

Turning 'Space' into 'Place' with Food Immigrant Women's Food Narratives in Post-1945 North Bay, Ontario

Jennifer Hough Evans

Volume 106, Number 2, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050694ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050694ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hough Evans, J. (2014). Turning 'Space' into 'Place' with Food: Immigrant Women's Food Narratives in Post-1945 North Bay, Ontario. *Ontario History*, 106(2), 214–234. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050694ar>

Article abstract

This article on food, identity, and place-making, examines the lives of twelve immigrant women in post-1945 North Bay, Ontario. It demonstrates how these women, as they navigated their way through kitchen and grocery store spaces, negotiated their sense of place, in connection with their identities, their memories brought from home, and their material contexts.

Turning 'Space' into 'Place' with Food:

Immigrant Women's Food Narratives in Post-1945

North Bay, Ontario¹

by Jennifer Hough Evans

Abstract

This article on food, identity, and place-making, examines the lives of twelve immigrant women in post-1945 North Bay, Ontario. It demonstrates how these women, as they navigated their way through kitchen and grocery store spaces, negotiated their sense of place, in connection with their identities, their memories brought from home, and their material contexts.

Résumé: *Nous examinons ici la vie de douze femmes immigrantes de North Bay, Ontario, après 1945. Nous voyons comment ces femmes, qui avaient apporté une culture culinaire de leur pays d'origine, se sont adaptées aux possibilités offertes par les produits disponibles dans les épicereries de North Bay et ainsi à la vie ontarienne.*

It's 2009 and Rosa Valentti sits in her grey striped recliner, surrounded by family photographs that cover nearly every spare inch of her white-painted walls. The images chronicle a family timeline, as new faces appear and in some instances, disappear, hairstyles and outfits

change and yet, what remains the same is the strong, motherly figure seated at the centre of it all. Over on the windowsill of her first-floor apartment are three tomato plant seedlings absorbing the late morning sun. As she rises to show me the plants, Valentti articulates conflicted emotions, noting she is proud that they have taken root and grown, but sad they will soon go to her son for planting in his garden. "It's hard," she says, casting her eyes to the floor.²

Italian-born Valentti, her husband, and five-year-old son immigrated to Canada in 1959. Her first taste of Canadian food came after an eight-day trip aboard the *Raphaela*. With little more than the proverbial suitcase to their name, the family purchased what they could afford in Halifax: a loaf of white bread. Chuckling at her reaction to the taste of this bread, she recalled: "I told my husband, if I have to eat the bread, I want to go home. I want to go back to Italy!" Soon afterwards, they

¹ I would like to thank Karen Srigley, and especially Franca Iacovetta for reading various versions of this paper, and recommending thoughtful changes. As well, thanks to Tory Tronrud and reviewers for their helpful comments. Funding for this research was provided by the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program, the Jeanne Armour Graduate Scholarship and the University of Toronto.

² Rosa Valentti, interview with author, North Bay, Ontario, 30 April 2009. Unless otherwise noted all interviews were conducted by the author in North Bay, Ontario. Women's names and aspects of their stories that might be used to identify them have been changed in accordance with their wishes.

journeyed to North Bay, Ontario, where they shared living space with her father and brother. Like most Italian immigrants coming to Canada at this time, Valentti and her family were sponsored by kinfolk and the shared living arrangement allowed them to save enough money to pay back their debt and eventually own their own home.³ It took a while, she said circling her hands together, to become comfortable with their new surroundings. At first, it involved finding familiar Italian bread and other ingredients and, two years later, after buying a house in North Bay, physically transforming their backyard by turning the grass over to create a garden filled with tomato plants. For a woman who grimaced in disgust at the mere mention of the canned sauces my mother used to serve me, her ability to make sauce from scratch by drying tomatoes on wood boards, much as she had in southern Italy, was central to her ability to cultivate a sense of place—that is, establish a new home to which she felt she belonged—in North Bay. It was also important to her sense of identity not simply as an immigrant woman but as a wife and mother and family-food provider, an identity reflected back in those hanging family portraits. It was not only being able to reproduce familiar foods, but also that the food her labour produced meant her children could grow up on what she considered

nutritious foods. No longer physically able to fulfill this role, an elderly Valentti now struggles with the loss of this highly gendered marker of self-identity.⁴

Drawing primarily on a set of in-depth interviews with Valentti and eleven other immigrant women who lived in North Bay between 1945 and 1975, this article uses their food memories and, in particular, memories involving grocery stores and kitchen spaces, to explore some of the deeply gendered aspects of women's lived experiences. It finds that women used food as a form of place-making, as a means to navigate as well as to shape a sense of belonging and personal identity in new and unfamiliar contexts. To help provide more general context, and some points of comparisons, this article also draws on interviews conducted with Canadian-born women in North Bay as well as the findings of other studies of women in post-1945 Canada. Such comparisons, as we shall see, render more significant findings about the relationship between food and identity formation.

Taken together, the twelve women whose food narratives are examined here had lived in eight different countries across Europe and the United Kingdom.⁵ In North Bay, six of them had worked outside the home as teachers, domestic workers, and nurses until they had children, at which point they became stay-at-

³ More than 90 per cent of postwar Italians came to Canada came as Valentti had, through sponsorship by kin, whereas the average for immigrants from all other nations was 47 per cent and for those considered racially desirable, like Germans, below 40 per cent. Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hard Working People: Italian Immigrants in postwar Toronto* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 46-49.

⁴ Valentti, interview.

