

Memories of a 1920 Pesach by Beulah Gross

Pesach festivities were held in the home of my great-grandparents, Mariana and Avrom Eliasov, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa and the memories are those of my late mother, Ida. Solly and Naomi were her siblings and Henny was their mother.

Pesach was a wonderful time for everybody. The children loved helping Henny and Mariana who, following Jewish custom, changed their everyday crockery, cutlery and cooking utensils for special Pesach ones. These lived on the top shelves of a large, walk-in pantry. A few days before Pesach, Mariana stacked all her Pesach things in a huge galvanised iron bath which she placed on the coal stove. This was then filled with water. When it was boiling Mariana plunged a red, hot poker into the water so that it boiled over. This made everything pesachdik.

Mariana always made her own kosher wine and her own vinegar for Pesach. She bought huge baskets of black and green grapes grown in the Wellington vineyards at the market a year in advance. Wellington is 11 km (7 miles) outside Cape Town. Ida, but not Solly or Naomi, remembered helping to squash the grapes and put them into a big wooden barrel which had brass hoops around it. This cask remained in the pantry till the contents were ready for use the following Pesach when the wine was tapped through the bunghole. Naomi mentioned that gooseberries and plums were also purchased. Although she said she never helped make the wine, Naomi remembered the smell of its fermentation very clearly.

Ida would help Mariana make large quantities of Pesach sweetmeats on the ironing board - imberlach, made from carrots and ginger, pomerantzen, made from citrus peels, and pletzlach, made from plums. Two kinds of taiglach, round or plaited biscuits literally oozing syrup and stored in jars, were made out of matzah meal so that they were kosher for Pesach.

The meals for the two Seders were cooked in huge copper pots. Everyone either brought something or donated something for Mariana to cook as she loved preparing the Seder for her family. The whole family in and near Port Elizabeth attended both the Seders at Mariana and Avrom's home as this was the biggest annual family get-together.

The dining-room was the biggest room in the house. Against one wall was a large, beautifully carved, dark wood sideboard with cupboards and drawers. It had a mirror at the back with small shelves on either side. On the sideboard stood a pewter and cut-glass wine decanter, a Russian urn, candlesticks, some china and crystal, a jar of Glauber Salts (a purgative) and a bottle of French brandy. Against another wall was a glass-fronted bookcase with four doors which housed Avrom's Hebrew texts and reference books. A clock hung on a third wall and a telephone was fixed to the far wall. The only other furniture in the dining-room was a black leather couch and a piano.

The table was large and had at least two extra extension leaves added to accommodate the whole family, about fifteen people, at the Seder. There were eight matching chairs, two of which had arms and were called 'carvers' for Avrom and Mariana.

At Pesach time, as for Rosh Hashanah, all the children were outfitted in new clothes. Due to their meagre finances, the adults simply added a small new item to their clothing.

Mariana dressed in her favourite 'best' - a dark grey dress with navy pinstripes, a small collar and buttoned down the front to the waist with self-covered buttons and cloth loops. Her shoes were black, buttoned across the instep and she always wore her one piece of jewellery, a gold fob decorated with blue enamel on a gold chain.

The table would be set early in the day with a sparkling white tablecloth large enough to cover the extended table and the serviettes were enormous. To keep the table linen and all her other linen white, Mariana would boil it in the kitchen copper. The cutlery, which Mariana had brought from Libau, had black handles edged in gold. Each person, even the smallest child, had their own Haggadah and wine glass. The ceremonial plate, the matzah plate with its dividers, a special Pesach wine decanter and shining brass candlesticks were in front of Avrom's place setting.

Avrom, wearing his shul suit with his tzitzit peeping from beneath his waistcoat, conducted the first part of the Seder, lasting about an hour. As he conducted this service there was silence except for the responses and the reading of the Four Questions. Avrom insisted on this and despite the build-up of the excitement of preparing for the festival and the wonderful smells emanating from the kitchen, decorum was maintained.

At the end of the service everyone washed their hands and Henny and Mariana served the traditional meal, beginning with eggs in salt water, followed by chopped herring, gefilte fish, chopped liver, kneidlach so light they almost floated out of the soup, and ending with the luxury of roast chicken. During the meal there was much laughter and conversation but Avrom still insisted on a modicum of decorum as there is a serious side to Pesach.

After the table had been cleared, everyone washed hands again, the Haggadot reappeared and Avrom completed the service, about half an hour. When this was done, Henny and Mariana brought out nuts and raisins and the Pesach sweetmeats - just in case anyone had a little hole left to fill - and the evening ended with everyone loudly singing traditional Pesach songs.

Pesach

Written by Beulah Gross

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