

The Entirely Improbable, Daring, Quiet Food Revolt: Imaginary Feasts at Nazi Concentration Camps as Shown in Anne Georget's Documentary *Festins Imaginaires*

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A group of young women are huddled together on a bunk bed in a dormitory. Whispering voices: 'Apple sauce. Vanilla custard. Gâteau de fromage. Potato croquettes...'. This is obviously about recipes and one of them is busy taking notes. However these women aren't on a school trip or something of that kind. This is the concentration camp of Ravensbrück, 1944. These women are starving. Nevertheless they talk about food, for hours on end. A woman's voiceover explains: 'Of course we were unbelievably hungry, but what made our lives – I won't say bearable, but it was a distraction – was sitting together and talking about food. I had organized some paper and a pencil and wrote down all those recipes. It was our dream kitchen behind barb wire'.

Festins Imaginaires by the French documentary filmmaker Anne Georget premiered at the Culinary Cinema series of the Berlin film festival in 2015. It has been on my mind ever since. We talk a lot about the complex meaning of common meals; this however was proof that eating and cooking could create a bond even in its virtual form, could invigorate and nourish even in its absence. As a food historian I knew about hunger fantasies in prisoner camps, and have quoted for instance from the report from Auschwitz by the Italian writer and holocaust survivor Primo Levi. But that was still about the actual intake of food. These women did not try to sugarcoat the back sludge they were given as soup, they were at the stove, cooking, if in their minds: 'One day one of us said, oh, I would so like some stew now, or a bread, and that's how it started. Another then asked, do you know how to make that [...]. The cookbook was my idea, I couldn't even do scrambled eggs, it would be useful for later on. We were determined to survive'.

The 70 minutes long documentary is about a quiet revolt: The starving women dream up a communal kitchen and dinner table, and are bold enough to write it all down. Anne Georget confronts us with recipe collections from Nazi concentration camps as well as other, similar scenarios in a Soviet gulag, and a Japanese camp for US American POWs, every single one a revolution. But her documentary is also a small revolution in itself, daring to tackle a very controversial subject. As I said, obviously this has been examined by other scholars. However, I am interested as much in the content as in the methodology Georget uses. Her strategy is the opposite of the typical expert, still characteristic of many academics, feeling confident in their fields and thus examining and explaining the world. Very much aware of how sensitive her subject is, Georget instead carefully approaches it from many different angles.

At this point I'd like to digress for a moment. The call for papers for this symposium suggested amongst many other topics, 'The rise in Food Studies programmes – revolutionary topics and methodologies'. Looking at today's offerings in this field it is easy to forget how revolutionary its existence as such is. When Alan Davidson retired from the ambassadorial circles in the late 1970s and decided to study food, he needed the social historian Theodore Zeldin to arrange a fellowship for him, 'against a background of official scepticism' (Oxford Symposium website, 2016). The first seminar they staged defensively referenced 'serious' science in its title: 'Food and Cookery: the Impact of Sciences in the Kitchen'. The twenty-one people who turned up represented several disciplines from the history of medicine to mathematics to French literature. They discussed the historical connection between food writing and writing on medical matters. The first full scale Symposium was held in 1981; the next in 1983; since then, at the urging of Zeldin, under whose auspices the first Symposia were treated as University seminars, they have continued as annual gatherings.

We have come a long way. Oxford has given rise to satellite events such as this one, and I can only repeat: this in itself is revolutionary. Food is finally accepted as a serious field to study. In 2011 the Oxford Trustees published a recipe collection to celebrate their 30 years anniversary (Norman, 2011). In its introduction Theodore Zeldin wrote about 'what recipes reveal and conceal':

In Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, a picture of a man with his hand in his mouth means both 'to eat' and 'to speak'. [...] These are recipes not just to satiate hunger and to give pleasure to the senses, they are also recipes for the mind, invitations to conceive fresh thoughts, and discover new directions and new contacts. [...] When we started the Oxford Food Symposium 30 years ago, we were attempting to make a break with the past in three ways. First of all, we proposed that universities should give as serious attention to gastronomy as to astronomy or any other subject in their syllabus. Secondly, we invited non-academics, food writers and chefs and writers to join us, so that we would not be a purely academic institution, but would benefit from the large number of knowledgeable people outside the universities who had interesting experiences to share. Thirdly, we combined the tasting of amazing meals and unusual ingredients with discussion of how we have come to eat and cook the way we do.