⁵ The breakdown of interviewees: English (2), French (1), German (3), Italian (2), Latvian (1), Scottish (1), Swiss (1), and Welsh (1).

home mothers, with many of them returning to work only after their children had reached their late teens. But the three who returned shortly after their first child's birth did so mainly to bring financial stability to the family economy. Most of the women straddled the divide between working- and middle-class, their efforts to stretch resources through smart shopping, gardening, and cooking being essential to satisfying family food needs. The food stories these women shared in 2009 and 2012 tell us much about the positive and negative relationships they created with the physical spaces they inhabited, whether a family-run grocery store, their employer's kitchen or the city of North Bay itself. Social and feminist geographers have found it analytically useful to use the categories of "space" and "place" to distinguish between the sites one merely inhabits (space) and those to which one feels a sense of intimacy, familiarity, and real sense of location (place).⁶ When applied to this collection of oral histories, these concepts help us

better understand the specific contexts in which these women's daily activities took place, how they handled particular situations, whether ordinary or extraordinary, and how their attachment to their physical surroundings reflected larger changes in their self-identity and/or struggles both for some continuity in their lives and for carving out a new home and life in this northern Ontario city.

A focus on immigrant women in North Bay also provides a corrective to a northern Ontario immigrant literature that, for understandable reasons, has been heavily biased in favour of men, whether in mining and lumber camps or boarding houses.⁷ Although there have been important contributions to our knowledge of women's lives in northern Ontario by Karen Dubinsky and Stacey Zembrzycki among others, a food-centred analysis contributes to a still limited understanding of immigrant women's identities, relationships and experiences in the North.⁸ This article also makes a contribution to

⁶ Sarah De Leeuw, "Intimate Colonialisms: the material and experienced places of British Columbia's Residential Schools," *Canadian Geographer* 51:3 (2007), 342; Michael Lansing, "Different Methods, Different Places: Feminist Geography and New Directions in US Western History," *Journal of Historical Geography* 29:2 (2003), 231.

⁷ Nancy M. Forestell, "Bachelors, Boarding Houses and Blind Pigs: Gender Construction in a Multi-Ethnic Mining Camp, 1909-1920," in *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s*, edited by Franca Iacovetta, Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 251-90; Varpu Linstrom-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto: Multicultural Society of Ontario, 1988); Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁸ Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Stacey Zembrzycki, "'We Didn't Have a Lot of Money, but We Had Food': Ukrainians and Their Depression-Era Food Memories," in *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History*, edited by Franca Iacovetta, Valerie J. Korinek and Marlene Epp (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 131-39; Forestell, "Bachelors, Boarding Houses and Blind Pigs"; "Women, Gender and the Provincial North," in *Northern Visions: New Perspectives of the North in Canadian History*, edited by Kerry Abel and Ken S. Coates (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), 107-116.

the Canadian and wider international literature in food history and food studies, particularly feminist works, because it provides us with immigrant women's insight into their everyday, domestic lives. Twelve immigrant women shared intimate details of their lives during their oral history interviews; their interviews provide us with new knowledge about food and cooking experiences as well as allowing us to hear about their life struggles and successes based on the "flexible and infinitely varied contours" of their lives.⁹ Taken together, their food and life stories suggest how immigrant women's individual identities, pre-migration memories and life expectations and actualities informed how they negotiated a sense of belonging in their new setting.

By focusing closely on the interconnections between space, place, and identity, this article contributes a spatial perspective to food history and memory studies. Building on the central premise of the recently published *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada*—

that often our memories give our physical surroundings meaning and significance in our lives¹⁰—it confirms the value of an approach that appreciates how a sense of place expresses our relationship, or subjective attachment, to our physical surroundings. That relationship can be positive, as in a beloved family home, or negative, as in a source of hurt, exclusion, and exploitation.¹¹ Memories can also serve as a source of mental escape, as happened with Jewish women in concentration camps who, as Myrna Goldenberg records, shared food stories that, at least temporarily, transferred them back to the kitchens and homes with which they identified strong feelings of comfort and family.¹² Memories are also influenced by experiences of mobility and displacement requiring us to listen to the advice of feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey, who suggests we conceptualize place as "a product of interconnecting flows—of *routes* rather than *roots*" (a static concept).¹³ In listening carefully to immigrant women's stories of food and

⁹ R.W. Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and Practices of Resettlement on Salt Spring Island, 1859-1891* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), xx; Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 2-3.

¹⁰ James Opp and John C. Walsh, eds., *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

¹¹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7, 43.

¹² Myrna Goldenberg, "Food Talk: Gendered Responses to Hunger in the Concentration Camp," in *Experiences and Expressions: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*, edited by Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 161-79.

¹³ Cresswell, *Place*, 13; Massey discusses this concept in her chapter, "A Global Sense of Place." She argues that we integrate the local and the global, and instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries, "they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. But where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself...." But where a large portion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself. See Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 154-55.

life in postwar North Bay, we see how their identities were formed both in intimate, local settings (the kitchen or grocery store) and in larger contexts such as their nation of birth or adoption.¹⁴

This article also brings a place-making approach to rapidly expanding scholarship on food and migration. As the editors of the recently published *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics*, observe, “many of us are fascinated by food because it is such a fundamental part of our lived reality, past and present, and of memory, good and bad.”¹⁵ The immigrant women studied here have vivid memories of food deprivation not only before and during the Second World War but also afterwards. Such memories provide a stark contrast to the real and idealized food circumstances they encountered in Canada, even serving to structure in part their memories of their pre- and post-migration experiences.¹⁶ Furthermore, as we shall see, the women interviewed used food as a tool for place-making; the foods they chose to purchase, prepare and serve their families reveal their attempts to situate themselves in their new contexts,

defining relationships, whether close or distant, with their new and old physical surroundings. In some instances, their food choices demonstrate a desire to maintain a connection with the homelands they left (both willingly and unwilling) even if efforts to recreate dishes did not always turn out as remembered. In other cases, food and cooking decisions tell us about women wanting to adopt a new national identity or trying to leave behind painful memories and family relationships. In still other cases, food decisions illustrate practical concerns with family finances and budgeting and reactions to children’s demands for particular foods or to the real food-related limitations encountered in North Bay and other communities across northern Ontario. Indeed, these women’s interviews reveal not only how pre- and post-migration experiences informed their identities and foodways, but also how it shaped their attempts at creating a new feeling of home and belonging for themselves and their families.

