

Food affectivities and managing situations of crises:

Recollections of an old Jewish woman during and after the Second World War

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Re-living lived histories: following personal routes and paths

By now it is accepted among social scientists¹ that there is a reciprocal and dialectic relationship between the past and the present and life histories provide a useful source in order to explore this reciprocity. In the case of Europe the supposed unity of history has resulted in a strongly Western-Eurocentric vision that has largely excluded the historic and regional diversities which have emerged. Balkan history or to be more precise Balkan histories uncover the complex puzzle of life experiences in the area which stem from diverse economic, political and social situations. Thus, the complexity of multi-layered European societies, if dismantled, opens the possibility of different versions of local histories, coexisting, experienced and lived in different ways (Hastrup, 1992). Human actors negotiate and appropriate historical events to make them their own, and thereby domesticate an impersonal, homogeneous history (Sutton, 1998). History is both personal and localized and as such it enables reference to the past not as something distant and static but as something that is continuously found in a dialogue with the present and is certainly perceived as close and alive, inspiring action in the present and mobilizing future reactions. The passage from general history to histories that are lived diverse experiences uncovers the interrelations between the national, the local and the personal. This passage is also mediated and translated by cultural capital and by habitus² and class differentiations (Kravva, 2011). This way the past can be re-evaluated, re-thought and lead to interpretations and emotional reactions that leave room to individuality, human agency but also social limitations and boundaries: Human agency is found in a constant negotiation process with the existing social structure reshaping and creating new social possibilities. Hence, life histories reveal the constant reading and evaluation of belonging, inclusions and exclusions.

This article is based on the life history of a woman who lived and died at the Jewish Old People's Home in Thessaloniki. Mrs. Evgenia was born in 1910 in Egypt and in 1928 settled in Thessaloniki. There, she fell in love with Leo, a young Jewish neighbour and during the Second World War risked her life to save him. She became

¹ On the topic of oral history see Thomson (1978). In his work several topics emerge such as the relationship between historians and the use of oral histories but also memory and the self. In Cowan (2000) Vereni sensitively deals with autobiography, memory and national loyalties in Western Greek Macedonia.

² Habitus is used by Bourdieu (1986) so as to give a different account of class relations and social conditioning. For him classifications such as class structures are imprinted on the body; consumption patterns and behaviours are seen as predisposed, always related to the family or educational capital of a person.

a Jew officially after the War when she converted to Judaism to get married at the synagogue. In her narration, we encounter two critical loci: food plays a key role in both of them since food becomes most 'visible' in situations of personal or social crisis. Both phases in her life could be seen as moments of crisis, as liminal episodes, where personally and socially she was found at a crossroads: in the first case she confronted the spectre of hunger and death and in the second case she experienced the shift from not being to becoming a Jew. Throughout the analysis, the issues of embodiment and emotional management uncover preoccupations of boundary maintenance but also issues of transitionality and ambiguity. In this woman's narration belonging is never given but is materialized and managed through the medium of food. All in all the analysis deals with the issue of "comfort food" meaning food that is treated as a means to deal with critical situations and a mechanism for providing positively valued emotions like comfort, security and stability during personal crises and transitional phases in a life. Food for survival that enabled mere physical existence during the Second World War is also seen as "comfort food" since apart from survival it ensured continuation of the family, and to some extent a return to the pre-War normality and social stability.

Collecting a person's life history is a long process that presupposes deep familiarity and interaction. Thus, from October 2005 until May 2006 I kept visiting Mrs. Evgenia at the Old People's Home almost once every week. My interviews - each of them lasted almost an hour - and discussions with her were all tape-recorded. During our first meetings my questions were open-ended. I was interested in pre-War life in Thessaloniki, memories of family, friends, education, free time, and the city's past. I was also interested in the Second World War in Greece, survival strategies and the experienced famine. The post War life was also a key theme and especially issues of food, "Christian food", "Jewish food" and kosher. I must admit that as time went by a strong mutual relationship of respect and understanding enabled more free and relaxed discussions. I recall how much she enjoyed my weekly visits and how enthusiastically she shared with me her memories and experiences, old photos of friends and family, but also her current views on sensitive issues of belonging and identity.

