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Streetwalker Stew

A sex worker taught my mother how to cook. This was in Brussels where prostitution was legal and in the rundown Anderlecht section of Brussels where many Holocaust survivors lived in the mid- and late-1940s. My Polish mother and Czech father felt at home with people who had shared similar horrors and didn't need (or want) to talk about them.

Starting their lives over in bilingual Belgium was easier for my parents than it might have been for other survivors thanks to my mother's already-excellent French and my multi-lingual father's ability to pick up Flemish quickly. That was a good division of linguistic labor.

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Mom described her tutor as tall, stately, and middle-aged with dark, curly shoulder-length hair. One morning when my mother was going out shopping, the two women left the small apartment building together. My mother asked her neighbor where she was headed so beautifully dressed and made up, and she replied, "*Je fais les boulevards.*"

That was an idiom for streetwalking my mother hadn't learned in school back in Poland before the war, so she asked friends what it meant. They were alarmed and thought someone was trying to recruit her for the profession. My mother found the suggestion hilarious, even though she attracted stares for her good figure and luxuriant hair when she was at the seashore.

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My mother was the daughter of free-thinking socialists who had advised her to live with a man before marriage, so she wasn't shocked by the woman's profession and they soon became friends. My mother had grown up in a bourgeois family where the maid also did all the cooking, so she knew nothing about kitchens and was eager to learn. This woman taught her how to prepare fish of all kinds, how to make *coq au vin* and the Belgian *stoofvlees*, a beef stew with mustard and beer.

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This woman even babysat my older brother, though I think he might have made that story up because it gives his infancy there a kind of glamor. He could also be jealous that my mother shared her memories about Belgium with me rather than him, and that I was an "A" student in French and won an award in high school, while his French sounded like Pig Latin.

Watching my mother cook or bake was always fun, and my mid-Michigan kitchen today is haunted in a good way by years of scenes that lit up our dark Washington Heights kitchen. Is it "closure" to feel her presence so near after her long slide into dementia? Maybe so.

Pass the Stella.