All of the women interviewed for this study came to Canada between 1947 and

¹⁴ Tracy Poe, “The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1947,” *American Studies International* 37:1 (1999), 6-8; Jeffrey M. Pilcher, “Who Chased out the ‘Chili Queens’? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880-1943,” *Food and Foodways* 16 (2008), 174-76; 181-82; Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: the Material, the Moral and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). See esp. chaps. 3 and 9.

¹⁵ Franca Iacovetta, Valerie J. Korinek and Marlene Epp, eds., “Introduction,” in *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 4.

¹⁶ Marlene Epp, “The Semiotics of Zwieback: Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women,” in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, edited by Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta and Frances Swyripa (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 314-40; Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2006). See esp. chap. 6; Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for American: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001).

1962, a period during which the Canadian government re-opened its doors to large-scale immigration, especially from Britain, Europe (the highest sources being Germany and Italy) and the United States, while also maintaining a racially selective white immigration policy.¹⁷ In response to a variety of domestic and international factors, such as labour shortages, Cold War politics, and humanitarian calls to house Europe's refugees, Canada admitted 2.1 million newcomers by 1967, an influx that increased the nation's foreign-born population twentyfold, but did not alter its racial make-up.¹⁸ Whether refugees or volunteer immigrants, the women featured here belonged to white European groups, though this did not necessarily protect them from Canadian suspicion or hostility. The challenge of regulating an ethnically diverse population, and encouraging its loyalty to and conformity with Canada's mainstream social and moral codes, greatly concerned Ottawa,

especially as many immigrants sought to maintain connections to the culture and homeland they had been forced or compelled to physically leave. But nor were immigrants the only groups watched; so, too, were Indigenous Canadians, Québécois, and other Canadians considered deviant or dangerous in some way, including women.¹⁹ In regard to women and food-related practices, for example, food nutrition experts regularly dismissed the knowledge and customs of immigrant, poor, and Indigenous women as backward and unhealthy, and encouraged them to abandon "primitive folkways" for modern shopping and homemaking practices.²⁰ In cities like North Bay, St. Catharines, and Toronto, the Canadian Red Cross (CRC) offered cooking classes designed to teach young newcomer wives and mothers "eager to learn to cook and keep house the 'Canadian way'" how to use "Canadian equipment, wooden spoons and measuring cups" along with the basics of "plain

¹⁷ Iacovetta, *Such Hard Working People*, 22-25; Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers*, 9-10; Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe* (Toronto: Lester & Opren Dennys, 1982), 5-8; Donald H. Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1869-1994* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Inc., 1995), 171-86.

¹⁸ Iacovetta lists approximate totals from 1946-67. These include more than 800,000 Britons, more than 400,000 Italians, almost 300,000 Germans and more than 240,000 Americans; See Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers*, 6-10; Avery, *Reluctant Host*, 171-86; 146-48; Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many*, 5; Iacovetta, *Such Hard Working People*, 24-25. For a discussion on the historical roots of whiteness in immigration policy, see Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). See esp. chaps. 6 and 7.

¹⁹ Krista Walters, "A National Priority": Nutrition Canada's *Survey* and the Disciplining of Aboriginal Bodies, 1964-75," *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History*, edited by Franca Iacovetta, Valerie J. Korinek and Marlene Epp (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 433-51; Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900-1950* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), chap. 2; Heidi Bohaker and Franca Iacovetta, "Making Aboriginal People 'Immigrants Too': A Comparison of Citizenship Programs for Newcomers and Indigenous Peoples in Postwar Canada, 1940s-1960s," *Canadian Historical Review* 90:3 (2009), 439; 449-51.

²⁰ Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers*, chap. 6; Walters, "A National Priority."

cooking economically.”²¹ What was missing from these and other educational efforts involving food, however, was some recognition of the deeper meanings food held for these women. One British war bride who had participated in these CRC classes told the *North Bay Nugget*, the city’s newspaper, that although they were helpful, people had to understand that many new Canadians “miss[ed] things” to which they had been accustomed all their lives, in her case “English-style deep-dish pies and custards that invariably accompany fruit in English desserts.”²² Food could provide comfort as women dealt with the often chaotic and disorienting process of immigration. Women’s memories give us an entry into intimate home spaces like the kitchen, allowing us to consider not just what women were supposed to cook or how, but what they wanted to cook, what they could afford to cook both in terms of time and money, what ingredients and equipment they could access in the city and home in which they lived and, finally, what food meant to them.

Feminist migration scholars have produced some of the most effective oral histories of food, and their analyses have highlighted such important factors as the lasting impact of wartime and migration

memories on one’s identity, the influence that changes in material circumstances can have on one’s gender roles, class status, ethnic identity and national commitment, and the different ways in which immigrant women’s choices and strategies involve a negotiation between pre- and post-migration contexts.²³ Similarly, this article draws a concept of ethnicity, not as a biological given, but as a social “invention,” that undergoes change, and as a process in which the immigrant subject was always actively engaged. Acknowledging women’s shared experiences (all of them, for instance, felt a sense of relief at learning that food was more plentiful in Canada, even if they could not afford it), this article looks to write a history at the level of the individual, exploring how each woman’s personality, family drama and powerful memories influenced the way in which she entered and negotiated the spaces where food practices took place.

