

A Montreal Bagel in Zurich

In the late 1960s, when I was a boy growing up on the west side of Montreal, my father would head east, to his old neighborhood on the Plateau, whenever he needed a hit of soul food — a smoked meat sandwich, some pickled herring, or a ball of chopped liver with *grivenes*. He would make for Schwartz's or Waldman's or Moishe's, to the shops lining St. Laurence Boulevard, known as the Main in memory of its service as a major local artery before the district changed hands. On weekends he would travel a little farther, in the direction of Mile End, to one of two shops, either St. Viateur Bagels or Fairmount Bagels, each located on the street from which it took its name.

My father's parents were from eastern Europe, born and raised in territories still administered by the Czar at the time of their births. They emigrated separately to Canada in the 1920s, fleeing economic ruin (in my Zaideh's case) and Cossacks (in my Bubbi's). Together with their birth families, and as yet unknown to each other, the two of them made it to Montreal, in those days the largest city in the Dominion and one of the contemporary goals of choice for ambitious immigrants.

Actually, to hear my Zaideh tell it, his family's "choice" of Montreal as a destination was dictated simply by the fact that the boat for Buenos Aires had left Southampton some days before they had completed their journey from Łódź by ox-cart, train and ferry; by their lack of the wherewithal to pay for local accommodations until the next crossing to New York; and because the gangplank happened to be down on the Canadian steamer as they trundled up to the port. As for my Bubbi, who had come from a village where you could stand on the roof of your house and watch the First World War, she had evidently been too immersed in grief to pay much attention to her family's itinerary.

By the time I was born, my grandparents had moved away from the Plateau, the old immigrant neighborhood that had received them forty years earlier and since witnessed the birth of their children, and established themselves in Côte-des-Neiges, a slightly more upscale area on the western edge of Mount Royal. My parents and I lived at a still greater

remove from the Plateau, in an up-and-coming quarter not far from Westmount, a leafy and still prosperous Anglophone enclave in what was rapidly becoming a predominantly Francophone city.

The bagel, the object of my father's peregrinations, was allegedly introduced into Montreal in 1919 by a Jewish baker from Eastern Europe dreamily identified as either Engelman or Shlafman. It is thought to have originated in Poland, its form perhaps influenced by the stirrups King Jan Sobieski had used during his victorious charge against the Turks in 1683, and offered as a gesture of assimilative gratitude by Semitic confectioners to the savior of Christendom from the presumed depredations of the Mohammedans. The Montreal bagel is made of yeasted dough boiled in sweetened water and subsequently baked in a wood oven; the ovens on St. Viateur and Fairmount are hot seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Purists eat their bagels coated in either poppy seeds or sesame seeds, period; exotic varieties featuring blueberries and chocolate chips are ritually condemned as hybrid wannabes.

Whatever its provenance and ingredients, however, for me the bagel will always be inextricably linked with Jewishness, which is in turn forever associated in my mind with Montreal; after all, as far as I was concerned (until I became a man, and the Parti Québécois came to power, and we left our province for the *fershluggene goyishe* west coast), Montreal was the ancestral home of the tribes of Israel. Why, for all I knew, the Holy One had commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the lookout spot halfway up Mount Royal, where teenagers today still park their cars to neck. And in the great cosmic game of noughts and crosses, the jovially circular bagel is the natural counterpart of the austere and forbidding crucifix – especially when the former is laden with lox, red onions, and a *shmeer* of cream cheese. How could the emaciated man of sorrows possibly hope to beat such an incentive to faith?

Now, forty years later in Zurich, the town of my own personal *galoot*, I can't simply head across town to the Plateau when I am overtaken by my ancestral desire. The nearest thing I can find to a Montreal bagel here is a Turkish bread known as a *simit*, a sesame-covered

ring of chewy dough purveyed by Zurich's Anatolian grocers. And while I stand in line of a Sunday at Ege Markt in Josefstrasse, one of the few shops exempted from the Pharisaic local sumptuary laws, I am routinely preoccupied by the word *simit*, the name of my boyhood bagel's Turkish doppelganger. Did the Ottoman Janissaries ride back to Istanbul in shame in 1683, I wonder, buoyed up only by perverse pleasure at the memory of the succulent pastry baked in honor of their defeat by a people known as the *Semites*...?

© Rafaël Newman 2008

First appeared as "A Montreal Bagel" in Katarina Holländer & Michael Guggenheimer (eds.), *Ein gewisses jüdisches Etwas* (Zurich: Omanut, 2007), p. 46; here in revised form.