A life in crisis or critical lives? Comfort food and "consuming" emotions

Lives in crisis can be analyzed as critical loci where known life patterns are being endangered. Following the classical analysis by Douglas (1966) we can argue that culture is an ordered pattern, a code that entails "powers and dangers" especially during phases of experienced marginality and abnormal situations. Thus critical moments require different strategies in order to overcome them. Foucault (1986) has argued that such places of experienced marginality constitute heterotopias, meaning non-places, places in between past and present experiences, a reflecting mirror of ruptures, crises and deviation. Such critical loci of time and space are often messy, disorganized and confusing and call for differentiated behaviours and strategies.

Sensory responses may occur not only during difficult situations and forced experiences of crisis but also during separations, ruptures and cross cultural contacts

(Seremetakis, 1994). Consumption functions a means employed by individuals so as to maintain control of their lives. Consuming specific food during periods of social uncertainty may reveal the will to maintain control and achieve stability of life conditions; during these turbulent episodes in our lives, food acquires a central role exactly because every other certainty is disturbed and endangered. Food and eating have received great attention by social anthropologists, sociologists and social historians. The power of food to signal important social events, to mark special occasions, to serve as a repository of past memories and present identifications, the ability of food-sharing to link people to a specific or imagined place are some of the themes³ that have been highlighted through ethnographic accounts and have been subjected to social, symbolic, linguistic or historic analyses. Eating often implies the hope of being or becoming more than we are. Incorporation helps us to be what we wish to be: “the food makes the eater” (Fischler 1988: 282). The act of eating expresses and at the same time reaffirms the collective experience of individuals and reinforces belonging to a specific place or a collectivity (Goddard, 1996), an ethnic or religious group and at the same time cooking and eating can be treated as ways to “taste” past and present and create images of belonging, continuity and cultural distinctiveness (Kravva, 2008, 2010).

Personal experiences throughout a lifetime contribute to the construction our personal narratives and as such give an idiosyncratic version of history. The topic of comfort food seems to acquire a pivotal role in this complex process; it is argued (Locher, Yoels, Maurer & van Ells, 2005) that such food is in a way “nostalgic food” and as such it enables exclusions and inclusions to be made and boundaries to be constructed and maintained. By this token identifications with a particular time and place in our histories can be effectively achieved. At the same time comfort food often evokes special or memorable events. Food is often linked to memories of being cared for by another and are associated with the moments of sharing with significant others during special events or activities. Therefore it can be treated as a powerful bonding apparatus where acceptance of a food offering is also an acceptance of the other in one’s life. It is argued that through “a tasteful” ethnography and a “tasteful” writing (Stoller, 1989) sensual openness is achieved and at the same time the Self is performed and filtered by senses and sentiments. Commensality, sensory memory and eating as mnemonic experiences (Seremetakis, 1994) create an emotional canvas where the past is “felt” (Sutton, 2001, 2010) thus it is evoked, remembered and recaptured.

Comfort food becomes important when individuals deal with such critical moments in their lives; it can be seen as a survival strategy in order to deal with crises and respond creatively. The issue of agency acquires great significance here. Individuals are not passive victims but active creators of their lives who make

³ The topic of food and eating has been analysed from different and diverse angles by numerable social scientists. Some of the most influential are Barthes, 1975, Goody, 1982, Mintz, 1985, Mintz, 1996, Lupton, 1996, Caplan, 1997, Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997, Bell and Valentine, 1997. Kravva (2000) discussed the interplay of food, memory and identity drawing from her fieldwork among the Jews in Thessaloniki, Greece.

decisions and take “risks” so as to manage anomic situations. As discussed below, the experience of hunger, the spectrum of death during the Nazi occupation and the re-organization of life after the Second World War were critical episodes in one’s life history. Comfort food becomes visible in her narrative especially during these liminal phases and enables the adjustment not only to past conditions but also new ways of materializing identity and belonging in the present.

In the first crisis episode that follows, Mrs Evgenia narrates how she managed hunger and deprivation during the Second World War and was able to provide ‘comfort’ food to her beloved husband and his whole family who were hiding in Athens. In this case food exchanges were a way to actively respond to hunger and a strategy to survive. Exchanging food items was a creative response, which framed and expressed cultural and subjective agency, and enabled her to adjust and actively respond to the extremely fragile conditions of that time.

