

Rolling matzo balls backwards down 3rd Avenue

By

Robert Degama

Rolling matzo balls backwards down 3rd Avenue

I didn't see the Statue of Liberty that day in 1902 when we arrived, three days before Passover, in America. I was down below deck and as sick as I'd ever been. Not from the sea journey but from the six-week-old salt beef that I'd carried with me all the way from home. I was twenty-three years old, and I'd come from the old world to the new, hoping for a new life. For any life. All I owned were the clothes that were sticking to my fevered back, seven dollars in cash and my grandmother's gold wedding ring, which was sown into the hem of my jacket.

She had given it to me as I left, saying, "What do I need this for? Maybe it will buy you something in America." She also gave me the salt beef wrapped in a piece of greaseproof paper. And that was the last time I saw her or any of my family. There was just me and my wife now, who was only eighteen when we left home. She'd had her nineteenth birthday while we were on the ship, and she was already pregnant with our first child.

The first thing they do when you land in America is herd you off the boat and up into the big grey hall for processing, like so many sheep. There were nearly six-hundred of us; some from Ukraine like my wife and me, and from Russia, Germany, Armenia, Poland, Ireland and all kinds of other places I'd never heard of. We had all come from the famines and the pales and the pogroms to work in America's booming docks and factories and construction yards, yearning (like the lady said) to breathe free.

The big hall smelled of poverty and disinfectant, unlike the ship where the poverty was unadulterated, and standing between us and the way into America were lines of officials. Noise and commotion echoed around the walls and bounced off the high ceiling, making you feel even smaller than you already did. Some of the officials wore blue uniforms and asked

questions about where you came from and whether you were an anarchist or a communist and if you had a business or a home to go to on the other side of the tall iron-clad doors. Some were women in grey dresses and starched aprons who were mainly interested in the children, and others were doctors in white coats. As I came up the stairs, supported on one side by my wife and on the other by our friend Solomon Lutz, it was the doctors who took an interest in me. I was as thin as a shtetel pony, as white as a ghost and sweating badly. I also had a limp from where a cart had fallen onto my leg when I was a boy. I was singled out and taken straight to the hospital. What no one had told us was that the infectious, infirm and insane would not be allowed into the promised land, and many had been deported back to the hellholes of Europe from which they came.

Don't worry, I wouldn't be telling you this story if that's what had happened to me, but we'll come back to all of that.

*

Right now, in 2022, there are one hundred and sixty-nine of my direct descendants living in America, and thirty one of them still carry the name Ozel. One even has my name, Felix Ozel, and two more are called Ruth, after my wife. There are lawyers and teachers, two doctors, no butchers but there are three bakers and one candlestick maker. One (my great-grandson) is the famous comedian Jude Perry. You probably know him because he appears on the television and makes more money than half of the rest of them put together. Not bad for a man who doesn't even have a real job. And every day in America, thousands of people open a jar of Ozel's Pickles™, a bottle of Ozel's Seltzer™ or a pack of Ozel's Matzo Ball mix™. Several hundred more also come to one of our two delicatessens, still operating in New York City. Until recently we even sold some of our products back in Ukraine.

I never made it to the twenty-first century, of course, and Ruth passed away a few years after me in 1979. At least I didn't have to live without her, but I did live long enough to

see my grandchildren and even one or two of my great-grandchildren. And by the time I was old, I was also wealthy. Even though it had taken me my whole lifetime to get there. We had a factory that made jars of pickles with our name on them, the delis continued to do well, and although we never really made money with it, we had a machine that made and bagged matzo ball mix for distribution all over the continent and beyond. My granddaughter Ellie was pretty much running the business by then. These days, women do all kinds of things, but that was the sixties when they didn't so much. I had always thought that one of the boys would take over, but she knew how to make money, like her father. Her father is Ellis, by the way and he and my other son Ezra were still involved in the business, even though they were both beginning to think about retirement. I kept my hand in, too. I couldn't do very much to help by then, but the customers at the delicatessens liked to see me. Running a place like ours is about performance as much as it is about the sandwiches and the coffee. If you want to make money in New York, you have to put on a show. You make your customers feel special, and as if nothing is too much trouble, so you smile and ask after their wives or their husbands or their children or reminisce about their fathers, who you knew before the war. And even when I couldn't do that, I could still roll matzo balls for the soup.

