

This story was published by everydayfiction.com



MANDELBROYT*

My grandmother's hands are pale with slender fingers and arthritic joints that never stopped her from doing whatever she wanted despite some occasional pain and swelling. They looked exactly as I pictured mine would, in another fifty years or so, and I loved them.

The only ring she wore was the thin gold band my grandfather had slipped onto her finger more than half a century earlier. She had simply adored him and Grandma put just as much love into whatever she cooked or baked in her sun-filled kitchen. I'm convinced to this day that, even though we can't see them, her fingerprints are embossed on every morsel that eventually reaches her table.

Early this morning, she had called to ask me if I could help her prepare a double batch of *mandelbroyt* for my Uncle Lenny's birthday dinner. His favorite treat, her recipe deserved mention in any serious collection of great desserts right beside Zabar's chocolate babka. Our entire family, including all of my thirty-two

first and second cousins, agreed and—as you might imagine—that didn't happen often.

“What is *mandelbroyt*?” a few non-Jewish friends have asked me.

That's easy to explain. *Mandelbroyt* is the Jewish version of biscotti, only there are more than 5,000 years of tsuris and nachas mixed in with the almonds, cinnamon, and vanilla.

Everyone loved Grandma's *mandelbroyt* and she shared it happily with mishpocha, the mailman, her cardiologist, the “girls” she played mahjong with on Tuesday afternoons, as well as anyone else she wanted to shower with kindness or appreciation.

“Come, my Allie, let's start so we can get these into the oven before I have to prepare tonight's chicken,” Grandma said as she set her huge ceramic mixing bowl on the kitchen table.

Two green stripes circled the outside edge of that thick-sided, pale blue heirloom. My grandmother had schlepped it in her lone suitcase, wrapped in heavy cotton batting, all the way from Berdichev to Brooklyn. No one else ever moved or dared touch that precious piece of culinary equipment without her permission. For as long as anyone could recall, Grandma had kept it on a shelf in her pantry in a place of honor between her Shabbos candlesticks and a slender rolling pin that had

belonged to her late mother, Chasye.

I often wondered what Chasye's hands looked like, but the only photo that had survived was her smiling face inside an enameled locket my grandmother kept safe inside her jewelry box. Grandma only wore that treasured necklace four times a year when she attended the Yizkor Service. In fact, if you opened her Machzor to that page, you would find one of her embroidered handkerchiefs bookmarking that prayer.

Deep in my heart, I had always hoped that cherished volume would someday belong to me. Grandma had explained to me what Yizkor meant when I was just a little girl.

“Allie, this is a very special part of the day for us Jews. It's a time to remember all those we have lost. Life is filled with simchas, but also with loss. You can't have one without the other. That's why you must learn to appreciate the good; especially the good left behind by those we have loved and who have loved us.

"When we remember, even when we are sad that someone we loved is no longer at our side, it's as if they are still here as long as they live on in our hearts. That is the very least we can do for them. The power of remembrance brings everyone to Yizkor. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you aren't welcome.”

I've never forgotten that day or the way she took my hand and gently led me

out of Junior Congregation, up the winding staircase, and then into the row our family members had occupied for three generations. I can still feel the warmth of her fingers on my shoulder as we walked up the center aisle of that crowded synagogue.

As the Chazzan chanted *El Male Rachamim* and my grandmother's tears began to fall, mine did as well. It came as no surprise that she—who always kept Hershey's kisses hidden in the bottom of her purse to soothe restless grandchildren—handed me one of her handkerchiefs to catch my own tears.

Tonight would be Lenny's first birthday celebration without his father seated at the head of the table, pouring sweet wine, and kissing his son the same way he had always done. My grandfather's all-embracing hugs and kisses were dispensed with complete abandon. I could tell that Grandma missed them more than anyone else.

As I reached into her kitchen cabinet for flour, sugar, and golden raisins, I prayed that she wouldn't be joining him for a very long time. But I knew, just as she had taught me, that one day, when the time came to remember her during Yizkor, I would gather my prayer book closer and cry with as much love as Grandma had always done.

###

**Mandelbroyt* is the Yiddish word for almond bread.