Crisis episode one:

Hunger, famine and the War

A systematic discussion on famines goes back to the book published in 1981 by Amartya Sen, an economist of Indian origin, who was awarded the Nobel prize for his contribution in examining these phenomena from “humane” and social economic perspective. By social economy it is implied that economy is not just about numbers and percentages but must be treated as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon where social and cultural factors and also historical trends and ruptures must be co-examined. If research fails so there is a danger of misunderstanding or even not understanding at all the social reasons and consequences of the above phenomena. Famine and deprivation have a history; we can reconstruct disastrous famines that led to starvation such as in 1333-37 in China, when four million people died in one region alone, or in 1770 in India, when almost ten million deaths are estimated, or in nineteenth century Ireland when the so-called “potato famine” killed one fifth of the Irish population and led to a significant emigration of the remainder. Sen (1981) emphasizes that starvation, which is thought of as an extreme outcome of a food crisis, is characterized by a sudden collapse in the level of food consumption. Starvation has two important dimensions: it is time specific but it can also be group specific. The first draws our interest to specific historical ruptures or conditions that may lead to generalized food crises and the second focuses on the commanding of power over food. This is a reminder that some groups can suffer acute and absolute deprivation and hunger when they seem, for specific historical and political reasons, to be cut off from the rest of the population.

Following the notion of entitlement, Caplan (1992) proposes an anthropological view of hunger that takes seriously into account the notions of exchange and reciprocity. We need indigenous voices and local accounts and in order to bring them forward the concept of agency could prove useful. This will open new possibilities in the analysis of the complex and historical phenomena of hunger and famine that will enable us to go beyond passive and victimizing discourses. People, even when faced with these situations of generalized crisis, do make decisions and

adopt survival strategies. Thus in order to understand hunger and famine situations we need to focus on the causes, the consequences and also human coping reactions. People respond to hunger individually but also as a group, meaning that they organize their lives to deal with it. Inevitably, hunger is a great source of danger and risk and a threat to social order (Millman & Kates, 1990).

Memories can also be those of hunger which can be seen as the locus of debate and conflicting memories. Situations of extreme hunger may provoke imaginative responses that stress the link between past and present, with the constant effort to respond to present conditions of life drawing from past traumatic situations (Sutton 2001). In this way the past is remembered, re-lived and projected on to the present and future. Famine in occupied Greece during the years 1941-44 was “the last ‘significant’ European famine in terms of mortality” (Hionidou, 2006). However, this critical episode is largely “invisible” and for the most repressed and forgotten in official Greek historiography where there is an emphasis on the political aspects of the German occupation but a lack of in-depth analysis of the food crisis of that time and its social consequences. Hunger during the war is certainly not forgotten but it is almost erased from the official national memory of the era since most works focus on the political and not so much on the social consequences of the occupation. The severe food crisis during the occupation was a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The main reasons were the dramatic reduction in food availability and the curtailment of communications thus a severe lack of transport facilities. Also the government and the occupying forces tried to regulate and control the market and the prices. This resulted in the creation of black markets with uncontrollable prices, subsequent monetary chaos and a total de-regulation of dietary conditions (Hionidou, 2006). It is true that hunger was more devastating in the big urban centres, for example the Athenian hunger is beyond any comparison, whereas the periphery -with the exemption of isolated island or mountain communities- enjoyed some kind of self-sufficiency based on food exchange and autonomy.