Our best years were just after the war, though. I know people like to say things about America these days, especially after the Vietnam War and with the way the black people have been treated. So I know maybe it looks like America has lost her way sometimes, but if you don't think that this is still the land of the free, you've never had to live in a place that isn't free. We were making good money, and we bought a top-floor apartment with a view all the way to Central Park. It was just off 3rd Avenue, uptown from the new shop, which was also on 3rd (near Mt Sanai) and way, way up town from our first shop, which is still there on Bowery.

The day we moved in, Ruth said to me, "No more moving now, Felix. This is our last home, and we have children and grandchildren and they can all come to see us here. I don't want to leave." And that's how it was. I don't think she meant it that way when she said it, but she just went out less and less.

I'd say, "Come down to the Park with me, Ruthie, the sun is shining."

And she'd say, "I don't feel so good today." or, "I have some things to take care of here." But what did she have to take care of now the children had grown up? We even had a maid.

I'd get tickets for a show or a movie and say, "The world is outside, Ruthie, it misses you. Let's go dancing."

And she'd say, "I'm tired, Felix, you have to let me rest now."

So I didn't push her. I think we both pretended nothing was happening, but she felt safe there, and she didn't want to talk to the doctors. I even tried to get her to move upstate to somewhere in the country, but she didn't want to go. And the world came to her by and large. She had family and friends. We had some space up on the roof with flowers and some trees in big pots. We could feed the birds up there and breathe the air and Ruth was happiest up on that terrace with our view of the park. She'd even spend long hours up there in the winter, wearing the mink coat I bought her. I got that coat from an expensive shop on 7th Avenue. I hoped it might make her feel like going out, but she just used it to keep warm, and she liked sitting and watching the birds and the clouds. Sometimes, I'd see her talking to someone who wasn't there. It was peaceful and smelled like a pine forest up on the roof, and you could watch the sunset way out over New Jersey.

The apartment itself was all wood and windows and light, and my daughter Rebekah lived just down the street with her bigshot husband, so we saw her nearly every day, and we looked after the children whenever we could. Her kids all went to college. They're the part of

the family that had the brains and mostly where the doctors and lawyers come from. Jude Perry, the comedian, is Rebekah's grandson, by the way. I guess it takes brains to tell jokes, too, or we'd all be rich. Anyway, every day, I walked in the park and got coffee on Park Avenue with Sol Lutz. He was also a bigshot by then, and he never married so he had plenty of money to spend. And my wife and my children, and my grandchildren wanted for nothing, and despite how it looked, Ruth wasn't so unhappy, and she wasn't crazy either. She'd just found a way to feel safe.

Life was good for us. No one ever knocked on our door in the night or burned our home down, and we never had to eat horse chestnuts or fill our bellies with grass or steal food from the rats to stay alive. And if you think those things don't happen, I can tell you that they do, and so could my parents and theirs before them. So, too, could the poor people unlucky enough to live in Ukraine or to be Jews in Europe in the nineteen forties. As if death doesn't already break your heart to pieces even when it can't be helped, here were people dreaming up a million new ways to kill each other. I'd lost touch with my family but I had a brother and two sisters and cousins. They were all caught up in it, and so was Ruth's family, including her mother, who was also murdered. What possible harm could an old woman be to them? And there were children too.

