The Palatschinken Papers

or

My Life Among the Pancakes

Philip J. Davis

I

Malad City, Idaho

Years ago on one absolutely frigid day, when I was teaching at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, my mathematical colleague Prof. F. invited me to go along with him to Idaho Falls where his son was competing in an ice skating contest. His son, then in high school, was a cracker-jack skater. In the evening, after the contest, there would be some kind of celebration in a park along the banks of the famous Snake River.

We checked into the Hilton Motel facing a large architecturally stunning Mormon Temple across the river – we’d had the good sense to make reservations -- and then went out into the early darkness to see what was going on. A huge bonfire had been lit for warmth, a school band played with gloved fingers pushing the trumpet valves, and grilled food was available. A good time was had by all, as one writes home to Grandma.

F.’s son went back with his high school group, and the next morning, F. and I drove back to Salt Lake leisurely. F. had arranged for another lecturer to take his classes at the UU.

“We’ll stop for lunch in Malad City at the `Twin Sisters’. They make pancakes the size of watermelons. Their pancakes are more than a meal. They’re an experience.”

Malad City, I thought to myself, an evil place for pancakes. But no – I learned that the place was so named by a Scotch - Canadian trapper in the 1840’s , who had come down with something. But that’s a story for another time.

The Twin Sisters, Rose and Reola, operated in the kitchen and came out behind the counter from time to time. They were huge ladies. Dresses size forty four by them wouldn’t fit –to quote Hyman Kaplan.

I have a theory – take it or leave it – that when cooks are huge, the food is exceptional. And so it was. We ordered a plate of “Malad Whoppers”, the specialite de maison, as recommended by F. Out came one large pancake for each of us, easily twelve inches in diameter, dripping with blueberry sauce. Bon appetite.

Under normal circumstances, I would have consigned a good fraction of the pancake to a Doggy Bag. But these were not normal circumstances. Prof. F. was a trencherman, i.e. a big eater, and I would have questioned his selection of The Twin Sisters if I had not finished what I had on my plate.

II

Jerusalem, Israel

Years went by – much too rapidly – and after a long , tedious, and tiring trip from Perth, Australia, sleeping en route , I found myself sitting in a smallish restaurant in the Rechavia District of Jerusalem, Israel. My trek up the hill from the airport in Lod, with a Romanian Monk in tow, has it not been chronicled in my little jeu d’esprit *The Thread* ?

The waiter handed me a bi-lingual carte de jour, Hebrew and English . A quick scan caused my eyebrows to shoot up. Palatchinken, I read , with a transliteration into Hebrew letters. Palatschinken ? Palatschinken ? What on earth was that ? Memory spoke, trying to ring a bell, but produced only a slight tinkle.

I asked the waiter what palatschinken is or were. He didn’t understand me – and I had heard that English was now the universal language understood by the whole world. I asked him in German: still no response. I pointed to the word on the carte, and out came a spate of language that I assumed was Hebrew but which I couldn’t understand.

We then went into sign language and what resulted therefrom resembled a mix between a game of Charades and an episode of *Fawlty Towers* featuring Manuel the Waiter. Ultimately sanity and sense broke through and I was handed a warm dish from the kitchen. “Ah… Blintzes !” I called out and the waiter nodded his head in a vigorous “Yes.”

I say ultimately –waiters often work on a different time scale than the rest of the world – the waiter presented me with the bill. Under normal circumstances I would had added 10% or 15% as a tip. But these were not normal circumstances. I had just come from Australia where tipping was not part of the local etiquette. In fact, if you tipped, the waiter would gently push your money back with an attitude of disdain. Now this was my first trip to Israel; what was the custom here ? Anyhow, I left 15% and the waiter didn’t seem to mind.

III

. Versailles, France

The clock ticked on and many more years passed. One bright summer afternoon, I found myself together with Hadassah, her “British” cousin Teddy and Teddy’s Parisian friend Jules in Versailles. The palace was closed to visitors due to renovations, but we enjoyed seeing the fountains which were playing , and the precise geometric floral arrangements. We walked down the grounds to the Petit Trianon which, again, was closed. At this point, Jules had a thought: in town there was a famous creperie, and why didn’t we didn’t we go there and have some refreshments. Agreed !

We found a table in *La Creperie Ancienne* and examined the carte. What an extensive menu ! It turns out that crepes can be filled with anything and everything. Over to the side, behind a long open counter supplied with burners, pans, and dishes filled with this and that, officiated the Chef de Jour dressed appropriately in white. The aromas wafting in our direction were nothing less than transcendental.

Jules made some recommendations, the waiter took our orders in their wide variety, (I was very glad that two of us spoke French: Jules and Teddy) and shortly we were regaled with dishes of delicate crêpes worthy, I’m sure, of the great chefs Escoffier and Julia Child.

