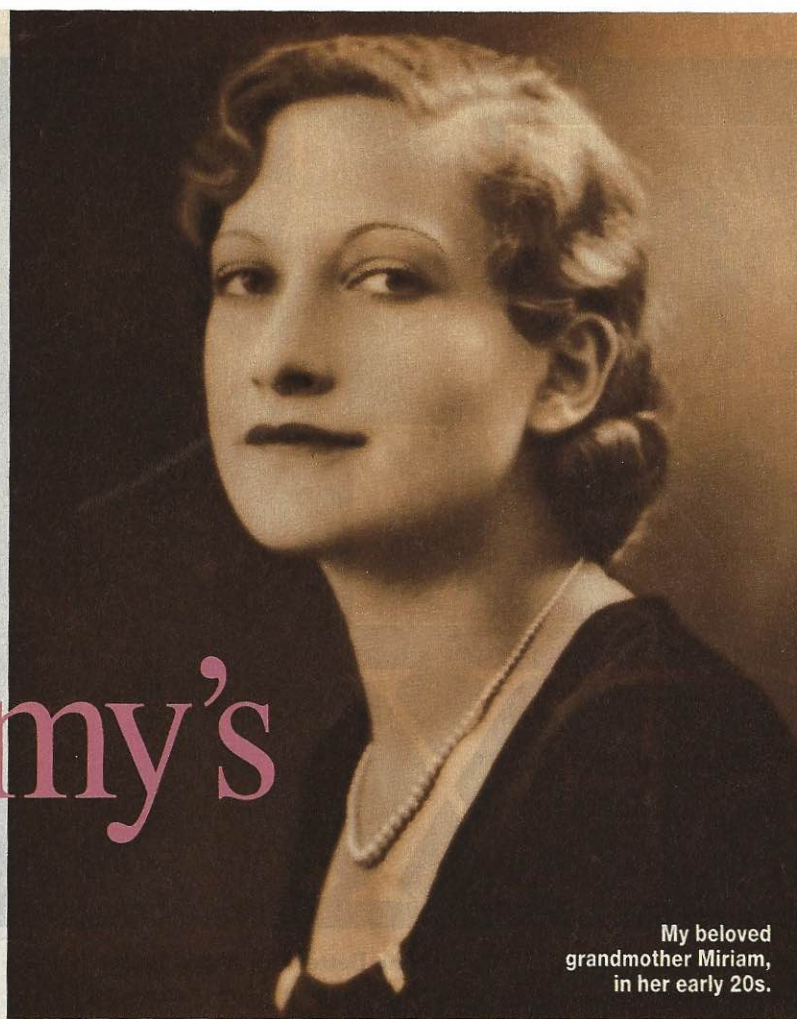


Nothing I learned in school could ever compare with her wisdom on how to live, love, laugh and appreciate the little things.

BY SHERYL BERK

Grammy's gifts



My beloved grandmother Miriam, in her early 20s.

“What are you looking for?” my husband, Peter, asks, watching me dig through a box in one of our closets.

“Stuffed cabbage,” I reply. It was always a family Hanukkah tradition, served with crisp latkes. I haven’t seen my grandmother Miriam’s recipe in years, but I know exactly where to find it: in the large cardboard carton of mementos I had labeled “From Grammy” when I was 13 years old and she passed away.

The box contains photos of a chubby toddler splashing around a pool in water wings. When I was terrified I’d drown in the deep end, Miriam taught me how to float on my back, supporting my shoulders and assuring me she’d never let go.

The box also holds a graduation card with the words “You always make me so proud. Love, Grammy” scrawled in a thin, shaky hand. And it has her gold wedding band, the one I wore when I took my marriage vows last January.

Miriam knew the most amazing things. She could spell *Mississippi* backwards. She could keep an omelet from sticking to the pan. She could comb the knots out of my long, matted hair without hurting me one bit.

When I was six and she was in her 60s, she showed me how to do the Charleston. “I was an extra in a Gloria Swanson movie, you know,” she’d say, swinging one leg high out in front of her to demonstrate. “It was a party scene with lots of people dancing, and the director put me up front because he thought I had great legs.”

On the nights when my parents went out to dinner, we’d dress up in bangles and boas, and belt out “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” to an imaginary audience. My grandmother and I were kindred spirits. We laughed and cried at the same things, and we understood each other. I told her we’d travel around the world together, and she showed me how to touch the stars by closing one eye and balancing them on my fingertips.

She taught me how to paint my toenails a perfect shade of Redcoat Red and never gave away my secret when I stalked around the house in sweat socks. When my mother would scold me for hanging upside down on the monkey bars or riding my bike with no hands, Grammy would nod and wink. “Go on,” she’d whisper in my ear. “Do something spectacular with your life.”

She was the first person who ever encouraged me to dream and to put those dreams down on paper. When she became almost completely bedridden and shook with Parkinson’s disease, I would sneak into her room—a makeshift space we had walled off from the dining room—in the middle of the night and crawl under her covers. We’d stare up at the ceiling, watching the darkness fade into dawn, and tell each other tales. We called the cracks in the plaster our cloud pictures and squinted to see an assortment of characters take shape in the shadows.

“Right there’s a one-legged ballerina,” she told me once, pointing her chin in the direction of a paint splatter. “Do you see it?”

I nodded, straining to make out a woman in a tutu *en pointe*. “She lost her leg because she danced too much in tight shoes,” she whispered so my parents down the hall wouldn’t hear us and chase me back to bed. “She should never have bought them on sale at Macy’s.”

