

Food as a vehicle for remembering: the case of Thessalonican Jews

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Abstract

In this paper I try to assess the importance of food -eating and talking about it- among Thessalonican Jews. I argue that it is employed as a powerful vehicle for expressing people's past experiences and thus it serves as a communicative and emotional channel. On the one hand, food practices and discussions bring up recollections of harmonious family relationships before the Second World War, while on the other hand, food enables people to talk about their traumatic experiences during the War period. A strong dividing line spans individual and collective memories and as such it transforms present experiences and accounts of membership and belonging. For the present is not an autonomous entity but it is constantly shaped and reshaped by discourses about the past.

Introduction

It is not only individuals that forget; modern "cities" tend to forget as well. Thessaloniki, a city situated in northern Greece, with a population of almost a million inhabitants, doesn't seem to have escaped collective amnesia. I often recall scenes from my early childhood when older members of my family talked about their lives in pre-War Thessaloniki. All these narrations included Jewish friends and invitations to attend *Bar Mitzvah*ⁱ ceremonies at the Synagogue. The stories ended quite abruptly with the following comment: "All our Jewish friends were sent to the concentration camps..." For a child's imagination such a comment provided no real answers and generated further questions about the fate of those people: Why? Who sent them? Why didn't they refuse to go? What happened in those camps?

Greek State education provided no further answers to my questions. During my years at school I heard nothing further on this and during my time at the Aristotle University of

Thessaloniki there was hardly any mention of the Jewish presence in the city. Years later the situation was similar in my work and social environment. No one seemed able, or at least willing, to give me a clear picture of the city's past. The municipal and other authorities of the city of Thessaloniki have not proved particularly keen to highlight any evidence of the city's multi-ethnic past. Thus there are no Jewish streets and no monuments apart from the Square of the Jewish Martyrs, a square that was dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust quite recently, in 1997ⁱⁱ. Collective amnesia has been transformed into ignorance, in the interests of a "homogeneous" present, a present without non-Christian citizens. However, since I have been engaged in a research project concerning Salonican Jews I have come to realize that my childhood narratives were neither fairytales nor figments of my imagination. They proved to be true stories of the Jewish presence and pictures of everyday life in Thessaloniki prior to the Second World War.

This essay will be an exploration of people's memories and the identities they experience through food. Sephardicⁱⁱⁱ cuisine constitutes an important marker of a shared past and present and a repository of shared memories from before and after the War. My interest focuses on two age groups: the Holocaust survivors and the second generation of Salonican Jews, meaning those people who were born after the *Shoah*^{iv} and who today constitute the middle-aged population in the city. The structure of the themes I wish to discuss is the following: a) a brief analysis of the social significance of food, b) a historical overview of the Jewish presence in the city, c) an analysis of the centrality of Sephardic cuisine within the family context and the consequent discussion of issues like childhood, married life and citizenship, d) memories of "shadows" and "silences". The nexus between memory and food acquires special attention in my overall account. Therefore, I strongly suggest that food functions as a mnemonic device, as a basic ingredient in the process of creating sameness and solidifying the sense of belonging to a group.

The social role of food

Food does not only nourish the physical body; it serves as a social signifier, a repository of memories and an indicator of present identities. Food narratives are more than everyday, trivial pursuits since they help the individual express, directly or indirectly, social boundaries through processes of inclusion and exclusion. The polysemia^v of food can be summarized as follows: a) it transmits socially significant messages; b) it strengthens the feeling of belonging (in this case to a family as part of a wider ethnic-religious group); c) it evokes memories and nostalgia with reference to past life experiences. Food practices and narratives enable the construction of similarities and differences and thus the elaboration of identities. The fact that food functions as a marker of sameness and difference is a key concept of many anthropological analyses. Recent theoretical trends tend to take into account several sociological variables and, among others, ethnicity has received special attention. A number of scholars^{vi} agree that the food complex touches issues of ethnic belonging and therefore food practices are employed by individuals in order to construct seemingly bounded cultural identities. As one of these scholars has concluded: “Food is never just food and its significance can never be purely nutritional... It is intimately bound up with social relations, including those of power, of inclusion and exclusion, as well as with cultural ideas about classification” (Caplan, 1997: 3).

