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 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 should include or connect everything from politics to economics and psychology. I would even argue that food studies should include or connect everything from politics to economics and psychology. I would even argue that food studies should include or connect everything from politics to economics and psychology. I would even argue that food studies should include or connect everything from politics to economics and psychology. I would even argue that food studies should include or connect everything from politics to economics and psychology. 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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 explained the virtual nourishment as a reaction to the intended obliteration, the attempt to establish some order in a world thrown into chaos. Christiane Hingouët 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.

Works Cited:


