

## Reflections on Breadmaking in Transylvania

Hajnal Minger, 12/2020

Recently, I had the pleasure of seeing a short video on breadmaking from Transylvania. It struck a chord with me and brought back wonderful memories from my childhood. It transported me back in time and gave me the opportunity to put bread making into a totally different context. The seemingly simple act of baking a traditional bread took on a new meaning. Because I came to realize that a loaf of bread is a lot more than baked dough. And now, remembering the oven that my father built for my grandparents as a young man, my grandmother's bread means a lot more to me. More than I could have ever imagined. I never considered bread to be the symbol of love, community and culture, as I now view it.

Traditionally, the first step of making Transylvanian bread in my view is a testament to a close knit resilient society. Without the convenience of refrigeration and stores that carry everything we can't even think of, the starter for that dough came from one of the neighbors. Because bread was not baked too often, the starter had a life of its own. To use the best starter, you got it from the person who baked a few days before you. So, you too were expected to save enough to have as needed, and some for the unforeseen. Only after you got that precious starter, could you take on the meticulous process of creating the dough.

Baking bread was a lengthy process, started early in the morning and had to involve a capable helper. In my case, my grandfather did those chores as long as my grandmother had the strength to make her bread. They started the process together. Grandma with the dough making and grandpa lighting the fire in the oven, with just the right amount of kindling and firewood. Later he arranged the glowing ambers just at the right places, not only to create the right temperature, but to be sure that the temperature can be sustained for a long time without the ability to add more fuel to that fire. It was not an easy task. None of us could do it. It took years of learning and practice. And the dough had to be kneaded repeatedly. It took hours, and us grandkids were watching and waiting to be called upon to help. The special wooden kneading trough had handles at the corners. We took turns to steady that magical device for grandma, otherwise the sticky thick dough would be unmanageable.

After the red hot ambers were moved around the edges of the oven and toward the door, after the oven was tested with a chicken feather that had to ignite and burn in the middle of the oven, the dough was finally set on giant cabbage leaves and carefully placed with the peel at the back. At this point it was almost the middle of the day, with many hours to go to finish. And grandma knew how anxious we were when that wonderful aroma of the baking bread filled up the summer kitchen. She fashioned some quick baking pretzel like shapes called birdies and we could have our treat without having to wait for hours on end.

Those breads were big, like wagon wheels. And none of us could touch the bread before it was thoroughly cooled, and the thick crust was beaten off of it and cleaned properly. Also, it was considered unhealthy to eat hot bread, so it would have been longer still. That is why she also made fried bread for us in a cast iron skillet. She topped it off with yummy sour cream or garlic oil. At my Hungarian camps in the summertime, it is probably our most favorite common endeavor to make this traditional food, called "lángos". Zingermans' bakehouse has it occasionally as well.

No matter the toil or the wait, the weekly bread baking was almost a celebration for us. It was sort of a sacred ritual and a competition too. Everybody knew in the family and the neighborhood, how the bread turned out. It was widely shared.

I must smile, as I think back now, how my grandma's bread has burned itself into my memory. The taste, the smell, the texture. I always have memories of sunshine too when I remember the bread baking. Even though it must have been raining or less than ideal circumstances in all those years, I do not remember any of that. I only remember that my grandmother's bread always turned out excellent, better than anybody else's bread.