Family Footnotes*

Lisa Rosenberg

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Auntie Sultana's Baklava was the best. Everyone in the Juderia agreed. Her recipe was all in her head. Like her mother and aunties before her, she never wrote anything down. If you asked her to tell you she would say: "some of this and a little of that." She'd hold her hand out and exclaim, "like this, like a fist, this much."

She was meticulous though, when layering the thin phyllo dough, individually bathing each hand-thrown, paper-thin layer with melted butter. She cracked open every walnut individually, by hand, crushing each against the other to release the fresh nut meats, and then crumbled them. "Not too much, just enough *ija* (dear one) – crumbles, not crumbs; you must have something to chew." She sprinkled in the cinnamon and just a pinch of ground cloves. "They can overwhelm without restraint." Then she constructed it layer upon layer and soaked it all overnight in rosewater and fragrant orange blossom honey, tempered with freshly squeezed lemon juice.[1]

Uncle Nissim always snuck into the kitchen when Sultana's back was turned and sampled the Baklava before it cooled. The Baklava must sit overnight, come to room temperature, and fully rest before it is perfect and the ingredients must have combined to saturate the delicate phyllo dough.

[1] Sultana was gassed at Auschwitz. Her niece, Fortuna survived and gave testimony. They were sorted and separated upon arrival. Sultana gave her thick coat to Fortuna, so she would look older than she was. She was so thin after the long difficult journey. Sultana was sent right, her niece (Fortuna) left to the barracks with the younger women, where they sheltered in the freezing cold, from the ash that fell all through the night. Fortuna now lives in New Mexico with her husband Leon. They met at the displaced persons camp after the liberation by the Russian army. They have four grown sons and daughters-in-law, and twelve grandchildren.

Auntie would catch him and scold him. "It's for Shabbat!" – her annoyed tone blithely at odds with the joyous and prideful smile that would light up her face. She knew how much he loved her Baklava. They were his bees that provided the strangely powerful orange blossom honey that made it so distinctive. Nissim loved his bees, and they loved him. They never strayed from his well-tended hives. He hated to leave them.[2]



Lisa Rosenberg is an Art Historian, Gallerist, and Museum Educator. Her early career was in the blue-chip retail art world followed by a museum education at SFMOMA and the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Lisa's writing up to now has been non-fiction, essays for exhibition catalogs, art criticism, tours, and public talks. She has an MFA in creative writing from Dominican University of California, a B.A. from U.C. Berkeley in Art History, and an M.A. in Graduate Humanities/Art History from Dominican University. Lisa lives in Marin County in Northern California with her husband of thirty-five years. Her family heritage is Rhodeslis, Ladino speaking Sephardic Jews from the island of Rhodes.

[2] Nissim was thrown from the train before it reached the camp. His brother Raphael was with him. Raphael survived and gave testimony. Nissim's legs gave out on the transport from the dehydration, exhaustion, and heat. The men in the box car tried to tighten the circle around him and prop him up, so he would not be seen. But he was spotted by a guard and thrown into the countryside while the train was in motion. There were no signs they could find to see where they were. Only a few of the men were in a position to look out of the small openings between the bars, so the survivors never could go back to, maybe, place a marker. Raphael immigrated to Rhodesia after spending a year in a refugee camp in Italy. He married a Rhodeslis woman named Estrella Capouya. They had two daughters, Joya and Regina. They still live in former Rhodesia (now, Zimbabwe) and run a successful cut flower business that is known for its spectacularly large and fragrant rose blossoms, pollinated by Raphael's own bees.