Mrs Evgenia vividly recalls the great hunger during the War. Yet, in her narration it is evident that she fought hunger conditions and tried to survive even under those very difficult circumstances. As she argues, she continued selling cosmetics since Greeks in the periphery kept asking for them. Far from being passive and accepting hunger as an inescapable situation this woman reacted to hunger, tried to deal with it, to resist. She was a brave woman who realized the difficult situation she was in, but also a real “fighter”, who dealt with hunger with courage and dynamism. Hunger is not synonymous with passivity as earlier accounts; rather it is idiosyncratically treated and the reactions vary considerably according to someone’s personality, social conditions but also his/her social skills and habitus: *“I cannot say we had great difficulties during the occupation, even though there were things that were missing. But we kept on -especially with the cosmetic products- which were very much in demand, especially in the countryside. We continued, however, even on my own when Leo was hiding in Athens. I sold face creams, colognes, perfumes and they gave me wheat, barley, corn and beans. Those I sold or distributed to people I knew. I never took money, everything was done by barter, and with the money I only took from certain clients. I bought the required material*

for the preparation of cosmetics. We lived simply, we only cared to make it through the day. One could not plan for the day after. With the help of two Armenian friends who worked for the Italian consulate Leo, managed to escape to Athens which was under Italian occupation and where the situation was less dangerous for the Jews. This is how we escaped to Athens, to Nea Ionia. We were led there by a woman who agreed to get a loaf of bread as a reward. But when we finally went there I also gave her beans and wheat. She was overwhelmed with happiness. There was great hunger in Athens. Almost every week I had to bring them food provisions from Salonica. It was in Athens that the two brothers of Leo were hidden. At first Leo stayed in the house of an uncle of mine. I went to visit them regularly to take provisions, but Leo had to leave from there too.”

Yet, hunger was out of control, especially in Athens, and Mrs. Evgenia explained to me that she had to deal with this situation on a daily basis. Death was an everyday phenomenon and although she could not do anything to help others she felt that she had to react to the difficult situation and try to survive. At the same time, she felt “responsible” for preserving those in her social network and providing food to Leo and his family, which was in a sense her own family, although they were not yet officially married. In a way, by providing food for survival and thus in a way “comfort” food she was at the same time providing family comfort, making sure that family life was not in danger: *“There was great hunger during the war in Athens, and that is why I brought provisions from Salonica. Apart from the little money I made at the shop, I also had some travelling salesmen who worked in the black market and took goods to the villagers. They asked for our face creams and gave us wheat and barley. I would take them to my parents but also saved some for Leo and his niece’s children. Once I remember a young boy dying in front of me from hunger. We tried to help him but unfortunately, he passed away. We all continued our life. Seeing carriages with corpses was a common everyday thing.”*

The generalized crisis situation of personal, family and social predicament called for innovative, creative solutions. Mrs. Evgenia, a woman who was working all her life found herself in a situation where she had to use her mind and creativity to create a viable life under those unlivable conditions: *“In Athens I tried to sell certain things I made myself. Once I remember I had brought many walnuts and a friend of mine who had been wounded in the war had a license to be a carrier. We put the nuts on the carrier and sold them, and to make more money we cleaned them before we sold them.”*

Crisis episode two:

Emotional geographies: domesticating the “undomesticated” city

The notion of emotional geographies and the emotional associations and feelings that a specific place inspires (dread, worry, loss, love etc) enlighten the discussion of mapping the city and creating viable cityscapes. In this process the role of understanding and domesticating the city via food becomes of central importance. Food is emotionally charged and through it we can attempt to deploy geographies of identities, family and social relations. Emotions enable individuals to filter their past and they affect they ways the present is sensed. Thus space is not an objectified,

calculable category but it is experienced, felt, appropriated and managed and therefore articulated and negotiated (Davidson, Bondi and Smith, 2007).

The reconstruction of Jewish life after the War in Thessaloniki was difficult partly due to the political instability but also because of the generalized economic depression. The low public profile of the Community was the outcome of the almost total extinction of the local population: from the 48,000 Jews only 2,000 people had survived the concentration camps and returned. However, the city had changed too since it was by then a city without Jewish schools, shops, synagogues, neighborhoods or families (Lewkowicz, 2000). The Jews who chose to stay in Thessaloniki after the War (many emigrated to Palestine or even went to Athens) were faced with absences, silences⁴ and felt the urgency of reconstructing communal and familial life.