*Dear Lord, Where is
North Bay?
The Local Context*

The women featured here arrived in North Bay at a time when it was experiencing population growth fuelled in

²¹ “Most Brides Happy Over Homes in Canada,” *North Bay Nugget*, 2 March 1946; “News Bulletin,” *Annual Report of the Canadian Red Cross*, September 1946; “Chit Chat: Homemakers Wanted,” *North Bay Nugget*, 28 April 1947.

²² “Most Brides Happy Over Homes in Canada.”

²³ A memory project requires an oral history methodology and efforts here draw on two decades of feminist oral history and its contribution to our understanding of how and what women remember, what form their recollections take, and what layers of meaning they reveal. These scholars also note the importance of the context, alerting us to the ways in which an interviewer’s subjectivity, or the shifting power relations between interviewer and narrator, also shape the memory. In listening to immigrant women’s stories, this article considers not only what they say but also how they actively construct their stories through

part by immigration. Between 1951 and 1971, the population had grown from 17,944 to 49,185. Part of this growth was the amalgamation of North Bay with the neighbouring West Ferris and Widfield townships in 1968. In addition, the foreign-born had more than doubled, from 1,856 to 4,720. Mirroring national patterns, the numerically largest groups came from Britain (38 per cent), Europe (37 per cent), and the United States (10 per cent) with the Italians and Germans the largest groups, representing 14 per cent and 9 per cent respectively of North Bay's immigrant population in 1971.²⁴ The large Italian population spurred the creation of the Davedi Club in 1953, "formed to bring together those of Italian ancestry."²⁵ In her interview, Elfriede Bremermann also remembered socializing with other members of the Germa-

nia club in North Bay where she spoke German with others, sung German songs and ate German foods.²⁶ Jewish women living in the city belonged to the Edith Sylvia Chapter of Hadassah, which at its peak had forty members.²⁷ Women also had a Greek Club, where in the middle of the summer they had a "big parade" to celebrate Greece's Independence Day.²⁸ While there were these larger ethno-religious groups who formed communities and their own organizations, their strength varied and there remained daily and meaningful interactions with others outside their specific ethno-religious group. In addition, for those individuals who belonged to an ethno-religious group few in number, they would not find the community support that they would have in larger cities such as Toronto or Montreal or even more north-

word choice, body language, silences, and emotional cues like laughter. See Pamela Sugiman, "Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, edited by Mona Gleason and Adele Perry, 5th ed. (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2006), 242-263; Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 87-100; Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11-26; Katrina Srigley, *Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-era City, 1929-1939* (Toronto: University Press, 2010); Sheyfali Saujani, "Empathy and Authority in Oral Testimony: Feminist Debates, Multicultural Mandates, and Reassessing the Interviewer and Her 'Disagreeable' Subjects," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 45:90 (2011), 361-91.

²⁴ Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Population: General Characteristics*, vol. 1, "Table 48, Population by birthplace for sex, for incorporated cities, towns and villages of 10,000 and over, 1951" (Ottawa 1951); Canada, Bureau of the Census, *Population: General Characteristics*, vol. 1, part III, "Table 37, Population by birthplace and sex, for incorporated cities, towns and other municipal subdivisions of 10,000 population and over, 1971" (Ottawa 1971).

²⁵ "Davedi Club: The First 25 Years, 1953-1978," Institute for Community Studies and Oral History, Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario.

²⁶ Elfriede Bremermann, interview, 10 June 2009.

²⁷ Gettie Brown, interview, 25 February 2012.

²⁸ Eva Wardlaw, interview, 27 August 2012.

ern locations like Sudbury.²⁹ Indeed, the majority of the immigrant women recalled that they most often socialized with neighbours or other parents regardless of their ethnic, religious or linguistic backgrounds. Elisabeth Meier recalled her Italian-born neighbour teaching her how to make proper tomato sauce.³⁰ Rosa Valentti recalled verbally sharing her recipes with English-Canadian neighbours.³¹ These were busy women looking for other wives and mothers with similar goals, family responsibilities and concerns.

In contrast to the English, French, and Indigenous women (and men) of the region of northeastern Ontario, many of whom saw North Bay as a big city where one visited the doctor, picked up certain grocery items or spent a day at the rodeo, immigrant women who hailed from metropolitan centres like Paris and London considered it a backwater. As German-born Elfredie Bremermann frankly said of her arrival in 1961, “I thought, oh no! There is nothing going on here.”³² The difference was indeed noticed by Swiss-born Annemarie Vos who made the transition from working as a domestic in what she described as English and Paris-

ian “manors,” including the home of the English editor for *Good Housekeeping*, to living with her new husband in a “little shack” located in a lumber camp just outside of North Bay.³³ None of the interviewees desired to move to North Bay but most agreed for practical reasons, primarily the promise of jobs, usually for their husbands, and the comforts of family. Charlotte Aimes, for example, was a French war bride who arrived in North Bay in 1948 because her husband landed an accounting job.³⁴ Along with some 25,000 other single German women, Lottie Frenssen arrived in Canada under contract as a domestic servant in 1954.³⁵ Having calculated that at least thirty of the thirty-five German “girls” who had travelled on her ship to Canada were headed for domestic placements in Toronto, her reaction, as she vividly recalled for me, was: “I want to escape Germany. I don’t want to go back into it!” On seeing some advertisements for domestics in North Bay, she wondered “Dear Lord, Where is North Bay?”—echoing the sentiments of others—but still easily decided in favour of locating in what she saw as a less Germanic space.³⁶ As they settled

²⁹ Françoise Noël, *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario: The Interwar Years* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 9-10; Stacey Zembrzycki, “Memory, Identity, and the Challenge of Community among Ukrainians in the Sudbury Region, 1901-1939” (Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 2007).

