

Dish By Dish

We stand at the sink, my mother and I, our sleeves rolled. Before us is a mountain of dishes to scale and conquer. As the suds gather, we fall into our familiar pattern: I wash, she dries. I ask, she answers. I prod, she elaborates. Our conversations cover the map, ranging from questions about raising children to recent news about old friends. But by the time I'm washing the cutlery I'm back in Poland.

Poland is where my mother was born and raised, where she survived the Holocaust. It is the far-off land of family roots I long to recover. Poland — so distant, so removed — is sometimes only a dish away.

No, no, no, I hear a faceless voice lament. *The dishes dry. The story ends. That's no way to chronicle your mother's wartime stories.* True enough. Some day, I will sit her down at a kitchen table, a tape recorder and a plate of honey cake between us, as I did years ago with my grandfather, my mother's father. The conversations with my late grandfather have been preserved on tape, to be retrieved, I hope, by my grandchildren. My mother's sink side stories are for my sake.

For now there is no tape recorder, no video camera, no sense of history being etched for the next generation. My mother's stories are unrehearsed, her answers spontaneous, her memories unpolished. The informality breeds an intimacy we wouldn't have in any other setting. Now that we live in different cities kitchens have become our common ground.

It hasn't been easy reaching this place where we stand, side by side by the sink. For years, my aproned mother stood at the centre of a very traditional marriage, anchored to expectations. She waited until all her children were in school before setting out beyond the front door. All the paths she pursued — a teaching career, a graduate degree — were lined with dishes. Day in, day out, dishes had to be done. In our house, it was a mother's task. A dishwasher? Not this mother. Fifty years after leaving Poland, my mother still prefers washing by hand. Call it old country residue.

Only when I was in my twenties did I begin to see the value of this thankless, vital chore. Only when I became a father of two in my thirties did I truly begin to appreciate what my mother of three had done. I thought of the plate-spinning act on the *Ed Sullivan Show* I watched as a child and realized these guys didn't have a thing on my mother. She needed relief.

Slowly, over time, I chipped away at her insistence that she alone could best wash dishes, as if she had inherited a family secret that had been passed down through the generations, mother to mother to mother. Housework had long defined her, and I was not about to colonize the small piece of domestic territory she had carved out for herself. I simply wanted to share it. Eventually, she surrendered without so much as waving a white dishtowel. Now, when she says, "You're washing?", her eastern European accent is coated with gratitude and relief. One of my greatest pleasures is watching her play with my two young daughters as I wash up. But almost always, like a bee to nectar, she'll make her way over to the kitchen and begin to dry. And that's when we'll begin to talk.

During one recent washing session, I asked her about the Warsaw neighbourhood she grew up in. Was it a Jewish neighbourhood, I wondered. No, she said, and went on to tell me about a family who lived in her apartment building on Mokotowska street, a family with two young boys whom she had befriended and loved as children do. After the war, after losing so many relatives and friends - thankfully her immediate family survived — my mother returned to her apartment to restore old friendships. One of the two brothers had become a doctor. She sought him out and recalled seeing him again for the first time after many years, years of war in which Poland, and my mother, would never be the same again. Sixteen when the war began, she was twenty-two before it was over. As we stood together over a half-century later, mother and son, hands wet, my mother recreated the encounter with her childhood friend. She skimmed on the details in favour of the emotions. The friend was so delighted to see my mother, so relieved that she was still alive, that he swept her off her feet and danced with her.

The friend's name? I can't remember. These are the details I will record, some day. They are important details — names, dates, places. But for now, over dishes, it is enough to hear the story. What lingers is the image of my mother as a young woman in her early 20s. She has survived the Holocaust. She has reunited with a childhood friend. She is dancing.

She will never forget the moment, she tells me. Neither will I. Not this moment in the here-and-now about another moment that was then. The stories my mother shares as we wash and dry have shaped me over the years, as slowly and surely as water on stone. The details, the facts, the figures: I will be sure to get them down, before it's too late. But first, there are dishes to wash.

Emil Sher
The Globe and Mail, 1999