Miriam’s lessons are the ones that stuck with me—not all the algebra formulas or Spanish-verb conjugations I studied for years. She taught ▶



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Grammy's gifts

(continued from p. 110)

me important basics: how much constitutes a pinch of salt, how to use seltzer to get a stain out of a silk blouse, how to sew on a button so it stays put. She helped me to appreciate the simple things, like cream-cheese-and-tomato sandwiches, towels warm from the dryer and the quiet moments at dusk when the whole world is draped in a curtain of blue light. She liked the springtime most of all, when the air was warm and the breezes gentle. "This is soft weather," she explained to me. "Not too hot, not too cool, just soft."

But I don't need to rummage through my box to recall Miriam's lessons. My senses often bring them and her back to me: the gardenia fragrance of her hand lotion at a department-store counter, an Andrews Sisters tune playing on Muzak in the dentist's office, the taste of her favorite sticky-sweet cherry cordial. Sometimes I see the back of a head on the bus and recognize the snowy-white hair falling in soft waves. Or



Me, age two, and Miriam.

I catch myself laughing her laugh, a hearty, joyous cry that makes my shoulders shake and my cheeks ache.

And I'm reminded of all those little words of wisdom she instilled in me, about life and love and loss: "Every time a door closes, a window opens," "There's a lid for every pot" and "Don't cry over spilled milk."

My husband calls these little

phrases old wives' tales and teases me when I tug on my left ear each time I sneeze as she advised me (to ward off bad luck). But I cherish her sayings. Miriam's lessons have gotten me through many terrible times—when I lost my job, when I broke up with a boyfriend, when I failed a test or when I simply burned dinner.

As I stir a big, boiling pot of stuffed cabbage (see recipe, *opposite*) on my stove while our menorah burns brightly on the windowsill, I can picture the past as if it were yesterday: My sister, Debbie, and I are spinning a dreidel and snacking on chocolate Hanukkah candy coins, called gelt, as my mother and grandmother work diligently in the kitchen. Miriam sprinkles a dash of sugar into the pot of cabbage for sweetness and squeezes in just enough lemon juice to "give it a kick."

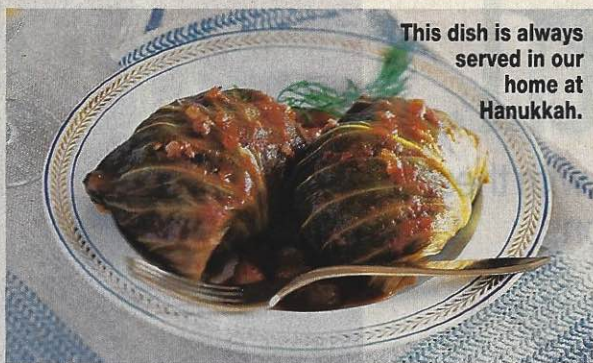
And I can't help thinking life is like that: sometimes sweet, sometimes sour and always a challenge to balance and blend both parts perfectly.

Peter and I eat dinner that night, and it's delicious—we help ourselves to seconds and thirds. My grandmother would have been proud. ■

COURTESY OF JUDY KAHN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBERT JACOBS; RECIPE DEVELOPED BY MIRIAM HORWITZ; FOOD STYLIST, WILLIAM SMITH; PROP STYLIST, LAURA HART

Grammy's gifts



This dish is always served in our home at Hanukkah.

Miriam's Stuffed Cabbage Rolls

- 4 qt water
- 1½ tsp salt
- 1 (3-lb) head green cabbage, tough outer-most leaves discarded

Stuffing

- 2 lb ground beef sirloin or ground turkey
- 1 (14½-oz) can peeled, diced tomatoes in juice, drained (1½ cups)

- 1 cup finely chopped onion
- 1 Golden Delicious apple, peeled, cored, shredded
- ⅓ cup uncooked converted rice
- 1 Tbsp each salt and vegetable oil
- 1 tsp each paprika and sugar
- ½ tsp pepper

Sauce

- 3 cups chicken broth
- 3 Tbsp fresh lemon juice

- ½ cup each tomato paste and finely chopped onion
- ⅓ cup golden raisins
- 4 tsp sugar
- ½ tsp each paprika, salt and pepper

1. In large pot, bring the water and salt to a boil. Cut out core from bottom of cabbage. Remove 12 large outer leaves from cabbage; add leaves to boiling water; simmer 3 minutes, until pliable; drain in colander. Separate smaller leaves from remaining cabbage.
2. Stuffing: In large bowl, mix ingredients.
3. Sauce: In medium bowl, whisk chicken broth, 2 Tbsp lemon juice and the tomato paste to dissolve paste. Add onion, raisins, 2 tsp sugar, the paprika, salt and pepper.
4. Line bottom of wide 8-qt pot with small cabbage leaves in even layer. Place 1 large cabbage leaf on work surface

- with thick end closest to you. Place ½ cup stuffing across center, shaping mixture into thick log. Fold sides of leaf over ends of stuffing; roll up from near end. Place, seam side down, on top of cabbage leaves in pot. Stuff remaining large cabbage leaves.
5. Pour sauce over cabbage rolls in pot. Bring sauce to a boil. Cover pot; simmer 2½ hours, until cabbage is very tender, basting rolls with sauce occasionally.
 6. With slotted spoon, remove rolls to warm serving platter. Discard cabbage leaves from bottom of pot. Boil remaining sauce 10 minutes or until reduced by half. Stir in remaining 1 Tbsp lemon juice and 2 tsp sugar. Place 2 rolls on each of 6 plates, spooning some sauce over each serving.

■ Makes 6 servings. Per serving: 424 calories, 39 g protein, 35 g carbohydrate, 14 g fat, 105 mg cholesterol, 2,201 mg sodium.

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