Ezra fought in the war, and so did Ellis' boys Sammy and Hal, and we worried about them every day. Ruth used to cry at night, but I saved my tears for the day they came home. While they were away, I stayed busy. I went to both shops every day, where I cooked soup and rolled matzo balls and served the customers. When things get hard, you work hard, and you find opportunities wherever you can. That's when we started the *Send a Sausage to a Soldier*[™] campaign. Between 1942 and 1945, we shipped over two hundred thousand kosher sausages to the boys at the front, with messages from back home stamped on them. That's

what made Ozel's a household name and how Ellis was able to turn us into a national concern after the war.

But the war wasn't even the toughest time. The thirties were hard for everyone. I know that was a time that didn't show America at its best either, but we kept going. We only had the delicatessen on Bowery back then, and no one could afford very much, so we sold matzo ball soup with a roll for a dime and chicken soup for a nickel, and for those that didn't have a nickel, we gave it away for free. We stayed busy. The place was always full of steam and people and conversation and the smell of hot pastrami and coffee. People helped themselves and each other. Even Sol came in and helped out. He'd arrive like he was doing us a big favour.

"Ahh, the poor immigrant classes, working their little red fingers to their little grey bones!" That's how he'd greet us, wearing a big hat and a fur coat.

"We do honest work," I'd say, "so why don't you roll up your fancy sleeves and help us? It will do your soul good, and if you do a good job, we may even feed you before you go."

And he'd say, "My mother didn't raise me to roll matzo balls, but I carried you off the ship, so I suppose I can carry you a little further. Show me to my station."

And I'd say, "Your hands are too fat to roll matzo balls; your mother fed you too much. I'm not sure I trust you with anything sharp, either. You can wait tables. Ezra will show you how and try not to upset any of my customers. There's a delivery of bread out back that needs to be sorted out, too." And he'd bluster around and put on a show, but in truth, he was broke. He'd been running a theatre on 2nd Avenue where he used to book big names like Molly Picon and Menasha Skulnik, but the Yiddish theatres had all closed, and no one wanted him up on Broadway. He lived with us for three years while he was getting himself back on his feet. He even ended up pawning that coat before he finally started making money

as an agent for actors and singers. Maybe the government could have done more to help, but in the end, it was up to us. We didn't come here for a handout. We just came for an opportunity. I always expected to have to stand on my own two feet, and after all if not my own, who's feet should I stand on? Yours?

So none of it came easy, we worked hard and things happened to us just like they did to everyone else. People got sick, and people died. We even lost our youngest son in 1930. His name was Elliot, and he was just ten years old. He died of influenza. He was healthy one day; then he got sick, and two weeks later, he was dead. That all still feels like a bad dream that we never woke up from. It changes you. I can't describe it all to you here, and these are things you don't want to see, what it's like to watch the life draining out of your child right in front of you and how you deny it and how it starts to dawn on you that he really might go. He was the most beautiful person I ever knew, and I can't think of one good reason why he had to die. He was our baby boy.

Just like always I worked, and so I don't know how Ruth got through it because I wasn't there so much of the time. She had the other children to care of, and like I said, things were hard back then, and we all just had to keep going. It seems cruel or crazy to say that now that I can see things from a distance, but at the time, I don't think I was thinking so much. Keeping the business going seemed to be the most useful thing I could do. If I could go back, I'd do things differently, though if I could go back, I'd have saved our little boy, too. But the days and the years only go one way, and what happens, happens, and there's no rhyme or reason to any of it.

In other ways, the thirties worked out for us. After Ellis lost his money in the crash he didn't throw himself off a bridge but came to help me and Ezra at the delicatessen. Ezra was a good boy, and he worked hard, but he wasn't so bright like his brother. Ellis knew how to make money. In the twenties he wore fancy clothes and had a black and yellow LaSalle

automobile. When they opened the Holland Tunnel in 1927 he drove Ruth and me and Rebekah and little Elliot through it in that car. It was the sleekest thing you ever saw, like a great yellow shark. We looked like movie stars in it. It roared through the streets of Manhattan and people stopped to see us go by and then to see us go down into the tunnel like a bullet. There, the noise was even louder as we raced along right under the Hudson River.