A brief historical overview

The Jewish presence in Thessaloniki dates back to the foundation of the city in 316 B.C. by Cassandrus. Several historical sources, including the ancient historian Strabo and the Acts of the Apostles, indicate that in this famous port a significant Jewish population lived uninterruptedly from the Hellenistic period up to the Byzantine era. This population was strongly Hellenized and gradually was culturally assimilated. Nevertheless, the *Romaniotes*, -the Greek-Jewish people- maintained some religious features. During the Middle Ages a strong wave of anti-Semitism emerged. In particular, the building processes of Western monotheistic States legitimized by religion and the Crusades that followed from this rendered the Jewish presence in the Christian world marginal and insecure. As a result of this anti-Semitic climate the edict of Granada^{vii} was issued by the Catholic Kings of Spain in 1492. According to the edict all the Spanish Jews, who

refused to be baptized into Christians, had to leave Spain within three months. A massive exodus of Jews from Spain followed. It is estimated that 50.000 people converted to Christianity and remained but more than 250.000 left the Spanish peninsula. The majority of them found shelter in the lands of the Ottoman Empire and almost 20.000 chose Salonica as their home, which was at that time under Ottoman rule.

These Spanish Jews, known as Sephardic Jews and gradually came to possess a significant economic power in the port of Salonica. The local language they developed over time, *Ladino*^{viii}, was a mixture of Spanish, Hebrew, Turkish and Greek. Sephardic culture marked the life of Thessaloniki and its influence was continuous until the Second World War when 46.000 Thessalonikan Jews were sent to the death camps of Aschwitz, Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. This number represents 96% of the Jewish population of pre-war Thessaloniki. Today the community counts almost 1.000 members and maintains two Synagogues, a primary school, a home for the elderly, a summer camp, two museums and a community centre, which serves as an administrative centre, but also as a cultural club and “brotherhood”, organizing various activities.

“We were expelled from Spain”

During my fieldwork among the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki people expressed a strong tendency to establish links with the Spanish past. This past stood for something that was felt to be not necessarily distant but on the contrary familiar and intimate. Memories of Spanish cultural heritage formed a common point of reference, a starting point for differentiation with the rest of the city’s population. Remembering the past was not only a way to denote distinctiveness but also a source of communal pride. This privatized notion of the past was evident in most of my interviewees’ accounts: *“Sepharad means Spain, so we are Jews of Spanish origin. Our ancestors left Spain to avoid conversion to Christianity. Many of them came to Thessaloniki, which was under Ottoman rule. The Ottoman Empire paid no attention to our religious beliefs as long as we paid our taxes^{ix}. For more than 400 years until the Second World War in this city there was a lively and powerful Jewish community which maintained many Synagogues, schools and created an admirable civilization”*.

This strong affiliation with Spanish culture was evident among the majority of my interviewees and covered many aspects of life and various cultural products such as language, music and cuisine and often a combination of these elements. In fact, many housewives explained to me that the Sephardic dishes they prepare have *Ladino* names so “*they definitely have Spanish origins*” and they were “*authentic Sephardic dishes*”. This was the case for salty dishes like *sfougato* or *sfougatico*, *pesce en salsa*, *keftikes de prassa de patata* and *de spinaka* or sweet dishes like *tupishti* and *sutlach*. The preparation of these dishes represented a bridge connecting them to their origins and as such it constitutes a powerful statement of identity. But the most interesting thing is that preparing and serving these dishes generated discussions about sameness and difference and served as the starting point for the expression of differences between the Jewish and the Christian populations in contemporary Thessaloniki. I was often invited during the end of my fieldwork to “taste” this difference: “*Try some of our dishes. This is the way we do it and this is based on the way our mothers and grandmothers used to cook. You^x cook differently*”.

Eating and remembering...

The legitimation of present social realities via food preparation and consumption was one theme I came across during my fieldwork. The topic of food proved to be more than a mundane pursuit since it generated important symbolic discourses. As far as family is concerned, food practices and narratives enacted a whole series of nostalgic recollections about the lost families, an idealized childhood but also memories about the Jewish past of “the mother of Israel”^{xi}. By recollecting family life people reproduced boundaries and reaffirmed their identity in a rapidly changing world. Throughout my paper I avoid making use of the dichotomy of private (family) versus public (community institutions) as in the case of Salonican Jews such reductionist binarism distorts the complexity of everyday realities. The boundaries between the two spheres are never fixed because both contexts are conceived as a continuum. Both private and public domains are loaded with notions of privatized history and identity. Within a common context privatized memories of a Thessalonikan-Jewish past constitute the basis for present discourses on identity.

The connection between taste and childhood memories is the first issue to be explored. In many of my informants' words there was an evident recollection of a harmonious past through remembering tastes of childhood. A 40-year-old man commented: *"I remember a sweet that I can't find anymore called tupishti. It looks like your walnut cake. My aunt used to make it dark with a lot of syrup; I called her Nona. She used to make it for the day of Yom Kippur. Generally I am a great fan of sweet tastes but believe me, this was something else. I am still looking for this taste but I can't find it anywhere"*.