³⁰ Elisabeth Meier, interview, 8 April 2009.

³¹ Valentti, interview.

³² Bremermann, interview.

³³ Marianne Buck, interview, 8 May 2012.

³⁴ Charlotte Aimes, interview, 27 April 2009.

³⁵ Alexander Freund, “A Canadian Family Talks About Oma’s Life in Nazi Germany: Three Generational Interviews and Communicative Memory,” *Oral History Forum/d’histoire orale: Special Issue 29* (2009), 9.

³⁶ Lottie Frenssen, interview, 3 June 2009.

in this city, women like these would find their food and cooking experiences influenced by a constellation of factors, including the conditions of the spaces they encountered and the memories of home they brought with them.

Even before arriving in North Bay, some women had heard stories of northern Canada (in Europe or on the voyage) that influenced their first impressions. The *Nugget* carefully documented the initial impressions of arriving British war brides. Having become the centre point for a developing northern Ontario transportation network, North Bay was a gathering site for war brides heading for what North Bay Red Cross liaison Mrs. E.L. Sherman called “difficult spots to reach” further west and north.³⁷ After eating “everything they put down in front of me,” one British war bride, on a layover in North Bay in April 1946, asked, “where’s all the snow piles they told us we would have to climb through up here in northern Ontario?” To which the Red Cross worker quipped: “Just wait a few months and you’ll meet all the snow you may have heard about!”³⁸ A similar response was evoked a few years later when sisters from Surrey, England decided to visit the city; they were struck by the “miles upon

miles of unbroken snowscapes,” which to their surprise did not keep the locals from enjoying a winter’s drive in the “vast wide-open spaces.”³⁹ For many newcomers and visitors, images of snow banks in April, along with “stories of Indians and cowboys, wilderness and... ranches, and other tales told by Canadian pranksters” informed their expectations and first impressions of this northern city.⁴⁰ For the women interviewed, adapting to this northern “wilderness” involved building a life and home for their family and this included the challenge of learning to navigate kitchen and supermarket spaces.

Place-making in Kitchen and Grocery Store Spaces

Many women, including scholars, view the kitchen as an “unwanted burden,” yet as food historian Psyche Williams-Forsion reminds us, this space “can also be synonymous with agency, self-definition, and self-awareness, given the social interactions that occur in and around it.” Kitchens are sites of production and consumption, but, depending primarily upon women’s decisions, they can also “nurture and sustain or reject and refuse” people.⁴¹ For the immigrant women interviewed, the kitchen allowed

³⁷ “New Bulletin,” September 1946; The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) had made the city a divisional point, the Grand Trunk Railway had extended to North Bay, gaining access to the CPR line, and the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario railway had made North Bay its headquarters and southern terminus. See Noël, *Family and Community Life in Northeastern Ontario*, 16-19.

³⁸ “15 War Brides Arrive in N. Bay,” *North Bay Nugget*, 8 April 1946.

³⁹ “English Ladies Say N. Bay Finest Place in Canada,” *North Bay Nugget*, March 1949.

⁴⁰ “Most Brides Happy Over Homes in Canada,” *North Bay Nugget*, 2 March 1946.

⁴¹ Psyche Williams-Forsion, “Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household,” *Feminist Studies* 36:2 (2010), 458; 437-38; Joy Parr, “Modern Kitchen, Good Home, Strong Nation,” *Technology and Culture* 43:4 (2002), 660.

them to negotiate a sense of emotional attachment through the foods they cooked and technologies they adopted, though it was complicated by their identities, economic and familial circumstances, painful memories, and their desire, in some instances, to live elsewhere. In Welsh-born Frieda Kendall's interview, she recalled with a sense of bitterness still evident in her voice all these years later, the feeling of being "stuck" in North Bay. In 1964, she had followed her husband, who had been stationed at Canadian Forces Base North Bay. But after he died, unexpectedly, two years later, she could not afford to move and had to find a job to support herself and her two children. She did not have the kin support that many Canadian and even immigrant women enjoyed. As she put herself through college and later became a full-time teacher, it was often her children who would "start the meal at night" and "get things going" until she arrived home. This too was problematic for Kendall, especially in regards to her son's role in the kitchen. Positing strict gender roles, she explained, "I thought it was just the girl who should cook, not the boy, and he was always in the kitchen." Believing that her son was "not supposed to cook," she added: "I used to kick him out, I used to get annoyed."⁴² Kend-

all considered life in North Bay a struggle in part because her family situation did not conform to normative expectations: she was a single parent in the 1960s (the only one interviewed) and one of only three informants who worked outside the home while having children under ten years old. Like other working women, Kendall encountered the messages delivered by popular publications such as *Chatelaine* and *Good Housekeeping*, which may have lauded women who had jobs and outside interests, but nevertheless reminded them—through the expert advice of nutritionists and fashion food makers—that at the end of the workday, their priority still needed to be meal planning and preparation. Letting your children satisfy this food role, even partly, the experts suggested, could undermine a mother's confidence in her ability to both raise her children and hold down a job.⁴³ Kendall's story also suggests how family dynamics shaped perceptions of her home-life and North Bay. Supporting a family of three on a teacher's modest salary, she saw her son's presence in the kitchen as further evidence of the strain under which she lived.⁴⁴ Highlighting contradictions between gender prescriptions and reality, Kendall's memories of food, and especially the labour involved

⁴² Frieda Kendall, interview, 21 April 2009.

