

Translating Grandfather's Hunger

Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach

I.

He barely speaks English. When he tries to say *how are you?* it comes out as *hava you? xavaro!* In Russian, to gobble or eat with a fury. And this, he does. First, a plate full of salad with lettuce overflowing onto the floor by the time he makes it back to the table from the buffet line. Next, red meat and baked potatoes and seared fish and some grilled vegetables covered by some rotisserie chicken and mysterious sauces. And when it comes time for dessert, he has two separate dinner plates, one with a leaning tower of fruit and the other, a mountain of pastries and cakes and at least two scoops of ice cream, vanilla usually, though anything made of milk and sugar will do. And tea, always tea. *Chamomile, two bags*, Babushka instructs the waiter, even if Dedushka would have preferred something else. He never lets it steep long enough before drinking, takes in the bitter hot water as close to boiling as he can get.

II.

How are you feeling?

I call during my walk along the ten-minute stretch between dropping his great-grandson at daycare and arriving at the coffee shop to write this. I was reading Speigleman's MAUS. I'm sure it has something to do with this, I think. Guilt and the pressure of time or its lack. Before, I would only call him by mistake. He has so little to say these days.

Oy Nechego

literally meaning nothing but colloquially the word for fine

Not nothing, not fine. You just exclaimed Oy. Is it your legs?

Yes. It's my legs.

he refuses surgery people die in hospitals he says

Have you gone on your walk already today?

This autumn light in early October is beyond description. I imagine he wore at least three layers. Being cold is not something he has to bear anymore. He keeps the condo hot. Wears his jogging suit indoors. Babushka sneaks the windows open. She even insisted he take off his sweater so we could break fast. She didn't let him eat the soup. He'd already had two bowls full some two hours earlier.

And what are your plans for the day?

Your grandmother has left me things to do. Vacuum. Wash the floors.

She always leaves me tasks.

Good that she is keeping you busy. I want to keep you busy too, tell me about the past.

The last time I asked in person, said I wanted to know more. He said he did too. Wanted to know that is.

About your childhood.

What childhood?

Well, what's the first thing you remember?

The first thing, I didn't go v sadik to the small garden children's garden kindergarten

I stayed home and I was hungry.
 Did they feed you at kindergarten?
 Yes, there they fed us.
 Why were you home?
I was confused already.
 I was sick. I didn't go v sadik because I was sick. I was home so I was hungry.
 I wanted food. So I went there to get food even though I was sick.
 Were you home alone.
How did he get there? Where was his mother? Brother? I am always afraid to ask about his father. Papa makes him stop talking. Food does the opposite.
 Yes. Mama was always working. I was hungry. Always.
 How old were you?
 I don't know. Young. Not old enough to be in school yet. Five. Maybe six. Seven?
 What were you sick with?
 I don't remember. I was hungry.
 Do you remember what they fed you at kindergarten?
 No.
I thought he always remembered food. The lemon he mistook for an orange. The giant peaches that grew only in the south. The empty cabinets and pantry. Not even a potato, he repeats. Always recalling how Babushka's mother never let her children starve. Always onions and oil and salted fish at least the onions. Always something to chew.
 We were in Samarkant, Uzbekistan then. In evacuation.
 What else do you remember?
 I was sick and I had to go v sadik because I was hungry.
 Well I have to go now.
I needed to read someone else's story. He sounded tired. But he always sounds tired when he talks now.
 Try to remember more of your past. I will call later and ask you about it. It will help me if you remember.
I know he is more likely to do it if it's for someone else.
 It's good for your health to remember.
Maybe that's a lie.
 Thank you.
He doesn't add for calling. He is always grateful when I accidentally call him.

III.

He doesn't speak Yiddish, but sings all the words to Tumbala Laika, likely recalling songs of a father he never knew. He doesn't speak Spanish either, but still says *como estas?* and expects an answer from anyone who looks to him like his Amigos at the resorts in Mexico, where he can eat unstoppably, for every meal, especially if Babushka is too busy with a great-grandchild to notice. One time, too many years ago now, he asked the landscapers working on the beach for their ladder and climbed a coconut tree to get the fruit down. Then, he had them drill holes in the thick brown shell so he could feed us fresh milk. Once we'd sucked that dry, he used one of their axes to split the sphere in two so we could scoop out flesh and know what it's like to hold that tender sweetness on our tongues against the sun's beating and the saltwater's approach. I still wonder how they understood. How they smiled and slapped each other on the back, Dedushka's skin darker than theirs, his belly bigger, and his mouth, always open.

IV.

You sound more upbeat today.

I downloaded an app that will record all of our conversations. Should I tell him?

Thank you. I just came back from walking.

It's so _____ out.

The Russian word I used has no translation. Ravishing and gorgeous and adjectives are too far from truth.

Where did you go?

Just walked around the building.

And your legs?

It's so easy to ask about his body. The answer always certain. His body anything but.

Budit' luchshe.

Literally will be better future indefinite tense

When?

I don't know. Eventually?

I want to ask about his mother again. About the hunger. The past. His fingers. Instead

Did Babushka leave you things to do today?

Yes. Dusting.

I wish you could come here and dust. We have so much dust.

Sigh deep long

I hope I have enough time to get our house done.

*One bedroom one bath apartment on the 6th floor balcony looking down
at the parking lot every now and again a bird pigeon maybe or even a crow*

Enough time? What else do you have to do?

*I should have asked already. What he remembers. All these things I want to write down before time runs out.
He's afraid he might not get all the dust. I'm afraid to ask why.*

Well now, I'm going to eat.

And it's back to food. It starts and ends in the mouth.

What are you going to have?

I know the answer. It'll be soup. It's always soup.

Soup.

What kind?

He can't think of the word Soup of from the brain to the mouth something is lost

you know the one *sigh maybe he's taking off his shoes*

Fish Uxa

Oh, okay then.

I should ask. The dust can wait. Soup can wait. Remember, I told you to try and remember. Did you?

Well enjoy.

Thank you. How's your ear. No wait, that wasn't you.

His other granddaughter has an ear infection. He confuses us sometimes.

Good luck with the dust.

This recording on my phone is five and a half minutes long, but I haven't listened.

V.

Now, he barely speaks, and when he tries, Babushka finishes his sentences in any language. Missing three fingers on his left hand, Dedushka still has all his teeth and a very able tongue. He has an aptitude for food and language, not memory. An aptitude for eating and feeding and opening his mouth, but there's rarely anyone to translate his ways.



Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach emigrated from Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, as a Jewish refugee when she was six years old. She holds an MFA in Poetry from the University of Oregon and is a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania where her research focuses on contemporary American poetry about the Holocaust. She has received fellowships from the Bread Loaf and TENT Conferences as well as

the Auschwitz Jewish Center. Julia is the author of *The Bear Who Ate the Stars* (Split Lip Press, 2014) and her poems appear in *Best New Poets*, *Gulf Coast*, *Nashville Review*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, among others. Julia is also Editor-in-Chief of *Construction Magazine* (www.constructionlitmag.com) and when not busy chasing her toddler around the playgrounds of Philadelphia, she writes a blog about motherhood (<https://otherwomendonttellyou.wordpress.com/>).