

# Stuffed Cabbage and History Lessons

WHILE EXPLAINING THE ORIGIN OF storytelling, my fourth-grade Romanian teacher depicted a vivid tableau of our ancestors gathered around a campfire roasting a wild boar and sharing their hunting adventures.

The tales—my teacher claimed—were merely a tool to keep fears at bay, and also a way to explain natural phenomena their primitive minds could not grasp. The old myths and legends sprang from a dreadful uncertainty of the world they lived in. “From a deeper need to figure out the meaning of their life at that moment in time,” Comrade Teacher concluded with a self-assured, didactical smile.

That day, walking home from school in my village at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, I thought of her words and wondered if our forefathers laughed and made jokes while cooking their evening meal, if their roasted meat was tasty without salt and black pepper sprinkled on the crunchy skin, if they had dogs fighting over the bones.

In my ten-year-old mind, the image of shadows flickering on cave walls began to fade away, replaced by another birthplace of good stories: my own kitchen. The primordial fire changed into our black cast-iron stove, while the wild beast dripping with fat became a pyramid of pickled cabbage heads towering from a wooden vat in the middle of the table. The cave dwellers—unshaved men and fur-clothed women—metamorphosed into my own family members preparing our national dish: *sarmale*, stuffed cabbage.

In my version, the stories did not originate solely from fear of the unknown, or the wish to keep each other from being afraid. They also derived from a place my relatives knew very well: a particular moment in time when history shaped their existence, changed their trajectory, and tested their endurance. There were funny, juicy anecdotes of love breaking the boundaries of moral etiquette, of clever, fast decisions made in the name of survival and preservation. There were family events elevated into legend and spiced with humor and witty comments.

Gathered in the kitchen to prepare the traditional dish for weddings, baptisms, Christmas, New Year’s Eve, church

saints’ days, anniversaries, and even funerals, the women of my family rolled and wrapped meat fillings in leaves of pickled cabbage and unfolded their stories. The past became vivid and tangible, a slice of life seasoned with real people’s incidents, heartfelt lessons offered to the listener’s mind as food for thought.

Allowed in the kitchen, first as an observer, later as an apprentice able to chop the onions into a mound of translucent white scales and grate the carrots to a feathery orange cloud, I listened.

It was enough to ask a question, or just toss a name into the steamy kitchen air, and the storytelling came out rich like a thick sauce over a broiled chunk of meat. There were also recipes, cooking tips, suggestions, witty words, and warnings.

“Add just a pinch of salt to the ground pork. Remember the cabbage is already salted by the brine,” my grandmother would admonish one of her daughters. “Besides,” she continued, “too much salt is a sign of bad luck. Remember cousin Petronela’s wedding feast? People left the salty *sarmale* untouched on their plates. Later the marriage came apart like a cabbage leaf boiled for too long,” she said and tightened the lid on the jar of salt.

“Oh, Mother, that’s just a superstition. Petronela wasn’t happy living with a drunkard and a loafer, so she left him. Would you blame her?” Mioara, my mother’s oldest sister, dared to contradict the family matriarch.

The old woman sitting at the head of the table remained firmly convinced that the amount of salt sprinkled on the food has something to do with the richness and the duration of a relationship. To her, there were cues in the color of a yolk, signs in the foaming yeast at the onset of the dough, forewarnings hidden in the skin of a freshly plucked goose, omens that only she, like a high prophetess, could decipher.

From Petronela’s unhappy story, the women would switch to another black sheep, cousin Zenobia, who divorced her abusive husband and later married her neighbor, Chaim, a Jewish widower with two small boys.



FIGURE 1: *The Romanian traditional dish of stuffed cabbage is usually served with mamaliga, a tasty polenta.*

SARMALE! BY ALEX CURPAS ([HTTPS://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/RANDOMBOY/5419709192/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/randomboy/5419709192/)) IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY-SA 2.0

“Now she makes her *sarmale* with ground beef, barley, and raisins. Can you imagine? A sweet filling wrapped in sour-salty leaves. And she called them *holishkes*,” my great-aunt Anica said, pursing her lips like the bottom of a bell pepper.

During 1969 Christmas cooking time, the women whispered that Aunt Zenobia was waiting for her passport visa, ready to leave the country for good. Her husband’s cousins from Israel paid the Romanian government for each member of Chaim’s family.

Noticing my puzzled face, Aunt Mioara, an avid listener of Radio Free Europe who knew more about state politics than the rest of us, felt obliged to explain the unorthodox trade. “You see, the president borrowed lots of money from the western banks to industrialize the country. Good intention, but this business of manufacturing goods is not a fairy tale to happen overnight.” She laughed and waited for us to follow suit.