⁴³ Franca Iacovetta and Valerie Korinek, "Jell-O Salads, One-Stop Shopping and Maria the Home-maker: The Gender Politics of Food," in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, edited by Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta and Frances Swyripa (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 197-200; Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 200.

⁴⁴ See esp. "Introduction" in Sherrie Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 1-16.

to produce it, were further reminders that life in this northern Ontario city had not worked out as she had expected.

Along with turns in familial circumstances, pre-migration experiences could also inform the gender dynamics of the kitchen. A case in point is Lina Karakans, who learned to cook during the hungry war years in the countryside outside Riga, Latvia. Saying that she was born “out of wedlock” in 1930, Karakans explained that she had grown up in her grandparents’ home because her single mother worked in a nearby city as a live-in housekeeper. A poor family that lived mainly off food grown in their garden, Karakans recalled what a special treat it was when their soup had a bit of the pike her grandfather caught. With food in such short supply, her grandmother, she recalled, would not let her “mess around with” the cooking for fear that teaching a beginner could mean costly mistakes; the family could not afford to let any of their food supplies go to waste. This lack of training deeply affected Karakans’ perception of herself after she married and moved to North Bay in 1957. With an uneasy laugh, she recounted how in the early years of the marriage, her husband often took over the responsibilities in the kitchen, and then eventually taught her how to cook. Her husband, she said, was much more familiar and comfortable than she in this

space, and, indeed, “knew more about cooking than I did.” Reflecting on this arrangement, she added, “You see I am not typical, as far as womanhood in the house and cooking—I am not at all.”⁴⁵ Her sense of what was “typical” for a woman was no doubt informed by popular discourses of the day, which regularly suggested a woman’s self-worth, and proof of devotion to husband and family, was linked to her ability to cook meals from scratch, try out new recipes, and to wow her family with excellent meals.⁴⁶ For example, as a weekly columnist for the *Nugget*, Ruth Millet offered her own version of this homemaking ideology when she scolded “bored” women for making home life tedious for their children and husbands. As an antidote, she recommended her column (an “eye-opener”) and admonished them to use meal-planning schedules to ensure life “isn’t dull or uninspired.”⁴⁷ Another staff writer on the *Nugget*, Mary Moore, similarly promised women that “Cooking Can be Fun” (the name of her column) with recipes for pinwheel cookies, *Gone With the Wind* cake, and the “exotic” chicken balls in sauce (a heavily racialized reference).⁴⁸ These columnists, like others nationally, reminded their readers that extra time spent in the kitchen, creating new and surprising recipes, could perk up the everyday and keep families together. For an immigrant woman like Karakans,

⁴⁵ Lina Karakans, interview, 22 April 2009.

⁴⁶ Iacovetta and Korinek, “Jell-O Salads, One-Stop Shopping and Maria the Homemaker,” 200.

⁴⁷ Ruth Millet, “We, the Women,” *North Bay Nugget*, 13 February 1956.

⁴⁸ Mary Moore, “Cooking Can be Fun,” *North Bay Nugget*, 11 June 1960; 9 January 1965; 6 January 1965. As T.M. Padoongpatt notes exotic food inferred to readers non-white food. See “Too Hot to Handle,” *Radical History Review* 110 (2011), 85.

neither wishing nor capable of heeding the call, such popular ideals placed her at odds with the majority of women at the time. While this occasionally concerned her, the hunger that dominated her memories of home meant that her priority was having enough nutritious food to feed her family.

Much like Karakans, Eileen Wield arrived in Canada with notions about food and cooking that had been forged in wartime. Her recollections revealed just how strongly her wartime memories of food were shaped by the tremendous pressure she had felt at having to feed her two daughters after her husband enlisted in the war. “Oh, you probably spent all morning just waiting in line, you know, for groceries,” she said, adding that the rations received after all of the time spent queuing up in “long lines” were hardly enough to feed a family.⁴⁹ Women in Canada had also faced wartime shortages and rationing, and many rural homes still lacked electricity in the early postwar decades—all points to emerge in interviews with them. But what became clear in interviews were distinctions about the severity of rationing made by British women like Wield and a Welsh woman who explained, “we were on rations, REALLY rations...they make me laugh over here when they say they’ve been rationed.”⁵⁰ As their language suggests, such immigrant women remembered a greater degree of austerity than many Canadians, except-

ing Aboriginal Canadians. Wield and her family would eventually say good-bye to England in 1957 when Canadian friends offered her husband a job and their family a place to live. Her daughter, Pamela Handley, recalled her amazement at the meat-and-potatoes meal they were served on the night they arrived: “My God, you had... so much meat that it would have been a week’s ration in England—for a family.”⁵¹ It was the large portions of meat that differed most markedly from their diet back home. Her mother’s reaction, although similar in that she too was surprised by the amount of food, was also different from her daughter’s. As the family food provider, shopping for and especially preparing and cooking meals were sources of anxiety for her because she was inexperienced with Canadian foodways. One afternoon, for instance, Wield was left on her own in the kitchen to prepare a large turkey to feed both families. Never having cooked one before, she was deeply frustrated by her unfamiliarity with North American foods and kitchen technologies. Indeed, as she told her story, it was clear that the incident undercut her identity as a wife and mother because she, too, had assumed that she ought to have possessed all of the requisite cooking knowledge.⁵²

As such memories remind us, the kitchen was a space imbued with gendered expectations, but it also evoked different responses. Positive stories also

⁴⁹ Eileen Wield, interview, 22 March 2007.