The moment of reckoning came. Teddy reached for his wallet. I reached for mine. Under normal circumstances, we might have split the bill. But these were not normal circumstances. Jules said something to Teddy in rapid French.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He said he was honored by the presence of my American Cousins and he would take care of everything.”

Ah, quelle delicatesse ; an occasion to be remembered.

IV

Manhattan, Kansas

I was giving some lectures at Kansas State University at the invitation of Prof. H.B. whom I had once invited to a program I was running at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington. Hadassah and I were put up in a very pleasant and convenient Guest Suite. I remember it very well because a previous guest had left behind a bottle of after shave lotion in the medicine cabinet that I adopted.

It must have been in early May. We rented a car and took the opportunity to drive around the nearby countryside. In one of our trips we came to a town that was celebrating its annual asparagus festival. The Kansas Asparagus Council (KAC) distributed brochures on what can be done with that vegetable. KAC’s answer: anything and everything including asparagus ice cream. Among the anythings was one that caught my eye: Asparagus filled pancakes. Aha ! My pancakes serving as Dresser to their Nibs the Asparagi.

But I can’t leave this diversion to asparagus without a further diversion.. .to Berlin, Germany where my friend Kurt L. is an artist, a gourmet cook, and an asparagus aficionado. Invited to dinner by his wife Josephina L. who ploughs the field of mathematical education. I was regaled with a splendid meal centering around the apotheosis of the noble vegetable. It would appear that Kurt has garden connections that provide him with special white stemmed asparagus, and if I interpret correctly what he told me, they must be plucked only.at certain favorable times to be determined almost astrologically. Is this Haute Cuisine or Freud’s Narcissism of Small Differences ?

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V

Vienna, Austria

Fifteen or so years ago. I had occasion to spend two weeks in Vienna, giving some lectures in the Technical University. My host was O. Univ - Prof. Dr. hc mult Hans H. whose professional work I admired. I was cohosted by his charming and capable assistant Obraetin i.R. Fraulein Dr.phil Teresa T. I checked into the Hotel Erzherzog Rainer which was located just a few streets away from the University. In the hotel lobby there was a portrait of the Archduke, and sufficient reading materials lying around to inform me (and other tourists) that the Archduke Rainer Ferdinand Maria Johann Evangelist Franz Ignaz had been a Prime Minister of Austria and was a considerable papyrologist. This fact was certainly eyebrow raising. I daresay that not many Heads of State have been papyrologists. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a philatelist. Bill Clinton plays the saxophone.

Fraulein Dr. T was no sylph and was a considerable trencher woman to boot, and when guided by such a person, the immediate vicinity of the TU became a gourmand’s international paradise. I have eaten there, e.g., schwarma, wonton, crepes hongroise, Turkish couscous, mini-schnitzelettes on a semmel (in the Imbiss across the street), gai phad , a Viet delicacy, and I shouldn’t forget that I ate a good old American hamburger in Macdonald’s located in the underground passageway in Karlsplatz.

One day at noon Fraulein Dr. said to me “ Let’s walk over the Naschmarkt and I’ll introduce you to palatschinken. Do you know what they are ? “ I pretended to no knowledge. “Well, I’m sure you’ll like them,” she explained. The Platschinkenkuchl Café had tables al fresco. We commandeered one. It struck me that a café dedicated to the greater glory of pancake was no ordinary café. I hope I have already explained that palatschinken are often filled. While I ran my eyes over the possible fillings, Dr. T. ordered palatschinken gefuellt mit mandarinnen und vanille Topfensauce. My eyebrows went up when I noticed that ratatouille was listed as a filling. Avoiding the banal, I opted for ratatouille. I thought the circumstance unusual, but after all, there is no Law of Physics I’m aware of that says that pancakes must be filled with something sweet; a savory filling is an active possibility.

VI

Providence, Rhode Island

Three years passed. Back home in Providence, one sunny morning, a call came from good friends the Eichhorns around 8:30 A.M. “Would you care to go out with us for breakfast?”

“Sure. Anything special up? Where shall we go ?”

“To IHOP. [The International House of Pancakes]

“Excellent. You’ll drive ? ”

At IHOP : Easily a dozen different kinds of pancakes were available, all of them described in a glossy menu with luscious adjectives and color pix.

I can’t recall what the others had, but I ordered “Rooty-tootie fresh ‘nfruity pancakes.” They came in a large, but not behemothian, stack. On a nearby side table were a half dozen bottles of sweet pourable goo. I selected blueberry sauce and recalled the Twin Sisters in Malad City, Idaho. “Why Not ?” is my motto. Go for the unusual. That’s why we once spent two days in Kirkaldy, Scotland which is hardly a magnetic attraction for tourists.

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