Since my mother showed visible signs of uneasiness, my aunt lowered her voice. “But he found a way to get the dollars: emigration of our ethnic minority. Well, if their family abroad would pay for them . . .” she said and disappeared into the pantry. I waited for more enlightenment, like a child

pinning for another slice of a delicious cake stored away by a parsimonious hostess.

Nobody uttered a word. We were all lost in our own thoughts.

“Zenobia is lucky; her husband’s relatives are planning to open a bakery store in Magda-Jaffa. They needed trustworthy workers to run the enterprise. And what can be better than your own family?” Aunt Lena broke the silence.

“She’ll be fine. When it comes to pastries, Zenobia has a natural gift. Her *hamentashens* are so good, they melt into your mouth,” my mother said, eager to return to a more neutral subject.

The idea of selling people for foreign currency appalled me more than mixing dried currants into the sautéed onion. Eating sweet stuffed cabbage was a matter of taste, but exchanging human beings for dollars was a bitter kind of dish.

As a teenager I began to question the communist regime, trying to make sense from bits and pieces of truth hushed in our kitchen. My grandmother advised not to waste time stirring the boiling water; the affairs of the Balkan states were hard to comprehend. She offered us her favorite story, one

historical moment in time she candidly called “my Christmas in summer.”

In August 1944, the Soviet Red Army crossed the River Prut and marched to Bucharest. A Russian captain stationed in our old farmhouse caught a glimpse of a wooden barrel hidden in the cellar while his nose detected a scent of fermented cabbage. With his pistol he pointed to the barrel, then to my grandmother, and demanded “*golubtsy, golubtsy.*”

Grandmother shrugged her shoulders in ignorance. The Russian officer placed his pistol in the holster, dropped an imaginary ball of filling into his outstretched palm, and mimicked the rolling of a wrapping. Then he waited for his gesture to be processed by the owner of that enticing vat of pickled cabbage.

“*Niet* meat, *niet* oink, oink,” my grandmother made the sound of a hungry hog and pointed to the empty pigsty in the yard.

The captain understood the language of deprivation, but his craving for the savory dish was more intense than the logistics of war. He ordered the village mayor to produce a pig for the slaughter or shooting would take place before his very eyes.

The village council gathered, and from an old military helmet, the mayor drew a piece of paper on which a house number was written. Early in the morning, a pig was sacrificed in the name of peace and brotherly love between the two neighboring nations.

Once the animal was slaughtered, and its meat sorted, cubed, and ground, the women rolled up their sleeves and went to work in my grandmother’s kitchen. They chopped and sautéed red onions, grated carrots, and cut fresh parsley leaves. They dropped fistfuls of rice into the mixture and kneaded it into the bowl of ground pork. They sprinkled black pepper, salt, and paprika over the concoction and began to fold the filling in pickled cabbage leaves.

They worked fast and in silence, afraid to disturb the fragile truce established between the villagers and the new invaders.

Like witches from an old folktale, when they finished their preparation, the women placed the cabbage rolls into a cauldron and hoisted it on a trivet. Under the hungry eyes of Russian soldiers, they watched the tongues of fire licking the bottom of that large pot and waited quietly as though performing an oblation ritual.

Late afternoon, when the *golubtsy* were almost ready to be served, Russian-style with a dollop of sour cream and corn porridge on the side, a military car arrived in the village. A Red Army colonel came out of the dusty vehicle and ordered the Russian regiment to leave immediately. The German troops were still holding the town of Ploiesti, a strategic point for both

armies, since the town’s petrol distilleries were a vital source of fuel for any war machine.

The Russian soldiers didn’t have a choice but to follow the military command and secure control over the industrial zone. The voluptuous stuffed cabbage dinner entered their memory as an unfulfilled dream of the past, an unconquered heavenly place.

Left with a big pot of good food, the villagers breathed with relief and sat down to celebrate Christmas in summer.

“We ate and laughed as if we were little children. We didn’t know what was in store for us. Nobody knew. History twisted and bent our meager fate. After the war, the winners cut the map of Europe among themselves like an apple pie. Stalin was never satisfied with a slice; he grabbed half of the pie for himself.” My grandmother would always end her story with these words and a deep sigh.

I listened to her and took a look around me. The copper kettle, the red enamel pots, the big wooden spoons resting in a chipped mug by the old stove were all there, in their place, and yet something seemed different.

My aunts and great-aunts grew older, thin and frail. Often they pulled up a chair at the table when they had to core and clean the cabbage leaves. Their hands were wrinkled, and star-sprinkled with age spots. My two great-aunts had fingers slightly crooked from arthritis like small roots of peculiar parsnips. They both wore eyeglasses when peeling and slicing tomatoes for the sauce poured over the hearty dish of *sarmale*. More and more they relied on my “young memory” to keep track of the number of tablespoons of flour meant to thicken the dressing.

