

## AN ADDENDUM TO EATING OUT

I recently wrote about eating out, describing the “eateries” I patronized with my mother, and with my first dates, and in high school and college: candy stores, delicatessens, luncheonettes, cafeterias and restaurants. Let me share with you the kind of eating out that preceded high school. Two different categories come to mind. The first, which still haunts me, is school lunch. The second, which brings back fond memories, are the peddlers that visited our block, especially the ones with wonderful treats that cost less than a nickel.

**School lunch:** We were poor and “on relief,” so I therefore qualified for free lunch, which was served in the gym in elementary school, (PS 62) and in a couple of classrooms on the second floor in junior high school (JHS 52.) When we had our lunch break, some of my classmates went home for lunch, and others, who brought their lunch, went to a designated area with tables and benches, to eat their lunch. Some brought them in lunch boxes featuring cartoon characters; others in brown paper bags.

I went to where the kids who were getting free lunch were assigned. It was humiliating. I did not know the other kids, and did not want to know them. (I was aware that both Sol Rauch and Tony Rodriguez, who were in my junior high class, were on relief, but I don’t remember them in the lunchroom.) There were a great many more kids getting free lunch in PS 62. Perhaps it was because the school was K through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, while JHS 52 was 7 through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I even was the recipient of free lunch when I attended summer school at PS 62, for a few years.

The menu was always the same: watery soup, a sandwich, a container of milk, and sometimes a piece of fruit. Unless you got on line early, the soup was luke warm, or worse. The sandwiches were varied, but I remember them as thin and on white bread, mostly American cheese. You picked up a tray, and flatware, and were served your lunch, which you brought to an empty seat. I tried to sit away from the other “diners.” I had no desire to make small talk. I ate my lunch quickly and left. What I remember most vividly was the frequently served tomato soup. I have come to hate tomato soup.

One year, while in junior high, my mother enrolled me in a summer program at a neighborhood recreational center called Juvenile House. My mother made my lunch, much like the kids who brought their lunch to school. I carried mine in a brown paper bag. Unfortunately, she invariably made mashed hard boiled egg sandwiches (without mayonnaise) so the eggs which had no binder, kept falling out of the sandwich. If I was no longer embarrassed eating free lunch, I was embarrassed having a sandwich which fell apart. When I started high school, I made my own sandwiches. No hard boiled eggs.

**The neighborhood peddler:** Thinking back to my childhood on Fox Street, I keep remembering how the street teemed with people, literally trying to eke out a few pennies, desperately struggling to make a living. (Digressing from food, there were musicians singing or playing their instruments in the courtyards, hoping that the tenants would wrap a few pennies in a piece of newspaper and throw it out the window. I still associate “You

Are My Sunshine” with one of the courtyard singers. There were the men calling out, “I cash clothes,” and “I buy used Singer sewing machines and old typewriters.” There were men who sharpened knives, and there were men with ponies and a camera who took pictures of the neighborhood children seated on the pony.) There were men with horses and wagons who would call out their wares. Housewives would come down to examine their fruits and vegetables in the hope that they were fresher and cheaper than the fruit store around the block. The legendary apple sellers, and the large street vendors’ carts were not in my neighborhood. The apple sellers were downtown, and the big carts were in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side.

Among the peddlers I looked forward to were those who catered to kids. It seems that almost every day there were peddlers who came down the block pushing all kinds of carts, selling ices, and slices of watermelon in the summer, and roasted chestnuts, and baked sweet potato in the winter. There were peddlers selling jelly apples, and dried apricots and marshmallows on a stick, dipped in hot jelly. And cocoanut slices. They had carts on two wheels, and they carried wooden two by fours, which were inserted in the back to stabilize the cart when they stopped. The cart was equipped with compartments for their wares. The most elaborate was the sweet potato man who had a metal cart on four wheels with a fire on the bottom, a drawer which kept the baked sweet potato hot, and a drawer for wood.

Eventually, there appeared the ice cream truck with the bells, and we bought our ice cream pops and sandwiches and cones, but we knew it was not the same. The person who sold you the ice cream had a uniform. He was not dressed like the peddler. He drove a truck; he did not come into the neighborhood on foot pushing a pushcart. He didn’t speak with an accent. He didn’t scrape the ice and add the color; he didn’t slice the watermelon, or crack open the cocoanut, or roast the chestnuts, or bake the sweet potato, or dip the apple or apricot or marshmallow. I would like to think that eventually, the peddler made enough money peddling, that he was able to open a store or maybe a restaurant, and send his kids to college. My mother told me that our dentist worked as a peddler when he came to America from Kishinev, went to night school, and became a successful dentist.

Today there is a renewed interest in street vendors. They are licensed, and sell an astounding variety of foods, including gourmet dishes. And they are mechanized. They drive trucks; they do not push push carts. And instead of fruits and vegetables being peddled from wagons pulled by horses, there are farmers’ markets where well-to-do patrons, baby boomers and millennials shop for fresh, organically grown foods. But to me, nothing can taste as good as the ices, the watermelon, the chestnuts and the sweet potatoes that we bought for a few cents from the peddler, and ate with our friends on the stoop.

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