Mrs. Evgenia married Leo a few years after the War and this way she “officially” became Jewish. In her narrative there was an emphasis on the process of becoming a “proper” Jewish woman by cooking “authentic” Jewish food and serving this kind of food to her new family -the family of her husband- in order to be accepted by them. In her narrative cooking and serving food was a powerful means of constructing a functional kinship, stabilizing family relations and of course being accepted by meaningful others as “one of them”. In her postwar life food mediated relationships and enhanced comforting feelings of acceptance: *“My husband’s aunt taught me how to cook Jewish dishes, mainly sardines cleaned of bones dipped in egg and fried in oil, beans with burned onions and Jewish meatballs made of leek and spinach, and of course lake fish sazan, which all cook for Pessah, but also throughout the year. I always had some at home. I also had vine leaves stuffed with rice and onions, spring onions and dried onions, dill, parsley and all these folded in vine leaves. I prepared at least 150 pieces, because we had many big climbing vines, and plenty of grapes. This woman taught me to prepare the carp in a ceramic pot covered with crushed walnuts and matza. During that time we bought matza from the peripatetic merchants in the street, they were sold in big pieces covered with a piece of cloth, nothing like the way matzas are sold today. One had to put the fried carp on the matza with the walnuts, cover them in the same way, and then pour good oil over it and watch it cook until the oil disappeared. After that one had to put it in the refrigerator, or before the war into the ice cupboard. Somebody passed everyday selling ice and we usually bought one quarter. But I also cooked Christian dishes for them. They did not say anything and ate them with pleasure. Except for the fish we also made enhaminados eggs which were put in water to boil with lots of onions and we added a little salt to taste. They had to boil over a low flame, or in old times we cooked them slowly in the oven. We liked these eggs, and used to put them often in salads. My father in law asked for those Jewish dishes. But he also ate others. He never complained, he was a very easygoing person. As far as sweets go, I only learned toupischti, and my recipe was published by Fitrakis publishing house. Mari, my husband’s sister had taught me this recipe when she stayed in my house. It was very tasty and very easy to make. I didn’t like preparing sweets, but I did like to eat them.”*

⁴ Jaleniewski-Seidler (2000) who draws from his own background - he grew up in England - uses the notion of “silence” to describe the situation experienced by the children of Holocaust survivors. The past was not to be passed on to them and instead there was a silence and absence full of anxiety for most young people in the postwar Jewish families.

We may observe that the second critical phase took place right after the War when Mrs Evgenia experienced the transition from being a Christian to becoming a Jew and this was mainly achieved through cooking and serving “authentic” Jewish dishes. In other words, cooking for her was an everyday “rite of passage” from Christianity to Jewishness, from one identity to the other. Her narration reveals a continuous process of exclusions, inclusions and interchange: a process of not being born as a Jew but becoming one through food. And of course cooking “authentic” Jewish food was a means to be “one of them”, to be accepted as a member of the family and a “proper” wife.

This woman’s life history also uncovers a constant process of domesticating this new city and adopting food strategies in order to re-construct her new life in a changed city. Mapping the city via food geographies was a central strategy employed to achieve the domestication of the “unknown” city. Sutton (2010) analyses how emotional geographies and sensory geographies are mobilized by individuals in their attempt to create a viable place making. For him foodscapes are important to understand the processes by which relationships and place-making are lived and internalized. What is proposed is a kind of emotional geography in which sensory landscapes can emerge and city mapping can be drawn via a sensory place-making.

Crisis episode three

Being a Christian and becoming Jewish: eating, embodying and resisting

Since the body can be seen as “a space” or category (Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997) it is not exclusively confined to individuals but is rather a collective affair. It is a ‘social body’ upon which communities mirror aspects of their collectivity: fears, preoccupations and ideal behaviours. And yet the social body is responding to individual feelings and preoccupations and as such is always at the crossroads between the social and the personal, in a way personalising and even embodying social activities (Locher et al, 2005). The body has a history and the bodies have or make their own histories. Thus “the body” cannot be assumed any more to be a bounded, material entity but is a locus of changing inner dynamics, wills and desires which also responds to external social conditions. By the same token embodiment⁵ is not to be taken for granted; rather it is to be understood in response to historically and culturally specific notions about health and well being, political domination, traumatic situations, notions of selfhood, and emotional status (Csordas, 1994). Traumatic situations are often experienced as moments of crisis where both survival and well-being but also perceptions of selfhood are questioned and endangered.

