Baking for Hope During the Pandemic: What We Can Learn from Communist Europe

by Roxana Cazan

My grandmother lived in a small village in Transylvania, Romania. The homesteads lay scattered along the Mures river that flowed lazily in its bed and provided sufficient irrigation to the neighboring wheat fields. After the village men took their share of wheat to the mill and returned home with Brobdingnagian bagfuls of flour, the women would start preparing sourdough bread. The loaves would be baked on Saturday mornings, before sunrise. Wrapped in clean kitchen towels and left outside in the yard to cool down, the loaves radiated their heavenly aromas that engulfed the village like a charm.

My grandmother would prepare her sourdough recipe Fridays after vespers—three parts flour, one part water, a generous pinch of salt, and a handful of the sourdough starter "borrowed" from her neighbor, Ana. I remember watching my grandmother as her hands folded sticky dough over in the bread trough, a receptacle carved out of a tree log and used specifically for this purpose. She would cover the dough neatly and allow it to rise overnight, then she would shape it into loaves and bake it in a clay oven out in the yard. When bread was baked, my grandmother would remove it from the clay oven on a large wooden peel. She'd dust the ashes off each loaf carefully, using a cluster of clean goose feathers. The loaves looked plump, and the crust well-formed, crispy, and ours.

Growing up in the 1980s communist Romania, I witnessed my parents and grandparents struggling to buy [food on a ration](https://adevarul.ro/locale/alba-iulia/ratia-lunara-alimente-comunism-erau-adidasii-calculatoarele-zahar-carne-unt-ulei-trebuia-primeasca-roman-1_5e00e1495163ec42714f7879/index.html). My parents entrusted me with the bread ration card, as it was my chore to buy it once every two days. As a family of four, we were allocated about 13 loaves of bread a month, 18oz of cheese, about 10 eggs, 18oz of pork or beef, 35oz of poultry, 3.5oz of butter, 2.5lbs of sugar, 2.5lbs of oil, and 2.5lbs of flour every month. I had not heard of chimichurri, ahi tuna poke bowl, or porcini mushrooms, and wasn't going to for another decade and a half.

We lived next door to the neighborhood grocery store, and when the truck pulled in, I would run home yelling, "They brought bologna!" My parents would quickly send me to the store to sit in a long line: the closer I was to the cashier, the bigger the chance I could actually buy some. Often times, the store would run out of the said bologna right in front of me, and I had to return home empty handed, with a sour taste in my mouth and a growling stomach. Smaranda Vultur (2014) argues that particularly because of this acute scarcity of food, cooking traditions compose an important part of national memory for Romanians; the impossibility of finding food caused very serious identity crises. Because of this, storing food became not only a survival strategy but also a political means of resisting communism.

\*\*\*

When in March 2020, the pandemic prompted us to shelter in place, I felt particularly fortunate. I was already a stay-at-home mother, and my family was privileged to maintain a steady income. Between changing diapers and preparing purees for my six months old son, I would often visit Facebook and Instagram to keep up with the communities I was part of: newly postpartum mothers, former colleagues in the academia, and family members living abroad. As a first-generation immigrant married to another first-generation immigrant, my hope was that we could travel with our son sometime in the summer, so that he could meet his grandparents. In the meanwhile, social media was good enough for capturing his first attempts at sitting up or lathering his oatmeal all over his tray table.

Social media, however, not only helped me connect with family and friends, but it also revealed to me a sudden phenomenon: most of my friends and family members were baking sourdough bread from scratch. Since I was anyway cooking at home, trying to avoid [the dangers of processed baby foods](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/toxic-chemicals-baby-food-parents-can-do), I also began to grow my sourdough starter. I remember reading hundreds of advice articles on how to maintain a healthy yeast culture in my starter and how often to feed it. Every morning as I turned on my phone, I'd see photographs of my friends' baked creations: sourdough muffins, burrata-filled pides, za'atar manakeesh flat breads, or savory bread puddings.

While many complained on social media that [grocery stores ran out of toilet paper](https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/26/coronavirus-why-is-there-still-no-toilet-paper-in-stores/), and this rare commodity became the subject of hundreds of memes and internet jokes, the same grocery stores also ran out of flour and yeast, the two ingredients needed for baking bread. Fortunately for me, I already had a large container of vacuum-packed dry yeast, and my husband was able to secure a 25lbs bag of flour. This is how I began baking sourdough bread.