The term "tasty" became equated with the term "familial"; people searched for tastes that are familiar to them and reminded them of their childhood. Mrs. Lea, an 80-year-old woman, still cooks for her son although he has his own family now; in order to marry a Christian woman he converted to Christianity. During the Christian Easter he had to fast as his wife did. Mrs. Lea explained to me: *"During Christian Easter my son was fasting. I cooked some of our food for Pesah, which is called pesce en salsa. My daughter in law cannot bear to even taste it but my son loves this dish and he wanted to have his portion. So I gave him some to take home. He loves it because it is tied with memories. Food you know is something that ties in with memory. My children love this dish because they were raised with this taste. They remember tastes. The food that someone loves is definitely the one he used to eat as a little child..."*

In some discussions food was associated with memories of married life and family bonds. Rosa, a 50 year-old woman, used food narratives to reveal aspects of married life and her relation to her mother in law: *"As far as cooking is concerned I learned a lot from my mother in law. My mother was a rebel. She refused to keep traditions. For my mother in law cooking was a kind of ritual. She cleaned up, washed herself and then she cooked for hours. I remember I first tasted a sweet called sutlach at her home. At the beginning I thought it was a bit burnt but I found it so delicious. Of course I was embarrassed to say anything. Then I realized that the more burnt it is the more tasty it becomes"*.

The ritual of commensality provided an excellent opportunity for releasing memories of past family life. While conducting my fieldwork I had the opportunity to share such a situation with several people. “Sharing the same table”^{xii} proved for my informants an ideal vehicle for memory release. Once while eating with friends at a local restaurant Rachel made the following remark: *“I like garlic but I don’t use it when I cook. I prefer onions. My mother used to cook like that. This is the taste I’ve been brought up with”*. Taste evoked a matrix of recollections concerning childhood, motherhood and the idealized image of a lost family life.

All the discussions I had with older men and women eventually turned to the “glorious” past of Thessaloniki. Food discussions proved a powerful channel for memories and nostalgia about the good old days of life in the city: *“Me and my husband love salted fish. We call it souimekos. It is very difficult to find this kind of fish in the market nowadays. Native Thessalonikans know it is the best meze (appetizer) for ouzo”^{xiii}*. My ignorance about life in the city surprised my informants but it was a good excuse for them to recall the past and narrate how their lives used to be and which are the tastes that they miss in contemporary Thessaloniki: *“Oh, I remember the old pastry shop, the hotels, the centre. Life used to have a different quality in those days, beauty and luxury. Nowadays I don’t even want to leave my home. Everything seems so cheap...”*

It has been argued that: “Concerning memory as such, we may note that our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past...Hence the difficulty of extracting our past from our present: not simply because present factors tend to influence -some might want to say distort- our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present. This process, it should be stressed, reaches into the most minute and everyday details of our lives” (Connerton, 1989: 2). The ethnographic data presented in this paper highlight that food apart from constructing family boundaries, and thus sociability, has the power to evoke memories concerning past family relations and sentiments of belonging to a city. By this token the past blends with the present and food narratives function as a repository of shared sentiments. After all, shared history is partly the internalization and the

employment of shared experiences and sentiments and if this is the case food serves as an important marker of creating and recreating shared histories.

Food, memory and the construction of identities are strongly interconnected. In particular, food is often the locus of recollections and memories of a family or community past. The mnemonic qualities of food and eating consist of retrieving memories of time, place and belonging. It has been stressed that: “If identity is constructed through memory, the memories of time and place linked to food, eating and nurturing play a key part in retrieving significant memories. Food could be seen as the sensory point of entry into a web of sentiments, memories and fantasies which largely constitute a sense of identity...” (Goddard, 1996: 213)

Shadows and silences

The picture that I have presented so far is one of idealized life with happy memories from childhood and idealized recollections of a past city life. Of course this is only one part of the picture. All these recollections belong to settled spaces of memories and spoken past experiences. But in the individual’s life there are also unspoken memories or more accurately unsettled spaces of memories. This was the case for the Holocaust survivors in Thessaloniki: food narratives became the starting point for expressing their experiences at the camps but also a way to mourn the lost members of their families. The Second World War was for them a strong dividing line which separated time, space and memories in a pre-War and a post-War Thessaloniki. I quote Victor Siedler who talks about the different or, more correctly, the imagined spaces in which memories of the Holocaust can operate: “The past was to be passed over in an anxious silence. These histories were often not to be shared, for the sense of rejection and loss they threatened to bring on the surface was not to be tolerated. At some level it was as if these histories had not really happened” (Jeleniewski-Seidler, 2000: 6). Such a past consisted for many years of “traumatized” and “unspoken” memories.