⁵⁰ Kendall, interview.

⁵¹ Pamela Handley, interview, 8 May 2009.

⁵² Wield, interview; Handley, interview.

exist of how some immigrant women happily entered into the untried spaces of the well-equipped postwar kitchen and delighted in trying out the new-fangled appliances. In March 1946, the *Nugget* reported that British war brides arriving in Canada were “captivated by the countries [sic] household conveniences, such as electric washing machines, toasters, irons, vacuum cleaners, central heating and refrigerators.”⁵³ Having lived in conditions of war and migration, most of the women featured here had had to abandon their homes and suffered severe deprivation, lacking fuel, electricity, and food. The modern kitchen technologies represented a change, but also required learning new skills: an act as seemingly simple as turning on the kitchen radio while preparing dinner involved some form of adjustment.⁵⁴ This was also true of women who had grown up without electricity in rural northern Ontario and recalled their mother cooking on hard-to-control and “extremely hot” wood-burning stoves that also served to heat the kitchen.⁵⁵ As an immigrant domestic who arrived in North Bay in 1954, Lottie Frenssen certainly welcomed the conveniences of the new kitchen technologies as she took over the cooking responsibilities in her employer’s home. In her case, she had learned the basics of cooking while taking home economics class back in Germany, where she was taught to pre-

pare recipes out of her Dr. Oetker cookbook using fresh ingredients. It quickly became apparent to her that Mrs. Millen lacked these skills; she vividly recalled a story of Millen using five different mixing bowls to prepare a cake mix. As Frenssen put it, “It didn’t take long that I took the cooking, I took it over.” Pulling out her Dr. Oetker cookbook—her “little German cookbook” as she called it—Frenssen was soon preparing lemon cake, goulash, and cabbage rolls for this family. She also learned to make a few new Canadian-style dishes, such as meatloaf. As she recalled, what most struck her about preparing these meals was the “modern kitchen, everything just turned on.” Whereas in Hof, Bavaria, she had to prepare the coal-burning stove she had cooked on in her family’s small two-bedroom apartment, in North Bay she turned on the stove with a simple flick of a switch.⁵⁶ This kitchen was a setting for interaction; Frenssen consulted German- and English-language cookbooks to prepare recipes using the conveniences of North American modern technology. In many ways, this kitchen was also a space of identity-marking: she was able to introduce this English Canadian family to a German-born woman who was a capable and skilled domestic worker.

The modern kitchen technologies many immigrant women found in Canadian homes, or eventually purchased

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Frenssen, interview.

⁵⁵ Germaine Perron, interview, 26 June 2012; Helen Duquette, interview, 24 February 2012; Frenssen, interview; Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers*, 150-53.

⁵⁶ Frenssen, interview.

for themselves after months of saving-up, also marked symbolic shifts in their self-identity. Charlotte Aimes' curio-cabinet was littered with knickknacks she had brought from Paris. After her husband's death in 1974, she noted, many friends expected her to return to Paris, but she did not because, as she put it, "I am more Canadian than French," adding: "I enjoy visiting, but my home is here." It was this willingness to adopt a Canadian identity and leave Paris with her Canadian-born husband in 1947 that produced tension in her relationship with her mother. With frustration even now in her voice, Aimes said, "my mother never forgave me and let me know." As oral historian Hilary Kaiser has recorded in her collection *French War Brides in America*, such disapproval was not only common among French parents, but so strongly felt that even when marriages failed, women stayed rather than return home to France and face their families' rapprochement.⁵⁷ The strain in this particular mother-daughter relationship often played out in the kitchen, and decisions about whether to use frozen and canned ingredients or fresh, or whether to embrace the conveniences of modern kitchen technology such as the refrigerator. As Aimes recalled, in Paris it was "*faire les provisions*, the shopping, you went every morning." There, "you went to the butcher, you went to the bakers, you

went to the vegetable, to the creamy, and went to at least four stores everyday." But in North Bay, she picked up her groceries for the entire week at the local Dominion (like many other women at the time), storing them in the refrigerator and pantry and ultimately allowing her to cut-down on time devoted to shopping. With two young children in the 1950s and 1960s, Aimes was grateful for modern conveniences such as the refrigerator and wondered how her mother had managed her family and household all those years without one. Yet when she offered to purchase a refrigerator for her mother, her mother refused explaining "she didn't want one, said she didn't need one."⁵⁸ Her mother enjoyed the everyday routine of shopping, and the extra effort made certain she had fresh foods to serve her family—a key feature of French cuisine.⁵⁹ Perhaps though, her mother's refusal to adopt a kitchen with new technologies was also symbolic of disapproval over her daughter's changing identity, one indicated by her willingness, even eagerness, to embrace Canada and Canadian food practices.

The abundance of foods found in some Canadian kitchens also marked a change for many of the women interviewed. During the Second World War, food historian Lizzie Collingham estimates that at least 20 million people died

⁵⁷ Hilary Kaiser, *French War Brides in America: An Oral History* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2008), li; See esp. the stories titled "Hi Red!" and "Ma Petite France."

⁵⁸ Aimes, interview.