Instead of just publishing the essays which our members wrote about particular foods and about more general topics raised by food, we decided to meet to engage in conversations and debates about a different theme each year. We called ourselves a symposium because convivial discussion was a central part of our project. We liked the idea of people with different temperaments meeting and inspiring one another's imaginations.

Zeldin's and Davidson's revolutionary project led to today's world of food studies. It also led the way in positioning food in an interdisciplinary context, beyond the academic world, using it as entry point and guidance to all aspects of life. Today we take for granted that food studies should include or connect everything from politics to economics and psychology. I would even argue that food studies have been informing other fields in this interdisciplinary, open approach.

Now let's go back to the starving, cooking women in Ravensbrück. Georget's interest in the subject went back some time: Her documentary *Les Recettes de Minna* about a recipe collection from the Nazi camp in Terezín had been aired on French television in 2008, and a book was published on the same subject (Georget and Herberstein, 2008). The project had been a long-drawn one. Georget had come across the recipes in 1996 in a New York Times book review (De Silva, 1996.) The film world had been more than reluctant to fund a documentary linking the joy of cooking with the horrors of the holocaust. After the premiere in Berlin, the quiet but determined woman in her early fifties spoke about the film and its making. I later researched that in her documentaries she chooses topics such as asylum seekers, the pharmaceutical industry, or euthanasia, fearlessly focussing exactly on those things most of us would prefer to avoid looking at because we deem them too uncomfortable, too confusing, and too painful. 'This subject (the prisoners' recipes) immediately touched a nerve', she told me later in an interview. 'I had long been convinced that recipes transfer much more than it seems'.

Financing her second film turned out to be just as long drawn and difficult as for the first. Recipes from Nazi concentration camps were rejected as tasteless, as taboo even. In the film the philosopher Olivier Assouly comments upon the discomfort the sheer existence of those recipes caused for many and the fact that in most families they were a long kept secret: 'Pleasure is not conceded to the victims, as pleasure would liberate them from their condition, as unconditional victims. Camp has to be unconditional suffering, suffering has to be sovereign at all times'. Georget had thought of that first collection from Mina Pächter as something unique. To her surprise she kept and still keeps hearing about so many others. Mina Pächter's recipes, after taking a quarter-century to reach her daughter, made for surprising ripple effects. Holocaust survivors and their families got in touch with Georget to

tell her about similar collections, long hidden away for fear of being accused as blasphemous. Because of Georget's way to deal with the sensitive issues surrounding the matter in hand, they trusted her and came out. She also learnt that this was not exclusively about mothers' legacies to their daughters. The son of a Flöha prisoner got in touch after reading the Mina book: 'I know that you will take me serious, that you will not assume they hadn't suffered but that all in the contrary, they wrote down those recipes because they suffered terribly'.

Subsequently, Georget made this second, unflinching and therefore very powerful documentary, *Festins Imaginaires*. She confronts us with strong-willed women and men who are fighting for their humanness. But she doesn't show them as distanced heroes, because they do something very familiar: they cook and eat, at least in their minds, finding ways to write down their recipes. To get caught with those notes could have resulted in a death penalty.

To translate taste into words – and the same goes for all other sensual impressions – is always a great challenge. It can only be successful if the recipients are left with enough space to incorporate their own experiences and associations. In these films the challenge was twofold: how to deal with food and taste that were absent even at the original scene, food and taste that only existed in protagonists' memories and imagination? Anne Georget found two ways to deal with this. On the one hand she avoids showing actual food, thus avoiding a direct, literal translation. On the other hand, especially in *Festins*, she draws circles around her topic without ever narrowing it down or zeroing in on it. Thus many facets flare up, presenting potential connecting points for the audience to approach what they see in their very own way.