Overnight, my life bloomed with activity. Not only did I care for my son, but I also had to feed my sourdough starter, gently coerce it into staying alive and ensuring its survival even during periods of inactivity. I would carefully watch my dough, waiting for it to rise just as I was waiting for my son to wake up from a restful nap. I would carefully spread out the space between naps and bakes, to ensure I had enough time to nurse and knead. The oven temperature and humidity had to be as exact as those of my son's bedroom. Not only did I capture my son's newly acquired skills in photographs, but I also eternalized my baked goods and family dinner ideas, to the excitement of my online community.

Notwithstanding the enormous privilege of being able to bake organic and trendy creations at home, I couldn't help but wonder, why did my friends and I start baking bread as if we all received a secret order to use our time at home productively and thoughtfully? What fascinated us with creating and maintaining yeast (of all things) alive, as if the pandemic was going to eradicate life as we know it? And why on earth did we suddenly become so enthralled by dough?

Having moved to the United States in the early 2000s, I have always marveled at the overwhelming cornucopia of grocery stores and my phenomenal ability to afford quite a bit on a graduate student income. Life caught me in its vortex of activity, and I had little time to cook. When the pandemic made all activities outside the home impossible, I reevaluated my schedule and determined that I can indeed cook healthy recipes. Not only did I began tending to my sourdough starter, but I also tried germinating various seeds. I learned how to create a miniature greenhouse using a Ziploc bag and a wet paper towel. Soon enough I was tending to a full-blown garden, weeding and changing diapers by day and nurturing dough by night.

And while I felt proud of the *Saveur*-worthy photos of new dishes I posted on Instagram every day, I crumbled and sobbed at the realization that many did not eat, having been [laid off](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/a-very-dark-feeling-hundreds-camp-out-in-oklahoma-unemployment-lines/2020/07/20/44d59cb6-c77a-11ea-a99f-3bbdffb1af38_story.html), [stuck in refugee detention centers or camps](https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/refugees/), or shattered by [poverty, which in my state](https://okpolicy.org/new-census-data-shows-that-oklahoma-fell-further-behind-the-u-s-on-poverty-and-uninsured-rate-for-second-consecutive-year/) has been planking well above the national average. Out of the whirlpool of emotions I was feeling, surely enhanced by the postpartum period, appeared a vision of my grandmother, kneading dough on a Friday night, alone in the kitchen, while outside a raging communist winter wrecked the village. That’s when I understood that we didn't need organic Whole Foods wheat flour or gourmet seeds to bake our own sourdough bread. We didn't need the privilege of working from home during the pandemic to feel the need of channeling our devastation into something that literally grows before our eyes.

All we needed was to connect with our ancestors—our grandmothers indeed—who carried on despite injustice, despite poverty, and despite pandemics. All we needed was to keep our hands and minds busy with something over which we had full control. All we needed was to bake for family, bake for hope.

Sources:

Cullison, Courtney (2018). New Census data shows that Oklahoma fell further behind the U.S. on poverty and uninsured rate for second consecutive year. *OKPolicy.org*, Retrieved on August 2, 2020 from <https://okpolicy.org/new-census-data-shows-that-oklahoma-fell-further-behind-the-u-s-on-poverty-and-uninsured-rate-for-second-consecutive-year/>

Gowen, Annie (2020). "A very dark feeling": Hundreds camp out in Oklahoma unemployment lines. The Washington Post. Retrieved on August 2, 2020, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/a-very-dark-feeling-hundreds-camp-out-in-oklahoma-unemployment-lines/2020/07/20/44d59cb6-c77a-11ea-a99f-3bbdffb1af38_story.html>

Stolberg, Sheryl Gay (2020). "Pandemic Within a Pandemic": Coronavirus and Police Brutality Roil Black Communities. *The New York Times*, Retrieved on August 2, 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/07/us/politics/blacks-coronavirus-police-brutality.html>

Timonea, Dorin (2019). Raţia lunară de alimente în comunism. *Adevarul* (Romanian daily newspaper), December 23, 2019, Retrieved on August 2, 2020 from adev.ro/q2z76s.

US Global Leadership Coalition (2020). COVID-19 Brief: Impact on Refugees, Retrieved on August 2, 2020 from <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/refugees/>.

Vultur, Smaranda (2014). Daily Life and Constraints in Communism Romania in the Late 1980s: From the Semiotics of Food, to the Semiotics of Power. *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experiences in Southeast Europe*, Eds. Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, Stefan Troebst, Budapest: Central European University Press, p. 181.

Woolfolk, John (2020). Coronavirus: Why is there still no toilet paper in stores? *The Mercury News*, Retrieved on August 2, 2020 from <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/26/coronavirus-why-is-there-still-no-toilet-paper-in-stores/>