Elliot kept shouting, "Will all the water come in, Pappa?" and "How fast are we going, Pappa? Are we going a hundred miles an hour?" But he was more excited than scared and the hot wind of the tunnel blew in our faces. Ruth tried to look calm, but she dug her nails so far into the palm of my hand I could see the marks for a month. I tried to look calm, too, but I was praying quietly to god. I guess I still believed in him in those days. And Ellis drove us like we were on a roller-coaster all the way down to Atlantic City, where the kids went on a real roller-coaster by the beach, and Ruth and I danced on the boardwalk, and we saw horses jumping into a swimming pool from a diving board that must have been fifty feet high, and we went to a talking picture for the first time, and watched the newsreels about Charles Lindbergh flying the Atlantic... and all of those things really happened! It took Lindbergh thirty-three and a half hours to cross the Atlantic. It had taken us almost three weeks and another twenty-five years, but we finally felt as if we had arrived.

Ellis made his fortune on the stock market, of course, it looked like easy money back then. They all drank too much. Even though it was illegal at the time, Ellis joined right in, and once in a while, I did too, and Ruth and I went dancing or to the movies at the weekends, when I could get away from the shop. Ellis got his stake money from me. I knew he was a clever boy, so I gave him the six hundred dollars I'd saved, and he nearly made a million with it. And when he lost it, he got right back up again and worked like his father and ended up making another million.

Stocks and shares are all luck, and hard work is always more reliable than luck. I got that six hundred dollars from selling matzo ball soup to hungry workers on the Lower East Side or to the actors and audiences from the Yiddish theatres at night. Sol used to bring lots of them to us. We got the first deli just before the Great War. That's when we could really start to make a living and felt that we had some kind of security. It was big enough to fit thirty or forty people in it, and it had a real Kitchen and wall-to-wall electricity. It was just a little way up the street from where we first started, down on St James' Place. Back then, it was just Ruth and me cooking soup over coals under a canvas awning. We were living in a boarding house with two tiny children, and day and night, we were working under our striped awning and cooking soup by lamplight. When that's all you have, it all comes down to you, and if there's anything I know how to do, it's cook matzo ball soup. We made a name for ourselves back then, Ruth and me. People liked to come and stand around the stall and eat and talk, and it's the same whether you're rich or poor. You make them feel special, and you ask after their wives and husbands, and you know their children's names. Looking back, I think those years might have been the happiest years we ever had, and although money was hard to come by, I didn't mind giving it to Ellis, nor that he lost it again. After all, I owed him everything.

You see, while I was in the hospital all the way back in 1902, and the doctors had decided that I was not fit to work and that they might have to send me back, my brilliant firstborn boy decided to intervene. On the 27th of April 1902, Ellis Ozel was born on Ellis Island, in the state of New York, in the United States of America. He was automatically an American citizen. With the encouragement of the ladies in grey and some persistence from Ruth, the doctors relented. Two weeks later, all the way down 3rd Avenue, down Bowery and St James' Place, at Battery Park Quay, I first set foot on Manhattan Island with my wife and my son... Oh yes... and my grandmother's recipe for matzo ball soup.

Matzo Ball Soup

Serve at Passover (leaving out the wine, onion and garlic) or whenever and wherever people are hungry.

For the matzo balls

- 6 oz matzo meal
- 5 tbsp schmaltz
- 5 eggs
- 1/2 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 5 tbsp Ozel's Seltzer™
- Kosher Salt

(Or use Ozel's Matzo Ball mix™)

For the soup

- Good chicken stock
- 1 Chicken
- 2 Onions
- Chopped carrots, turnips and celery
- Good olive oil
- A little white wine if you can get it
- Garlic
- A handful of Dill
- Kosher Salt and pepper

Method

Watch your ancient Jewish grandmother stir every ounce of love she has into her soup and do exactly as she does.