More than fifty years separate us from the *Shoah*. Last year when I was carrying out my fieldwork in Thessaloniki I realized that people had started to put in order the tragic

experiences that marked their personal, family and community life. Food discussions were used by Thessalonikan Jews, who were either survivors or children of survivors, as a vehicle to remember the painful past and evaluate the effects of that tragic ordeal upon their lives. Although my initial intention was not to collect Holocaust experiences, the narratives of food made people overcome their reluctance and made them comfortable enough to share their experiences with a young Christian woman. It seemed to me that food was a vehicle for speaking about the painful past, of sharing it and of putting some order in this “unsettled space”: *“Oh, life before the War was so beautiful. Here we are again. I am going to tell you the story of our deportation to the Concentration Camps. Everything happened so quickly. My father was trying for months to get us foreign passports. But ironically the same day we managed to get them we were already on our way to Bergen- Belsen. All my family. I remember I was just a young girl then...”*

As an epilogue

Taste acquires a central position in the formulation and evaluation of present life experiences. It enacts past memories of childhood and family life. In the case of Thessalonikan Jews such memories are happy and idealized but to a great extent they also constitute a source of sadness and discomfort. In any case food practices and narratives proved a valuable means to evaluate the past and thus, release as a web of sentiments and experiences for the present. It could be said that food functions as a mnemonic device, which enables individuals to place themselves in the present and “manage” aspects of their identities. The same applies not only to taste but even to the thought of certain dishes: they seem to carry a powerful baggage of recollections. Food serves as a starting point for the elaboration of differences and a reaffirmation of boundaries. Through past memories Thessalonikan Jews express their membership in a community and at the same time state issues of belonging and denote quite strongly the feeling of “being a Salonican”. I end this discussion with one of my informants’ words: *“After the War many things kept me here. I love my city so much that I could not live anywhere else. I feel that this is my home. I feel that every change that happens in this city also happens in my home. Thessaloniki is my home...”*

Recipe:

This recipe was given to me by Lina Perahia. *Pesce en salsa* is a dish that Thessalonikan Jews consume during the celebration of *Pesah* (Passover). According to Judaic dietary Law only the use of *matsah* (unleavened bread) is allowed. Old Thessalonikan-Jews argue that this dish represents “the city and the history of Thessaloniki”.

Ingredients:

Fish fillets (preferably carp)
Eggs beaten (one or two)
Matsah (almost two cups)
Vinegar (one cup)
Walnuts chopped (one cup)
Olive oil (one small cup)
Salt, Pepper

Preparation:

Deep the fish fillets in the egg and then roll them in the crumbled *matsah* in which you have added salt and pepper. Fry the fillets in the oil and vinegar adding some *matsah*. When fried place them on a platter and spread over them the chopped walnuts.

ⁱ The Jewish ceremony of coming of age, which takes place publicly at the Synagogue.

ⁱⁱ In 1997 Thessaloniki was the Cultural Capital of Europe. During that year a series of publications and talks concerning the Jewish presence in the city took place. Moreover a monument to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust was inaugurated and the whole square was named after it: Square of the Jewish Martyrs.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sfarad* in Hebrew means Spain. Accordingly, Jews with Spanish origins are called Sephardi.

^{iv} *Shoah* in Hebrew means destruction. In the literature the term Shoah is more commonly found than the Greek term Holocaust. In my discussion I make use of both terms.

^v The term was introduced by the French scholar Roland Barthes (1975). For him an entire world is present in, and signified by, food. Food items and also the act of eating can reveal a lot about the feelings of “eating and being”.

^{vi} Namely Caplan (1997), James (1997), Fishler (1988), and Van Den Berge (1984).

^{vii} The edict of Granada was the outcome of the *Reconquista* meaning the recovery of the Iberian Peninsula from the Arabs by the Christians. This edict was influenced by the Catholic Inquisition.

^{viii} According to historian Rena Molho: “...Most of them were forced to leave all their belongings except the Spanish civilization that in later times proved an indispensable part of their Jewish identity. If the mother tongue of a people describes its national belonging then the fact that the Spanish-Jews preserved the Spanish language even after their destruction by the Nazis proves the deep roots of their cultural patriotism” (Molho, 1988:123).

^{ix} The Ottoman Empire was based on the *millet* system according to which all the non-Muslim populations were allowed to practice their religion but were obliged to pay heavy taxes.

^x In all our discussions the distinction “Us/Them” came up quite frequently as people differentiated Jewish from Christian Thessalonians.

^{xi} In 1552 the poet Samuel Usque wrote: “Near the big sea that surrounds the Ottoman Shores God raised the mace of mercy and stopped the river of misery, people of Jacob! Thessaloniki is a faithful city. The exiled Jews run to your protection and are welcome as if this city was our holy mother, Jerusalem”.

^{xii} Christine Delphy (1979), “Sharing the same table: Consumption and the Family”.

^{xiii} A traditional Greek alcoholic drink.

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