They still told stories, mixing them with bits of recipes, tips for using leftover food or substitutes for the ingredients missing from our communist market.

To me, the times when our family got together to cook began to slowly lose the cozy, warm air of a carefree holiday I had sensed in my early childhood. A solemn mood hovered above the pungent smell of sauerkraut. It started when Great-Aunt Anica passed away quietly in her sleep. We missed her loud laughter and the sugary almond cookies she used to bake for the New Year’s Eve.

Three years after her departure, my grandmother, too, left an empty space at the head of the kitchen table. My mother and her sisters gathered and prepared the meal served after her funeral. They didn’t tell stories then, just wondered if up there, in heaven, Grandmother was still arguing with her sister Anica about the right way to fold the cabbage leaf over the ground meat: sides or the tip in first. Maybe they continued their last debate about the proper way to arrange the layers of rolls in a pot and for how long they should simmer them before baking to a perfect golden-copper brightness.

“Maybe they can talk about our rationed sunflower oil and sugar allowance without the fear of being heard by the secret police,” I said, annoyed by the shortage of food we experienced in the late ’70s.

My mother heard the sizzling resentment in my voice and looked sharply at me. Her piercing eyes were a soundless warning to keep my disapproval in a pot with a lid.

It was a time when fear governed our lives, when whispers carried shadows of doubt, and worries gnawed through our hearts like worms into apple cores. Waiting in line for a package of frozen bones for soup or for a carton of eggs took a toll on us. It also turned our daily mood into a permanent gloomy state of mind.

But we had to celebrate Christmas, and we had to have stuffed cabbage for our holiday meal. Pork was rarely found on the market since the farmers didn’t raise pigs anymore due to the lack of fodder and the government restrictions on livestock ownership. The state farms exported the entire meat production, leaving the bovine carcasses for the national consumers.

We could substitute bulgur for rice, use margarine instead of butter, but we needed ground pork for our *sarmale*. One of my mother’s colleagues from the school where she worked as a teacher suggested replacing the ground meat with chopped hazelnuts and pieces of walnuts. Our entire family rejected the preposterous idea with disgust: *sarmale* for Christmas was not a vegetarian dish.

The 1977 winter holidays were fast approaching, bringing more uneasiness into our household. We had to find a *modus operandi* to procure the meat or turn to our last resort: the black market. With plenty of money, a good connection, and one or two packs of American cigarettes as an additional bribe, one could go home with a piece of pork shoulder wrapped in brown paper and tied with a red ribbon, an innocent looking present to any inquisitive eye.

Unfortunately, our family didn’t have a reliable source working at the county slaughterhouse or at the butcher shop on the market square. We had to find other means to acquire the chief ingredient for our most-desired dish.

After a brief meeting held by my aunt Mioara, a decision was made: the men of our family should solve the problem of procuring the meat for our Christmas dish. My father and his brother-in-law would travel to a village up in the mountains in search of a slaughtered hog.

Most of the hamlets scattered over the rugged terrain of the Carpathian highlands were not part of the national agricultural plan, and the inhabitants enjoyed a relatively free hand in running their meager farms and raising a few domestic animals. For a good price, some peasants would sell to the

town dwellers three or even five kilograms of center pork loin or a slab of fatback for bacon and lard.

Equipped with sturdy rucksacks, food, batteries, and flashlights, and dressed in layers of wool sweaters under heavy jackets, as if they were setting out for an expedition to the North Pole, Father and Uncle left at the break of dawn. The women waited patiently at home, once in a while munching on a tangy cabbage leaf and declaring that it was the best pickle they had had in years.

It was my last winter vacation as a college student, and the last I would spend with my family, although I didn’t know that then. We were waiting and, since waiting could be considered an evil way to waste time if one does not use the hands and mind, we turned to baking *rugelash* and Great-Aunt Anica’s almond cookies.

Sensing a gloomy mood floating above the flour puffs at our table, I tried to lift the spirits by telling historical anecdotes about stuffed cabbage. I told them how the plant was mentioned in the Jewish book of Torah more than two thousand years ago; how the Persian king Darius the First regarded it as very nutritious staple for his soldiers and carried casks of pickled cabbage with his army during his military campaigns in Greece.

I told them about the Swedish king Charles XII, who spent five years in exile in the Ottoman Empire where he enjoyed the Turkish *dolmas*, and when he returned to Sweden in 1715 he introduced his favorite dish to his countrymen. His royal chef substituted the grape leaves with pickled cabbage and called the stuffed rolls *kaldomar*.

