

# OF PARSNIPS AND MOTHER TONGUES

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Here, no one's mother tongue is English.

That is not to say that people were not born here;  
but rather, that most of the mothers of the people I know, were not.

My mother was not.

My mother tongue is Russian. But this is not the language in which I dream, love, eat...

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I don't know the names of the foods that I eat in Russian, at least not all of them. I don't even know how to say "identity" in this mother language of mine.

The other day I tried to tell *mama* and *papa* about a food project I'm working on with my Nepali friend. But I felt stuck and fell silent when I didn't know how to explain a project that looks at the relationships among food, memory and identity.

I said:

"We are looking at the ways in which a particular food can become a definitive force in individuals' attempts to reflect on their memories and their..."

Their...

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How would you say ‘identity card’ in Russian?”

No not the technical term that means ‘identification with’... I mean, it’s part of it, but it’s more than this...

Do you know what ‘identity’ is?

No?

me neither...”

We ended up talking about the weather.

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I was born in Russia, but I grew up in Israel. My family and I moved not because of Zionism, religion, tradition or some other such grand narrative. We moved because of food, or rather a lack of it. My brother and I were diagnosed with celiac in our first years out of our mother’s womb.

Celiac is a digestive and autoimmune disorder of the small intestine that results in severe gluten intolerance. Some might call celiac a disease, but I don’t feel particularly diseased so I just say celiac—for me, much like displacement, it’s a lifestyle.

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Since not much was known about gluten back in the 1980s, especially not in the deficit-struck Soviet Union, hospital officials registered us with Moscow’s diabetics society. Each month we received a package of insulin injections.

This gesture was not of much help to our nutrition, although my brother and I had a blast with the syringes, filling them with water in the bathtub and shooting each other.

*Mama* and *papa* were less thrilled about getting the syringes, and after long debates with *babushka* they decided to emigrate once the opportunity presented itself.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991 was precisely what my parents and *babushka* were waiting for. The event promised to rescue us all from the endless queues to buy oranges, toilet paper, fish wrapped in newspaper, and other such delicacies.

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Waiting for the train from Moscow to Budapest, where we would catch a flight to Israel, *mama* and *papa* repeated the name of the new place we would find ourselves a few hours later.

I remember asking repeatedly about this new place and why were we going there. I can't remember the answers, but I do remember *mama* and *papa* promising there would be sun, palm trees and bananas!

All of their promises were fulfilled.

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Growing up in a country that was not ours presented my *babushka* with numerous anxieties. She worried that Hebrew would replace her grandchildren's mother tongue.

I never shared this anxiety.

Language never seemed like something I could lose; it was never a thing I owned in the first place.

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*Babushka*, a gynecologist by profession, was an amazing cook and baker. The kitchen was her temple and preparing food was her religion. With her strong hands, she ground gluten-free grains such as rice and corn into starchy flours. She mixed the ingredients and kneaded the dough to form cakes, pastries and *blini* for my brother and me.

She watched cooking shows attentively; a pen in one hand and a notebook in the other, she wrote everything down.

There were so many notebooks.

I once tried to decipher her messy handwriting without much luck.

She worried that we didn't eat enough

so she cooked and baked

and cooked some more.

She called me a "gourmand" when I refused to finish a meal because it wasn't to my taste. I wonder if I've become one because of her.

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I haven't lost the little Russian I had when I left my motherland, which never felt motherly to me.

*Mama* and *papa* worked hard to make sure I acquired new words, new turns of phrase, new ways of revealing and concealing. But I lost the ability to experience the language.

Maybe losing a language is possible after all?

*Mama*, *papa* and *babushka* became *ima*, *aba* and *safta* after we immigrated to Israel. But they never metamorphosed into *mom*, *dad* and *grandma*. It's just not who they are.

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I feel most at home in Hebrew.

I can say whatever I want, however I wish, and I don't doubt my ability to express myself so that I'm understood. Hebrew is the least tiresome language for me. It doesn't require my tongue to roll on my palate in an unnatural way, as if I have pebbles down my throat and in the void of my oral cavity between my teeth and tongue.

And still, Hebrew seems to lack words that make my palate satisfied and my stomach full. Words such as "parsnip." Or "gluten-free." In Hebrew you'd say: "lacking gluten."

The lack is inherent in the Hebrew that I eat.

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I fell in love with English fairly early, maybe because I wished to complement the absence that I felt with Hebrew and Russian, or maybe because I wanted to be more like my brother. He is a year older than me, and at the age of 10 he started learning English with a private tutor. I asked *ima* and *aba* to send me to the same tutor.

I loved the feeling of my tongue rolling on my palate while producing the English *rrrrrr*, and not quite hissing between my teeth when I produced words like "*this*" and "*thousand*."

I liked being able to understand all the English-language TV shows without subtitles, and I loved reading books that opened on the left and closed on the right (the way I read in my mother tongue).

Still, none of my experiences with English prepared me for my encounter with the parsnip.

It took me almost three decades to learn about parsnips, not only the word but also the strange and comforting flavour of the roasted root vegetable.

I was a graduate student at Oxford University, sitting on a narrow bench in a 700-year-old dining hall, surrounded by 200 students and faculty members more than three thousand miles from home, when I first tasted the soft texture and mildly sharp taste of...

What?

I wanted to know what triggered this sensation. I wanted a word that could tell me how to communicate my love for this edible piece of heaven.

Parsnip. I learned the word fairly quickly, but it had no meaning in my trilingual brain—it had no signifier.

I asked my friends what a parsnip was. I checked a bulky dictionary. I called my parents.

Finally, I discovered that in Russian a parsnip is *pasternak*, like the writer (I wonder which one came first), and in Hebrew, you would say “white carrot.” This actually presented a clear mental image, but not one that matched any vegetable I’d seen before.

The frustration was resolved when I found the desired word stuck on a heap of what looked like beige and yellowish carrots in the supermarket. I still miss parsnip whenever I go back to Israel.

And not just the taste of it.

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This sense of absence, the inability to communicate flavours and textures is one that I find most common among multi-linguals and multi-placials. I feel confident enough in my displacement to invent words that would communicate the sense of (dis)belonging to more than one place.

This deficit of words was the most challenging part of entering the English-speaking world. I found that I could talk fairly easily about Walter Benjamin’s convoluted concept of history and its relevance to contemporary politics, but I could not communicate what spices I used to cook borscht and prepare hummus.

I could not instantaneously think of a word or a string of words that could describe the sensation of eating a caraway seed, or the soothing texture of coconut butter as it melts once it touches the palate exactly in the same place where the English *rrrrrr* is produced.

Or why turquoise, when pronounced in Hebrew as *turkiz*, always evokes the taste of celery  
in my mind.

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I've been writing and living in English for two-thirds of my life. Hebrew and Russian,  
however, never deserted me.

They tend to reappear in the most unpredictable places, like mushrooms that pop above  
ground after a tsunami. The words and sounds make their way unexpectedly into my mind  
and out of my mouth.

To be sure, my mother tongue is no longer Russian. Nor is it Hebrew. Rather, it is the  
mixture of the languages that I live, speak and taste. No matter where I travel, these words  
follow me like faithful companions.

At times I think that I have mastered all three languages. At others, it seems the languages  
have mastered me.