An engagement with food, eating and non-eating focuses on sensory aspects which are experienced inside and outside of bodies and transformed via the interplay of bodily boundaries (Sutton, 2010). Embodiment⁶ is not a “natural function” or

⁵ Davidson & Milligan (2004) argue that a recognition of the emotional nature of embodiment leads to the realization that we have to explore how we feel and we think through the body. Thus place and space are sensed via emotions and this is how personal geographies are created.

⁶ A number of ethnographic cases (the Thai-Cambodian border, Fiji islands, Chinese cathartic healing) are used as contexts to explore issues of embodiment, somatization, sensibilities and emotional

envisioned as a normative, harmonious process; it is often confronted by tensions, doubts, ruptures and ambivalences leaving room for “life politics”⁷. The constant slippage of personal identities is much related to issues of bodiliness and incorporation. Thus “the body” hosts self-productive processes both subjective and objective and in any case material, personal and social; in this way it becomes an agent in itself, sustaining personhoods which internalizes discourses but also challenging them and producing altered realities (Turner, 1994).

As noted (Lupton, 1996) food incorporation (or the rejection of food) is central to the construction of subjectivities; the mouth is symbolically loaded and signalizes the boundary between the inner and the outer passage from the social world to the personal domain. Hence, the body⁸ and especially the mouth become liminal, critical zones and the ultimate controllers between the outside and the Self. But also the body and the mouth are entrances and gates where personal battles are fought and resistances played out.

Keeping or not keeping kosher was a constant matter of preoccupation for Mrs. Evgenia. In her narrative, the body was a locus of resistance: although she had officially become a Jew after the War, she nevertheless experienced the laws of Judaism idiosyncratically and selectively. Eating or not eating certain food was not a matter of imposition but a matter of choice and certainly subjected to personal preferences and tastes. Yet, we have to bear in mind that the postwar Jewish population in Thessaloniki had been dramatically reduced, so keeping kosher was no longer a central issue: *“I remember we used to keep Kosher, mainly on certain days, not all year round. But I remember there was a kosher butcher in Aghia Triada Street, owned by two brothers. I remember them all day cutting and cleaning the meat. It was hard. Many Greeks used to buy meat from the Jews because they considered that meat cleaner. Jews don’t eat pork or salami, but neither do Moslems.”*

Leo, although a member of a very religious family, reacted to kosher rules and interpreted them in a very idiosyncratic way. For him being Jewish was unquestionable and yet a kosher diet was not treated as part and parcel of this identity. So, the body for him was a locus of resistance and a place where everyday identity battles were fought. It was also a locus of critical re-working of given norms and rules and as such a means to solve and work out personal and religious crises: *“My husband*

experiences. All these cases reveal that the body is not a fixed category but always relational and a process in the making.

⁷ According to Giddens (1991) “life politics” reveal the everyday making and remaking of the self, a reflexive, never ending project for which the individual is responsible. Inevitably the self creates its own trajectory from the past to a desirable future.

⁸ The gendered body and the interplay between gender, meaning and power is discussed by Lupton, 1999 who did her fieldwork in Italy in the town of Bosa on the island of Sardinia and in the city of Florence in the region of Tuscany.

ate salami. He was nevertheless a true Jew, you could not touch him, but go to the synagogue he would't. All the family were true Jews, but only his brother Isidor went to the synagogue regularly, the others didn't."

Rituals and celebrations were treated by Mrs. Evgenia as a time *par excellence* to show her religiosity, her loyalty to the Judaic laws, and an opportunity to act, eat and cook as a "real" Jew. And yet the problems of accepting this new identity was something that Leo and his wife had to negotiate especially during these festive days. Christian friends were not invited and in some cases, this caused frustration and confusion. It certainly generated exclusions and opened up issues of family unity: "*My favorite festival was Pessah. If I compare it with the one we celebrate in the Old People's Home one doesn't understand here anything. Here the Rabbi reads and the rest of the people eat. "Eh, wait a minute my dear, close your mouth, nobody is going to take it away from you". But there I could understand the festival, and I was very sorry once when Elvina was in Thessaloniki, my niece, that Albertos - my husband's brother - didn't want her to come and see how we celebrate, because she was not Jewish. She was very sorry, because she would have liked to watch other customs."*