Dogs barking, heavy snow, darkness, abandoned barracks. That's how Georget shows the camps. Again: what she does not show is the food (or people). She told me she thought very long and hard about this, finally deeming it impossible to 'show a kilogram of butter and at the same time mention Theresienstadt. There had to be enough space left between the pictures on the screen and what the audience brought with them so that the film didn't take them as hostages'. She decided to work with the artist Elsie Herberstein who drew ingredients and dishes (and much more), and included wall paintings left by prisoners in the camps.

Her way of circling around the topic is similar to a brainstorming session. What is really happening? What could it mean? Georget had made facsimile reproductions of the recipe collections, which she gave to experts from many different fields as well as prisoners and their families, recording their reactions with the camera. She chose informal settings to stress the tentative, open approach. This goes with her general strategy doing documentaries: 'I never have the one answer ready. The very opposite: At the end there tend to be more questions than before, and that I find interesting. There are no simple answers, for nothing in life'.

There is the French Michelin-starred chef Olivier Roellinger, visibly moved and overwhelmed, struggling for words. The philologist Jérôme Thélot explains the meaning of the word recipe, implying the continuity of taking over and passing on. The US American rabbi and historian Michael Berenbaum says: ‘The camp is hunger, it means the loss of power and dignity, it destroys the body, other than with slavery where the capacity to work is preserved, this is of no importance here’.

Again a female voiceover: ‘It was bitterly cold. Our souls and bodies were broken, we trembled not because we had nothing to wear, but because our stomachs were empty. We were desperately hungry’. The slavistics professor Luba Jurgenson explains the virtual nourishment as a reaction to the intended obliteration, the attempt to establish some order in a world thrown in chaos. Christiane Hinguët contributed to the recipe collection and survived Ravensbrück: ‘The hunger after two years of starvation is terrible. Not the beatings, when you couldn’t keep upright anymore. [...] And then we thought about the bowl filled with flour, in which we cracked the eggs, about the whisk for the egg white, and we imagined all that. It was a real pleasure. We forgot about everything else’.

And on the circling goes. Yehudit Inbar, director of the Holocaust documentation centre *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem, notices: ‘Everything had been taken from them. Hair, body, regular clothes, families, life, culture, it was all gone. They had only themselves left, the most fundamental: their souls. And souls must communicate, must bond, connect with others. Recipes were a remarkable way to communicate, a source of power’. Neuroscientists Hanna and Antonio Damasio look shocked and interpret the recipes as a common, safe ground because they don’t touch too much on the personal. At that point Georget brings back Michael Berenbaum: ‘The idea that people in that situation talk about food is absolutely extraordinary. Such a triumph of the mind, to transport yourself back to the time when there was still a home, a kitchen, a family, guests, when the world was whole. And now every single thought revolves either around starvation or its consequences, hunger, cold, struggling...’.

Finally psychoanalysts Géraldine Cerf and Maurice Borgel dare to put it into words: ‘These words [in the

recipes] bring back so many sensual impressions, gestures; these words are nourishing. They nourish the mind, the psyche, but also – and that seems ironic – the body. They satiate the hunger’. The power of the mind is much stronger than the body. Another voiceover confirms this: ‘Our “Sunday brunch” gave us the power to survive. And that was important. We talked about wonderful dishes, served at the family table, during better times. During those indulgences we only swallowed our saliva. At the end of those dreamed-up feasts we somehow felt invigorated. We were relieved, not only virtually nourished, but because we had been sitting together, as around a dining table, had recreated a family circle for ourselves’.

Anne Georget found a very subtle and yet powerful way to leave plenty of space for our own associations and feelings, while forcing us to open our eyes and minds to as many facets as possible. Not only is this film about the power of food in its complete absence, not only does it demonstrate how important it is to approach a complex subject from as many angles as possible, it also translates the best chefs’ food principles into film: Use what you come across and what inspires you. Inspire others, instead of imposing your own horizon onto others and thus limiting theirs. Build up trust without ever lulling in. Be unflinching – and revolutions might happen.

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