

LEAVENED

POEMS BY DORIS FERLEGER

MAYAPPLE PRESS 2015

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Published by Mayapple Press
362 Chestnut Hill Road
Woodstock, NY 12498
mayapplepress.com

ISBN 978-1-936419-47-0
Library of Congress Control Number 2014952750

Acknowledgements:

Grateful acknowledgment to the following mentors, editors, fellow poets and places of learning, for support, wisdom and inspiration: Chris Bursk, David Ferleger, Leslie Ullman, Elie Wiesel, David Wojahn, the Bucks County Community of Poets, Vermont College of Fine Arts, Vermont Studio Center, Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Ed Hirsch and Adam Zagajewski Polish Poetry Conference, Carolyn Forché Poetry of Witness Conference, Natalie Goldberg for encouragement and New Mexico Writing and Memoir Retreats.

Thanks to Donna Baier Stein, editor of *Tiferet, A Journal of Spiritual Literature*, in which poems in the collection first appeared.

Cover art by Natalie Goldberg.
Design by Doris Ferleger assisted by Andrew Ford and Ari Halbert.
Cover composed by Judith Kerman.
Book designed and typeset by Amee Schmidt with titles in Libre Baskerville and text in Calisto MT.
Photo of author by Jeff Mantler.

*...this is a table I said
this is a table
there is bread and a knife on the table
knife serves to cut bread
people are nourished by bread
man must be loved
I learnt by night and day
what must one love
I would reply man...*

—“*In The Midst of Life*” (1955), Tadeusz Rózewicz

For my parents, Avram and Miriam Ferleger

ALIVE

*Displaced Persons Camp, Germany, 1946.
From the imagined diary of Avram Ferleger of Chmielnik.*

March 30, 1946

*Today I signed in as Alive.
It took me a year to decide
I am alive.*

April 8, 1946

*She is so pretty like my sister Ruchele.
I ask her to marry me. She tells me I'm crazy.
She asks, How can you love me already?*

*I tell her we will learn to love each other.
She asks, How do you know? I say, I know
you're pretty and you come from a good family.*

*She laughs because we come from the same family.
Her father and my father were brothers.
She tells me, Come back in a month. We'll see.*

May 8, 1946

*I bring for her a good coat.
Warm. She wants her sisters
should also have coats.*

May 9, 1946

*I trade cigarettes for a ring.
She tells me again I'm crazy.
But a good crazy.*

*The ring has on the inside
someone else's initials.
She doesn't look to mind.*

*She warns me I am really marrying
three women. She won't leave her sisters.
We sleep on tables*

*in a burnt-out factory.
Giant empty windows. No glass.
But the light comes in good.*

SITTING ON A SUITCASE

After every war someone gauges which truths his American cousins can tolerate:

In 1946 Poppa tells how, on the boat called The Marine Perch, the first of the second convoy to America from the displaced persons camp, Uncle Cazik sat for two weeks on his suitcase, so Poppa had to stand in line to get him food.

Who knew what Cazik had inside? Sabbath candlesticks his mother's hands circled three times each Friday night drawing in whatever light was left in Chmielnik for the shtetl Jews who pretended to need even less than the dead?

His father's prayer shawl, its blue fringes kissed and kissed before and after placing it across his shoulders, as it is written every Jewish boy and man must do?

Poppa never asked.

At Ellis Island the inspector didn't ask either; he just opened up the suitcase and hundreds of pieces of stale bread—

collected like rare coins,
each unique, each minted on a certain day
of a certain year—lay there, covered
with mold and the smell of salvation.

CATSUP

So many war stories my big-bellied poppa tells
end up being intimate with a certain food
and perhaps more important
with the purpose of that food.

The inaugural food story was about potatoes.
Or that's what I thought, at first. Raw potatoes
thrown down for three years into a living grave
under a haystack where a Christian farmer kept

Poppa hidden. Since the war started Poppa
had been saving black market money,
so the purpose of the potato was to save
Poppa's life in return for that money.

Money handed over to the farmer before the digging
of the hole? Who dug the hole? Why didn't the farmer
take the zlotys, then turn Poppa in?
I think about these things. Fried potatoes

the American soldiers drenched with catsup
as they dallied in line on the Marine Perch
on its way back home one year after the war had ended,
when Poppa didn't know that catsup was catsup—

he just knew that every potato he swallowed
from then on had to be covered in it because
whatever American soldiers had, he wanted.
Never before had he wanted so much.

EATING ALIVE

In 1943, your father, mother and sisters
are taken by Nazis and turned into ghosts.
You survive. Each *Yom Kippur* I watch
your eyes, eating alive,
pages of atonement.
Their murders are not yours
to atone for. Survival is not yours
to atone for. All this,
even God cannot atone for.

FIRST SUPPER

Momma's and Poppa's first meal in America
was at Uncle Sol's, bright coal eyes,
Stetson suede hat, matching tan suit,
thick auburn mustache waxed into handlebars,

which, to my grandfathers, would have been
considered as Gentile as clean-shaven,
and worse yet, the uncle's wife, Aunt Riva,
was a divorcee, a *shonda* in the Old Country,

and though Riva taught Momma which side of the plate
the knife and fork goes, she served *traif*
and Momma got really sick from eating too much
of the ham, too tasty and salty to pass up,

and Poppa couldn't believe there was corn
on the cob on the table, a food reserved
in Poland only for the swine, forbidden
to be owned or eaten by Jews,

swine now sitting smoked at the uncle's table,
and so Poppa knew to ask for the disinfectant,
the cold red gloppy stuff American soldiers had
poured on every potato, every piece of meat

on the boat to America. All the way around
the room, ten American cousins laughed,
though Poppa knew no one
from his shtetl would have laughed

at what he wanted—to cover the profane
food with the red sauce that would purify
everything about to enter his mouth, everything
of this strange new land that would save his life.