

MRS. MARCUS'S BAGELS by Raphael Shevelev

After a stay in a hospital near my home, in Berkeley, California, I received a questionnaire from the administrator.



“Raphael and Bagel” – photograph by Karine Schomer

I responded that I had been delighted with the courtesies and professionalism of the nurses, technicians and physicians, but resented the antisemitism. On my second morning there, my breakfast tray had contained a curious item: wrapped in cellophane was a round, cold, soggy bread-like substance, ashamed of its own pallor. The menu labeled it as ‘a bagel’. I told the administrator that anyone calling that deeply offensive object a bagel must be a rabid antisemite.

The episode got me thinking of the bagels in my life.

The early ones, a gastronomic high point of my 1950s youth in Cape Town, spoiled me rotten. What I remember best were the summer weekend expeditions to Muizenberg beach, and the interruption, either on the way there, the way back, or both, to buy bagels from Mrs. Marcus. Her bagels were exquisite, crispy golden brown on the outside, soft and addictively chewy on the inside.

Mr. and Mrs. Marcus lived in a very modest house in Cape Town, on the east side of Buitenkant Street, just a block or so north of Mill Street. I think he was a cobbler. In order to augment the family income, Mrs. Marcus began to bake bagels for sale in the community. They were so delicious that she soon had to install a second, larger commercial oven. That's when she became famous.

I remember a time when we stopped on the way home from the beach, and my mother went into the Marcus home for six bagels. We lived only about a mile away, and by the time my parents and I got home all we had left was a crumpled brown bag and a few crumbs. That was the ultimate test: they needed no butter, or cream cheese or lox. Mrs. Marcus's bagels were not coated with onion flakes, or sesame seeds, sun-dried tomatoes, or, heaven forfend, blueberries

Mrs. Marcus's trade soon brought her to the notice of the authorities, who insisted that she obtain a baker's business license and arrange her premises in a more commercial way. That would have incurred an expense that she could barely afford, and led to a ploy the memory of which still charms me.

On one occasion, when I entered her house to make a purchase, she had company. Two young gentlemen were present, distinguished from her other customers by their crewcut hairstyles and what looked very much like police-

issue boots. Before I could ask for bagels, she introduced them by name, and though here my memory fails, they were probably called something like Mr. van Zyl and Mr. van der Merwe. To the introduction she added softly, in Yiddish, “*blanke kneplach*” (“shiny buttons”), a metaphor for police uniforms.

She then handed me a bag of bagels, kissed my cheek and hoped I’d enjoy the *gift*. No money had changed hands, and therefore no evidence of commercial transaction. This scene was acted out repeatedly with others over some months, and finally the authorities gave up and withdrew the bagel police for other, more questionable, law enforcement work. A day or two after each event, her customers brought Mrs. Marcus the money.

There’s much to remember about my youth in South Africa. The beauty, the warmth of family and communal life, the early education that eventually led me to universities and careers elsewhere, and the crushing injustice, the immense crime against humanity, of *apartheid*.

I have since eaten bagels in Berkeley, Los Angeles, New York, Vancouver, London, Paris, Krakow, Tel Aviv and even in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where the hotel menu described them as “*un tipo de pan Ingles*” (“a type of English bread”)!

For many years, after careers in academia and business, I have been, most enjoyably, an autodidact student and occasional instructor in art, and an exhibited and published artist.

I’ve come to realize that the experience that began in Cape Town with my visits to the National Art Gallery, exposure to the work of artists at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, and frequent attendance of symphony concerts, led me to consider those elements which contribute to greatness in art: composition,

coloration, balance, harmony, surprise, and sensory nourishment, among others.

I have found all these in the great paintings, sculptures, architecture, photography, literature and music that have illuminated my soul and so enriched my life. But I have also come to realize that they were present in Mrs. Marcus's bagels, and that she too had been a great artist.



“Bagels” – photograph by Raphael Shevelev

A word about the author:

Raphael Shevelev (1938–2021) was born in Cape Town, the son of Jack and Doris Shevelew. He attended SACS, UCT and the University of the Witwatersrand, where he then taught Political Science and Public Administration for three years before immigrating to the United States in 1964 and settling in California. In 1989, after careers in academia and business, he decided to devote himself full-time to photography and writing. His art and some of his essays can be seen on his website www.raphaelshevelev.com. Though he only returned twice to South Africa, his formative experiences there nourished his imagination and ideals throughout his life. “Mrs. Marcus’s Bagels” was originally published in *The Cape Jewish Chronicle*. Along with several dozen other such essays Raphael wrote over the years, it will appear in a posthumous book under preparation and elsewhere. (Karine Schomer, wife of Raphael Shevelev, El Cerrito CA, USA)

Date written: February 2010

Date Posted on the CHOL Share Your Story Site: February 2023