

## **What I learned from my mother** (Lucie Milosz Haskins)

My mother's approach to life had always been practical, sensible. I'm certain that much of this was shaped by her survival of her early childhood where, as the only daughter of a couple with many sons—prized for working the farm, she learned early on just what her true worth was: clean the house, cook, do without so the brothers can benefit. In fact, when she was in her teens, her father told her that the six boys would each inherit five acres of family farm land as a wedding gift. But Anna had better choose her husband wisely because no such gift would come her way.

I only met my grandmother Sofia once, when I was twelve. My mother sent the money for plane tickets so my grandmother could come from Poland for a short stay. My mother hadn't seen her mother in over twenty years. She had grown into an adult, married a man my grandparents had never met, had three daughters, and moved to America during that time. My grandmother was shocked at the waste of American living. She couldn't understand why we threw out stockings when they got a run in them. Sensible people (meaning her and our Polish relatives) got out a needle and thread and darned the run. When we pointed out that our stockings were sheer and couldn't be mended like her heavy cotton ones, she sighed at the waste in manufacturing such foolish, impractical garments.

However, Babcha quickly became acclimated to our lifestyle which was considered luxurious by her standards but rather middle-class by our own. She quickly became the requestor of many and varied services. *"Bring to me a cup of coffee."* *"Now I need a blanket to cover my cold feet."* We were a generation removed from the farm and her ways. And, while we remained polite, we didn't respond well to her orders—a frustration I'm sure she blamed on lax parenting by my mother in permissive America.

My mother didn't consider any job beneath her. She took a dishwasher's job at Paul Kimball Hospital because she didn't speak good English and that was the only job she could get. (People equated language fluency with intelligence. My mother spoke German, French, Polish, and was learning English.) But she took the dirty and physically demanding dishwasher's job because she knew it got her in the door; it was a stepping stone to a better way of life.

My mother persevered and eventually became the Head Cook at Paul Kimball Hospital. I loved going into the hospital kitchen around the Christmas holidays to help her bake dozens and dozens and dozens of cookies for the staff parties. The large cookie sheets were spread all over the counters in the immense kitchen. I arranged sprinkles carefully on the cookies, concentrating to ensure a neat decoration. I was fascinated by the gigantic floor mixer. It had one heavy-duty beater. Would it grab you and beat you into the cookie dough if you stepped too close? I made sure I kept my distance and never found out!

I remember one time my father planned to take all three of us girls to a newly released Walt Disney movie. A movie I had been dying to see—*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. My mother had asked me the day before if I wanted to help her with the cookie baking. She knew how much I enjoyed "helping" her. I still feel the dilemma I felt, even after so many years. *"The movie?...I REALLY, really want to see it!...Or, should I go with Mommy?...Everyone else is going to see the movie and she'll be all alone at*

*work...She needs me more...I'll go with her. We'll have fun. And I can keep her company. I can see the movie another time."* I did have fun, I enjoyed keeping her company. I still haven't seen the movie!

My mother had always been a wizard in the kitchen, driven as all geniuses are, by her instincts. She made the best pierogi. I was always fascinated by the unwavering routine she used to make them. Place a mound of flour in the middle of the table. (No measuring cups please. Use whatever cup or glass was handy.) Make a well in the middle. Add a sprinkle of salt. (Just a pinch. No measuring spoons.) Open some eggs so they can sit in the mound. (How many eggs? Just enough to moisten the flour. Not too many.) Then, without the eggs running down the mound (an acquired skill) bring the flour around the eggs and mix it all together into the dough.

Homemade noodles were another treat. More dough, rolled flat and cut with a knife (no fancy pasta machines for her), then dried on the counters and on the table and on any other flat surface available for a few hours till ready to boil. When were they ready? I could never tell. Mommy just counted on her instincts to know the right moment.

My mother would spend extra time arranging food on a platter in the most pleasing form to the eye. A simple plate of sliced tomatoes and onions became a studied work of art with concentric circles of tomatoes alternating with onion, sliced green scallions artfully and casually tossed on top for additional color. Her culinary gifts were meant to be transitory in nature. Sadly, only the memories of outstanding meals remain.

Fruit was a luxury in winter. Always, for the holidays, my mother made sure that a large, carefully arranged platter of fruit was prominently displayed. This served to remind us all that, yes, we had truly arrived in the land of plenty.

