life, with the ground below marked by a 'a rotting yellow squelch, the aroma more sickly than sweet' (*ibid.*). How displaced Peul from towns such as Bozoum will come to recall their trauma and survival can only be understood through further scholarship into socio-religious conceptualisations of food and dispossession, for 'survival comes in cultural inflections' (Myerhoff 1978: 257).

In her analysis of French Jewish women's writings of the Shoah, Lucille Cairns (2009: 8) pointed out the refusal or abstention from certain foods by individuals because of the 'highly perverse identification' with Jews who perished in the Nazi camps. In one example, Cairns cited the child character, Hannah, in Myriam Anisimov's *La Soie et les cendres* (French 'silk and ash') who bore a hatred of milk, for its pale white tone brought memories of colourless Jewish corpses in Nazi extermination camps. The habit of 'consuming guilt' after surviving the Shoah, when so many perished from brutal starvation, was framed as a 'human response to trauma' (*ibid.* 11), but clearly attention should also be paid to the act of consuming – rather than avoiding – specific foods that become associated with a calamitous experience.

In contrast, at the Jewish Centre under study, bread is consumed as a shared and intersubjective token of trauma among the camp survivors, and when combined with a steaming bowl of *krupnik* soup, memory of the *heym* is not only brought to life but is – in a sense – also recreated. The relationships that survivors forge with food are obviously a result of the barbaric starvation inflicted upon them, but the specific symbolism of bread and soup recounts a deeper story of an ancient – as well as lived – experience of exile.

Although the menu is imprinted with the taste of suffering and displacement and seeks to (re)inscribe foods with meanings of home, it does so explicitly

for Ashkenazi Jews in a way that might not be culturally appropriate for Shoah survivors of Sefardi origin. These are the Jewish communities whose origins lie in the Spanish expulsion of 1492 – Sefarad being the Hebrew word for Spain – and were later deported to concentration and extermination camps from Italy, Greece and the Balkans. For those Jewish survivors and refugees who spoke Ladino rather than Yiddish and enjoyed a diet influenced by the Mediterranean climate (see Roden 1996), Polish barley soup would arguably make little sense as a therapeutic intervention. Although the idea of the Jewish Diaspora imagines an ancient legacy of exile from the land of Israel, the Jewish Centre clearly understands that within the word ‘Diaspora’ lies a vast wealth of cultural and ritual difference that does not translate across divisions within the same religious group.

Conclusion

Food in Jewish communities, Claudia Roden (1996: 8) notes, ‘is a nostalgic subject which has to do with recalling a world that has vanished’. The symbolic meaning of soup at Bitachon can be conceived as a clear example of the Welsh term *hiraeth*, for which there is no close English translation but is interpreted as a deep sense of longing or nostalgia for a lost place, person or way of life. As also illustrated by Ben Ze’ev (2011), consuming particular foods may be inextricable from experience for religious or ethnic minority groups more broadly who have become violently or emotionally severed from their origins. Based on this study it would seem that such a claim is indeed possible and worthy of further scholarship, as the Shoah is a truly embodied phenomenon for the community of ageing Ashkenazi Jews I worked with in 2013. As has been shown here, the words of my participants narrate a journey that is best shared in the form of *krupnik* soup and served alongside a soft roll of bread, nourishing the body with a lasting taste of memory, familiarity and all the ‘secrets of surviving’.

Ben Kasstan is an interdisciplinary researcher based in the Department of Anthropology, Durham University (UK), and his current research interests lie at the intersection of religion and health. His PhD is supported by the Wellcome Trust and explores childhood and child health in Haredi Jewish communities. The original research presented in this article was generously funded through a postgraduate studentship by the Centre for Medical Humanities, Durham University. The research later received the 2014 Margaret Clark Award from the Association of Anthropology & Gerontology, as well as an award for the best postgraduate dissertation submitted to the Department of Anthropology at Durham University.

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