

Ica Opre: Young woman in her new family in the 1980s – “My mother-in-law taught me the tricks of cooking”

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The recollection below is by one of the local contributors of our participatory research projects in Tiszavasvári. She joined our research team in summer 2022 and lives in the centre of town. She worked as a nursery school teacher and later headteacher in the nursery located near one of the Roma neighbourhoods, different from the one where our project is based. She has researched local folklore as an independent scholar. Her family live nearby.

I got married in the early 80s. After the wedding, we moved in to my husband's family home. He was an only child, so us staying with his family did not bother anyone. We lived in a newly-built two-bedroom house, with one bathroom and toilet. Three generations lived together there, as my mother-in-law's mother also lived with us. She was 81 at the time. Everything was new to me. The environment, a house with a bathroom and toilet inside, hot- and cold-water taps... The kitchen had a real sink inside! All of this was not available in most detached houses in the countryside at the time. The heating in the rooms was provided by oil and ceramic stoves. Where I came from, this was considered to be “posh”.

I was surrounded by a new environment and new customs, to which I got happily accustomed. My mother-in-law's family was rather large and impressively united, especially as long as grandmother was alive. Cherishing and maintaining the old customs and traditions struck me as the breeze of something new. Celebrating Easter was one of these new experiences, for example. As they were Greek Catholics, they kept quite strictly to all their traditions. True, they were not church-goers (it was the early 80s after all) but I have fond memories of cooking the Easter meals, the feverish preparations on Easter Monday, setting the table in the front room, and making a lot of coffee, which would be kept warm in thermos bottles for those coming from afar. In the afternoon, my mother-in-law sat next to the window, and laughed out loud when a young man, having just completed the Easter rite of spraying water on young women, fell off his bike and ended up in the ditch. Accidents like this happened due to all the blessings young men received, accompanied by a drink or two of strong fruit brandy.

My mother-in-law taught me all the tricks of cooking, too. As a young girl, I did not learn these kinds of things at home as I lived in halls from the age of 14, and my family was poor anyway, so, big feasts were off the table, so to speak. In my husband's family I got a glimpse of how people stick together on the occasion of weddings. The week before the wedding, each day had a task of its own for both women and men. Men took care of the butchering of animals and the delivery of large cauldrons and cooking pots, benches, and tables. The women baked the biscuits and cakes, rolled the cocoa rolls, plucked the chickens, peeled the vegetables, and sorted the rice. At that time, like we do with peas or lentils, rice was also poured out on a table and selected almost grain-by-grain and prepared for cooking.

I learned the hierarchal relationships of old families from them, too. Here, I could see what deep respect younger siblings showed to the older ones. They addressed them using formal ways of address and grammar, like *vous* in French, which would seem very strange today. My mother-in-law, for example, as younger sister, called her brothers *Brother Jani* and *Brother Pista*, talking to them using formal grammar to show respect. Older siblings' words, criticism, and opinion was regarded as sacrosanct. Young siblings sought the eldest brother's views and advice in all decisions. I also witnessed the importance of true unity and mutual support within the family when we built our house. Later I raised my children in this spirit, too.