After a long marriage Leo decided to move into the Old People's Home in Thessaloniki. His wife chose to stay in her own house. Yet, the Jewish High Holidays were an opportunity to meet up, be together, celebrate them and of course to eat kosher, to eat proper Jewish food. Mrs. Evgenia was Jewish but she experienced her belonging to Jewishness especially during ritual moments: "*I used to come here and celebrate together the High Holidays, such as Pessah and New Year. I gave something for the institution, something to the cook. I always came for the High Holidays and we celebrated them together."*

This woman's narrative reveals that history is not monolithic and homogenous but to a great extent personalized, subjective, localized. It is a series of episodes, dramas and performativities in order to overcome critical phases and traumatic situations during a lifetime. Life histories are - as stated - a starting point in our attempt to explore the past but also how the past interacts with the present and informs present identities. Food and all the associated activities (cooking, eating, exchanging etc.) serve as loci and repositories of past and present experiences. People invest food with a significant emotional baggage and this leads to several emotional reactions. The life history presented and analyzed focused on the emotional power of food that enables individuals to cross boundaries, manage critical transitions, challenge and inform belonging. A topic not much discussed theoretically - at least in the case of Greece - and certainly not recorded extensively and in depth. Key contemporary notions such as affectivity and emotionality could be further explored by using extended life-histories and long personal narrations. What more, as mentioned before, this paper suggested an analysis of the survival strategies during the Second World War and the War famine, rather neglected fields of study. Emotions and food affectivity seem to have a central role during life's critical episodes. Food according to the theories presented can be treated as "comfort food" since it is associated with happy moments

and harmonious family memories. The present research reveals that food during the War famine enabled survival but at the same time ensured social and family continuation, stability and “normality”. Mrs. Evgenia used food as a survival mechanism but also as a means to fight passivity, death and destruction.

Instead of an epilogue: “Visible” subjectivities

After a series of interviews Mrs. Evgenia herself problematised her own “belonging” as multiple, contextual and at times conflicting; she described the everyday battles and defeats of her multiple subjectivities: *“I am a Spanish citizen and therefore I do not vote (in national elections), but until now I have voted in the Community’s elections. I care about how the Community is doing, because I live here. This is my home, who supports me here, now? Greece? No, the Community. By the way I have a complaint: here in the Old Peoples’ Home they don’t let us know about the death of our friends. For instance when Mr. Jackos died, I found out about it only on the day of his funeral from another friend. Shouldn’t I have known? Last night I watched by chance a documentary about the Jews of Thessaloniki and their hardship in the camps. Why didn’t they let us know?”*

The life history of this woman provides the complex canvas on which critical loci are drawn. During these moments of disordering, namely the hunger during the War and the transition from being Christian to becoming Jewish, food is seen as a central survival strategy providing comfort, enabling some degree of life certainties, promising acceptance and ensuring continuity. I tried to give voice to life experiences and reveal the past conditions as multi-layered, complex and at times conflicting. And I do hope that from my analysis the notion of Self emerges as always in process, constantly made and re-made, always reacting and interacting emotionally and actively responding (accepting, neglecting or altering) to the social and historical conditions.

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Abstract

The paper is based on the life history of a woman who lived and died at the Jewish Old People's Home in the city Thessaloniki¹ in northern Greece. Food plays a key role in her life course since it enacted emotional responses and affective interactions revealing that belonging is never unproblematic but is materialized and mediated through the medium of food and eating. The analysis stresses the issue of "comfort food" meaning food that is treated as a means to deal with critical situations and a mechanism for providing positively valued emotions like comfort, security and stability during personal crises and transitional phases in a life.

¹This life history was taken by Vasiliki Kravva (in 2005-2006) in the context of a European Research programme called Centropa. This is an oral history programme which covers the whole span of the 20th century and collects life-histories but also visual material (such as photographs) of the Jews living in the wider Balkan area. The co-ordinator of the programme in Thessaloniki was the historian Dr. Rena Molho. All the so far processed material can be found on the internet under the address www.Centropa.Org