I went on and on with my stories about different nations and their particular ways of preparing food, about royal chefs and their famous dishes.

My mother and her sisters kneaded the cookie dough and listened to my chatter, without sharing my enthusiasm for cookbooks and foreign cuisine. They had their own unwritten recipes they followed to the last pinch of salt, and they couldn’t care less about the histories of the past. They lived in a miserable present and worried about their future.

After two days, Father and Uncle returned from their business trip. Frozen snowflakes still clung to their eyebrows, but a victorious smile radiated underneath the cold air shielding their faces.

Like old hunters from a medieval era, they dropped a chunk of animal flesh wrapped in a sheep hide on the kitchen table. Then they waited to be rewarded with thankful words. We did our best to show signs of exuberance. But . . . the meat didn’t have the rosy color we were used to. When sliced along the bone, the tight muscle revealed a darker pink, almost a purplish hue.



This was not how I remembered pork. The grinding process was laborious and took a long time. We blamed the old knives and sharpened the blades twice. Aunt Lena exchanged a furtive glance with my mother, then shrugged. Soon, she made herself busy warming up water to scald the rice for the stuffing. My cousin Mia tied her scarf around her head *babushka*-style, winked at me, and returned to her onion chopping.

For a moment a heavy silence, thick like porridge, enveloped us all. Then it hit me: the meat we were using for our *sarmale* came from a wild boar. Moreover, I suspected that everyone knew, but nobody uttered a word about that shameful secret as if it were a hidden plot to assassinate a Party official, the one responsible for our food shortage.

Once we began to roll the cabbage leaves over the fillings of game meat, rice, herbs, and sautéed onions, the stories began to unfold. Slowly, the words brought a note of liveliness to our kitchen, like a glass of effervescent mineral water to parched lips. Aunt Lena had news about a distant relative, Ana-Maria, a young chemist who represented Romania at a scientific congress in Brussels and never returned.

“This girl had such courage, it’s almost scary. She had a husband back home, a nice apartment in Bucharest, and maybe a car in the future. Her husband was on the list at his company to purchase an automobile. But she didn’t think twice. She signed the papers to immigrate to America. Think about it: another continent, a new language, different people, strange customs. And so far away,” she said and looked at us to endorse her lament.

“Good for her, she did the right thing. What else could she do here? She is smart and has a doctorate degree. She’ll find a job in America. Her husband will join her after a while,” my mother said, to our surprise.

“I wonder if they make *sarmale* in America,” Aunt Lena said and looked at me as if I were an expert in the matter.

I didn’t answer. I thought of Ana-Maria and her determination, her struggle in a foreign land, the emotional suffering, the disorientation, and, maybe, the exhilarating joy she might experience in her new life.

I didn’t know that only few years later, after a twisted chain of events, I would undertake the immigrant path and land in New York City.

In 1992 while visiting a friend’s daughter, a student at the Chicago Art Institute, I spent one full morning walking the Windy City streets, taking in the smell, the colors, the sounds.

Around noontime, I found myself far from the town center, on one of those narrow lanes with small grocery stores, electronic repair shops, and small apartment buildings. All of a sudden an unmistakable aroma of *sarmale* hit my nostrils and made me stop. To my left, almost unnoticed, was a restaurant with a door scarred by paint peeling. The shop window was plastered with menus written in Polish.

I couldn’t resist the magnet-like pull and I entered. Nothing fancy, just a small room with six wooden tables, and only two old people slurping noodle soup at one table by the window. I couldn’t read the menu, but remembering my grandmother’s story about the Russian officer demanding *golubtsy*, I pointed to the word *Colabky* and reinforced it with the English word: stuffed cabbage.

The waitress, a middle-aged woman with a round, smiling face, understood my accented speech and returned with a large plate of three fat cabbage rolls, like three miniature piglets sprawled in a steamy tomato sauce. Soon, my taste buds traveled joyously to the land of my childhood.

When I paid the bill, I glimpsed through a door ajar behind the counter. There, sitting at a large table, the woman who waited on me and another woman, a younger version of herself, were shaping meatballs and wrapping them in cabbage leaves. They were talking and laughing. I assumed they were sharing stories of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers who once lived in another country and told their daughters amazing anecdotes along with family’s cooking recipes.

I thought of Aunt Lena. In my mind’s eye, she—hands resting on her hips, gaze on my face—was still waiting for my answer to her question: “Do they make *sarmale* in America?”

I closed my eyes and sent her my mental answer, “Yes, auntie, they do. And they tell stories, too. And food and stories are twin sisters from the land of comfort and the joy of being alive.”