

In Search of Lost Tsimmes by Herbert Kretzmer

Herbert Kretzmer recalls a South African childhood

Every year on the eve of Pesach, with the table already prepared for the first seder, my mother, known as Tilly, unfailingly telephoned round the three modest hotels in our little South African town of Kroonstad, enquiring if any Jewish travelling salesmen were perhaps lodged there for the night, in need of cheer and company.

Consequently, our seders usually included a couple of shy strangers at the table. Tilly liked to gather them in.

I have decided, perhaps rashly, that this brief boyhood memoir should include some mention of my lifelong search for a decent *tsimmes* a tasty, fondly remembered side-dish of my youth in which carrots featured prominently. Alas, I report only failure and disappointment, despite the tireless researches of my dear wife, who isn't even Jewish, who has led the Great Tsimmes Hunt for the past 17 years, avidly despatching enquiries to all corners of the known world. Recipes have come in by the dozen — some insisting on the inclusion of prunes, others advising sweet potatoes, strips of brisket, dumplings, chicken fat, God knows what. The only agreed common ingredient was carrot. All recipes were perused; several were tasted. All trails ran cold. *Bupkes*.

Tilly was born in Lithuania, came to South Africa as a child, speaking only Yiddish, married another Litvak immigrant like herself, became a shopkeeper's wife (groceries, fresh fish, bicycles, curtains, new and second-hand furniture, not necessarily all at the same time). She became a passionate Zionist, easily brought to tears by the printed speeches of Chaim Weizmann and Abba Eban. She raised four sons, was prominent in community welfare, became the first Jewish woman to join the town bowling club, formerly confined, though not by design, to genteel, white-clad goyim.

Sammy's Romanian Restaurant, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, reputedly the oldest Jewish restaurant in America, did not even have *tsimmes* on the menu when I visited it some years ago. 'Tell you the truth,' explained the manager drily, 'we just can't get the carrots.' Pressed, he gave me the real reason. 'Everybody remembers *tsimmes* differently. I got fed up with guys calling me over every night and kvetching 'You call that a *tsimmes*? That's not a *tsimmes*!' Eventually I took *tsimmes* off the menu. It was making me crazy'

There were just enough Jews in our town to maintain a synagogue and a full-time rebbe, who conducted shul services, taught Hebrew to the children, slaughtered poultry and cattle to render them kosher. Members of the community were often at loggerheads, bitterly divided, mostly, it seemed, over the nature and extent of some future Jewish homeland. Peaceable Zionists such as Tilly hoped for a modest sanctuary in a justly partitioned land. Others were of sterner mind. 'A Jewish national home on both sides of the Jordan,' thundered one of the slogans of the time. People stopped talking to each other. I saw early on how awkward Jews could be.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines '*tsimmes*' as '1. A stew (vegetable or fruit) that is cooked slowly, over very low heat. 2. The overcomplication of a relatively simple situation: a state of confusion. ('She made a whole *tsimmes* out of planning the birthday party.')

On the first day of the Second World War my friend Norman Skolnik and I rode out of town on our bicycles to witness personally, we thought, the opening stages of global conflict. We prudently selected a shaded site under a thorn tree, a few hundred yards from an isolated petrol storage tank, a huge steel drum whose contents might have half-filled a private swimming pool; surely, we reasoned, here was a prize target for an imminent Luftwaffe attack. Our eyes were directed steadfastly towards the south-west horizon beyond which, hundreds of miles away, lay South-West Africa, now Namibia, once a German colony. We sat there all hot, hazy afternoon, a couple of 13-

year-olds waiting for the bombing to start. At sunset we remounted our bicycles and pedalled home to supper. Thus, we passed Sunday, 3 September 1939.

A year or two later, to Tilly's horror, my older brother Elliot joined the South African Air Force as part of a bomber crew. He was one of 10,000 South African Jews who signed up for active service. Elliot spent most of the war, it seems, looking for U-Boats in the Mediterranean. He came home in one piece to become a pharmacist and, in 1991, the Mayor of Johannesburg.

The great tsimmes hunt goes on and on. Leo Rosten's *Hooray For Yiddish* defines 'tsimmes' as 'an involved or prolonged procedure'.

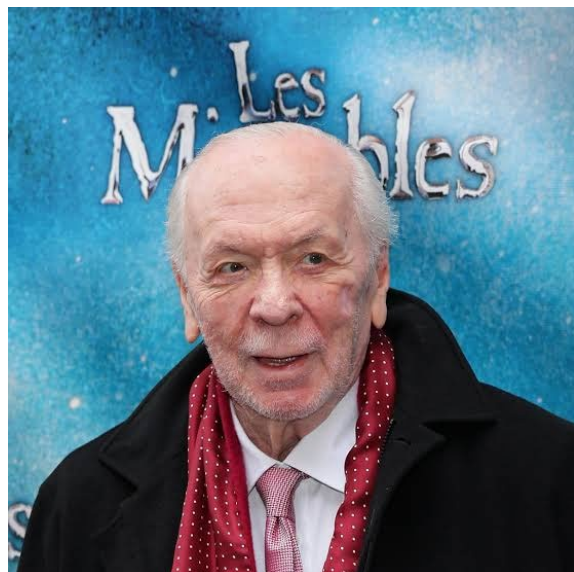
Tell me about it, Leo.

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A bit about the author:

Herbert Kretzmer was a journalist, critic and lyricist, best known as the lyricist for the English-language version of the musical *Les Misérables*. He co-wrote the 1974 hit song 'She' with French singer Charles Aznavour and wrote the lyrics for the 1960 song 'Goodness Gracious Me'



He lived in London. He died in October 2020 aged 95.

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