Entertaining friends meant feeding them. My wedding reception was held at home. The living room and dining room were emptied of all furniture and replaced with a long L-shaped arrangement of rented tables and chairs. My mother baked and cooked for days. She presented the revelers with creation after creation. They gleefully chowed down with new offering from the kitchen. They finally fell back sated, knowing they couldn't eat another bite. Then my mother came proudly out of the kitchen with *"And now for the HOT food!"*

I remember long winter days when I was sick as a child—lying in bed all day—no TV sets in bedrooms then of course, nothing on my mind but to daydream, read if I could think clearly enough, or just sleep. My blankets would be piled thickly and heavily on top (to this day I still love the feeling and security of being encased in such a heavy cocoon).

My mother would check on me periodically. I would awaken as I felt her eyes on mine as she peered around the doorpost. Often she would have brought a bowl of something comforting and easy to slide past those infected tonsils—homemade chicken noodle soup; hot tea with honey and lemon; puddings: rice, vanilla, or my favorite, tapioca. My father sometimes popped in with his favorite restorative—hot beer with honey. The trick was to heat the beer without it foaming and overflowing the saucepan.

Drinking a cup of that, I was certain to fall asleep immediately and slumber away while nature healed me internally.

My mother was full of surprises. I once asked her what she wanted to do if she could pick anything in the world. Her answer—she wanted to work with animals (study their habits in the wild or work in a zoo).

When Dean and I went to get our marriage license, she went along as a witness. When asked if she knew of any legal reason why we shouldn't get married, she leaned back with a mischievous look in her eyes, placed her hand on her chin, and said, "*Now let me think!*"

My mother really understood motivation. We all took turns clearing away supper dishes. Whenever it was my turn, I would always wait to do the job until after my favorite TV show or some other important-at-the-time activity ended. My mother would invariably remind me to do my job; I would ignore her; then guilt would set in as I heard her rustling around, cleaning up the kitchen. For the longest time, I couldn't understand that impatience. Why couldn't she wait? I always did what she asked, sooner or later. I finally absorbed the lesson; she couldn't really rest until the work was done. As long as it remained undone, a portion of her mind kept drifting back to it. Just do it now and it won't eat away at you.

With my mother's strange work hours, she'd be up at 4am to start the hospital breakfasts, back by noon, nap for a few hours and then get up, ready to go again. I'd often make her a liverwurst sandwich (her favorite) on corn rye bread. I'd slice the pickles thinly and place them artistically on the liverwurst (presentation is all). I'd put together a cup of cold coffee with just the right amount of milk in it. (She wouldn't drink hot coffee. Since she was so busy, a cup of hot coffee always got cold sitting waiting for her.) I'd cover the sandwich with a wetted-down paper towel (to keep the bread moist) and place it on her nightstand for her to enjoy when she woke up. On days I didn't make the sandwich, she'd come down and subtly activate my guilt sensors by saying, "*I woke up and was SO hungry, but my sandwich wasn't there.*"

When we lived by the Hudson River (when we first came to America), to get me to come in willingly at night, she told me that gypsies took children who were outside when they shouldn't be. You could always tell when the gypsies were around looking for babies and children to steal because you could hear the whippoorwills warning the children, "*Whip-poor-will! Whip-poor-will!*"

To keep me away from a dangerous but fascinating-to-me well, she told me that a nasty troll lived in it and just waited for little children. He would wait for them to get too close to the edge, then, quick as a flash, he'd put his hand out, grab their legs, and pull them in the well. You'd better believe that I gave that well a WIDE berth after that! And that I ran inside as soon as I heard the whippoorwills warning me!

I think my mother was an artist. She completed only the third or fourth grade in Poland. Farming communities needed helpers in the fields; girls especially weren't encouraged in academic endeavors. My mother displayed her creative skills in many ways (in addition to her cooking and baking). She

knitted beautifully original sweaters from her own designs without using any patterns. For sizing, you would lie down on a newspaper and she traced your body shape.

For larger projects, she instructed my father to build a sturdy frame. He pounded in nails all around its perimeter approximately an inch apart. She threaded the vertical lines of the tapestry, using the nails as the strong foundation. She then threaded the horizontal lines into the frame, row by painstaking row, to provide a sturdy neutral background for her creation. One particular design came alive as she took yarn leftover from her knitting and created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Large red apples grow on the tree that dominates the scene. A three-dimensional snake slithers down the tree. Eve's hair is braided away from the canvas. As a touch of modesty, Adam and Eve are fully clothed. It is absolutely charming and innocent and captures my mother's whimsical spirit perfectly. I cherish this primitive wall tapestry as one of the few permanent creations she's produced.







