

“The Bialy Eaters” In Sherman Oaks

By Cynthia Citron
For the San Diego Jewish World

I can't begin to tell you how I came to be eating bialys in Claudia Caplin's beautiful home in Sherman Oaks. It started with an invitation to an At-Homes Salon Theatre to view that new group's first production: “Pass the Salt: Jewish Women and Food.”

As co-founder of the new series, Ellen Sandler, explained, salt is part of God's covenant with the Jews, as it opens the taste buds, enlivens the taste of food, never gets stale, never spoils, and lasts forever. Pretty sweet of God! The series, which Ellen hopes will “open up the taste buds of the mind,” is designed specifically to afford Jewish women artists the opportunity to “leave a legacy for generations to come: a body of work illustrating our life in the 21st century.”

For their first program, Ellen and her producing partner Ronda Spinak chose “The Bialy Eaters,” a book by Mimi Sheraton, long-time food columnist and restaurant critic at the New York Times, which Ellen adapted and directed as a play reading. To tell the story, which concerns Mimi Sheraton's search for the perfect bialy and the history of this unique bagel-like onion roll, the two producers rounded up a cast of TV and stage professionals, including Anita Barone, who played Mimi, and Phil Abrams, Lawrence Pressman, and Arva Rose who each played multiple roles, in telling the story of Mimi's odyssey.

The search began in New York, at a selection of Lower East Side delis, where each baker insisted that his creation was the “real” bialy, and all the others were pale imitations. As Mimi noted, the food of one's childhood carries with it a certain nostalgia, and so she began her seven-year search for the memories associated with the original Bialystocker kuchen of eastern Poland. Beginning in New York, she interviewed elderly Polish immigrants, who led her to other resources, which finally led her to Bialystock, Poland, where the first “fressers” (eaters) first baked these “squishy, crusty, yeasty rolls with indented holes filled with onions, either browned or not,” (and this “browned or not” was a controversy that still stirred the blood of the fressers). At the height of their popularity, some 1600 dozen bialys were produced every day by the bakers of that small town.

In Bialystock, the Jews were the majority culture, and here Mimi's book (and Ellen's adaptation) veers into the melancholy memories of those who survived the Holocaust. Anatol Lishinsky, a prominent contact in Warsaw told her that in 1941 some 200,000 Polish Jews joined the Russian army to fight the Nazis. But even so, some 60,000 Jews were killed in Bialystock during the war, with many

of the survivors noting that the Poles were most helpful to the Nazis in pointing out their Jewish neighbors. There had been pogroms in Poland in 1905 and 1906, and they persisted even after the Holocaust ended: a Jewish cemetery was destroyed by Polish punks as recently as 1971.

“Auschwitz was a great Berlitz,” one of the survivors commented as he enumerated the languages he had learned while in that camp. And Leo Melamed, who created the International Monetary Market, and is chairman emeritus of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, lovingly remembered the smell of bialys baking. “Kuchen was the essence of our meals,” he said.

And, as Mimi noted, “whenever you have two Jews, you get three opinions,” and so even though there are only five Jews left in Bialystock and nobody there remembers bialys, the arguments over their preparation continues in America,. “If you brown them before baking, the onions turn black,” says one faction. “Unless you wet them, and then they turn pink,” says another.

But perhaps Elie Wiesel, who Mimi interviewed in the Marais (the Jewish section of Paris), had the definitive word on bialys: “It was not the taste, but the symbol,” he said. “It was what your mother gave you when you came home from school.”

Not only the ultimate comfort food, but the symbol of a long-lost way of life.

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