⁵⁹ For an interesting discussion on the cooking customs of women living in France, see Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, "The Nourishing Arts," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 67-77.

in Europe from starvation, malnutrition and other linked medical issues. Even in comparably well-served countries like Britain and Germany, notes Collingham, the lack of fat in diets, along with extremely limited amounts of animal protein from sources such as meat, eggs or cheese, meant most experienced the ongoing sensation of hunger even when their food contained enough calories.⁶⁰ Most of the women interviewed had experienced severe food shortages, rations, deprivation and hunger in wartime Europe. Indeed, Lottie Frenssen had vivid memories of the hunger she experienced in Germany. She recalled begging for food after her family of eight became refugees, travelling for five weeks by horse and wagon “running from the Russian invasion.” Drawing her face gaunt, she said “I looked like that; we were all skinny, skinny.” Moving from famine to feast, she was awed by the amount of food in the Millen household and how it was so easily acquired: “Whenever you ran out, you made a list...[and] it would come the next week.” In this middle-class kitchen, shelves were effortlessly restocked as items on the weekly shopping list were picked up at the local supermarket. The fully stocked kitchen also allowed her to indulge in new Canadian foods, particularly white bread. “I pigged out on it... I ate more of that than anything else,” she

said, adding: “I puffed up quite a bit and then the boils.”⁶¹ The new and plentiful foods literally affected her body; besides gaining weight, a physical reaction to the new foods caused her to break out into boils. Still, we can understand her excessive consumption of white bread, for as Marlene Epp and others have documented, the response to her new environment was rooted in her past. White bread, symbolic of prestige and plenty, marked her removal from a context of deprivation (and a powerful memory of her family’s meagre diet) to one of comparative abundance.⁶² The reaction of immigrant women like Frenssen to the amount and accessibility of food found in Canadian pantries and kitchens were further reminders of their wartime and migration memories, marking the long-term resonance hunger had in their lives and memories and informing their reactions to new spaces. In kitchen spaces, women framed both positive and negative associations with their sense of place.

The grocery store and supermarket were also spaces where women developed a sense of emotional, even intimate, attachment, in this case to physical settings outside their household. A pre-Second World War immigrant, Italian-born Antonietta Demarco and her family had established a successful family-run grocery and deli that sold fresh fruit and

⁶⁰ Lizzie Collingham, *Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (London, England: Penguins Books Ltd., 2012), 6-14.

⁶¹ Frenssen, interview.

⁶² Epp, “The Semiotics of Zwieback,” 328; See also Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985), 139-41. In this seminal work in food history, Mintz discusses sugar’s “usefulness as a mark of rank—to validate one’s social position, to elevate others, or to define them as inferior.”

vegetables to the North Bay community and operated a lunch counter that was popular with teenagers after school. But as anti-fascist sentiment increased during the war, and Italians living in Canada were denounced as fascists, people turned on the Demarcos, especially after her husband was interned in June 1942.⁶³ Demarco shuttered as she remembered the ugly taunts, the racialized epithets written on their storefront (“boycott the Italians!”), and the strain of living in North Bay at the time.⁶⁴ Sales plummeted to less than ten dollars a week most weeks. “Even Italian people” were afraid to shop there for fear of being labeled fascist. But after surviving the war years by scrimping and saving—“you didn’t waste anything”—they resumed business and it returned to “normal” after the war. Yet the tone of fear she conveyed in telling this story speaks to a more enduring impact. Her granddaughter recalled that it explains why her own parents were counseled, “to be Canadian” in order “to survive.” This influenced how she and her siblings were brought up. They were taught to fit in with the English-speaking community and hence, never learned to speak Italian (segregating them from newly arrived post-1945 Italian immi-

grants) and also developed a penchant for Canadian meals (including recipes from Betty Crocker’s cookbook).⁶⁵ A family-run grocery store, in this instance, became the context for mistreatment and exclusion by their local community, which they had for so long been members. It also had lasting ramifications for the ethnic and cultural identity of a family.

Along with smaller-scale grocery stores like the Demarco’s, postwar North Bay also offered larger supermarkets. When the Loblaws Groceteria opened its doors in 1955, cars lined Main Street in North Bay and hundreds turned out to shop in the store heralded as “one of most modern in Ontario.” It advertised brilliant lighting and extra wide aisles, which supposedly made it easy for the busy housewife to pick up all the items on her grocery list.⁶⁶ But as food historian Tracey Deutsch reminds us, these larger post-1945 supermarkets operated under the guise of making shopping easier, but also undermined the sense of grocery-shopping space as a place where women could assert their personal agency and preferences.⁶⁷ The Canadian film, *Arrival* produced by the National Film Board in 1957, captured some of the power dy-

⁶³ Demarco family, interview, 28 August 2012. One of about 600 Italians interned, he would spend two years in Petawawa classified as an “enemy alien”. Franca Iacovetta and Roberto Perin, “Italians and Wartime Internment: Comparative Perspective on Public Policy, Historical Memory and Daily Life,” in *Enemies Within: Italians and Other Internees in Canada and Abroad*, edited by Franca Iacovetta, Roberto Perin and Angelo Principe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 4-5.

⁶⁴ Antoinetta Demarco, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 23 August 1973.

⁶⁵ Demarco family, interview.

⁶⁶ “Another Step Forward,” *North Bay Nugget*, 27 June 1955; “Interior of New Supermarket,” *North Bay Nugget*, 27 June 1955; “Shopping Spree as Loblaws Store Opens,” *North Bay Nugget*, 29 June 1955.

⁶⁷ Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*, 220.

namics that could play out in the grocery store and supermarket. *Arrival* portrays the story of an Italian couple, Louisa and Mario, who have just reunited in Toronto after being apart for two years. In one scene, they enter a grocery store and Louisa quickly becomes overwhelmed and frightened by the many seemingly identical aisles lined with boxed goods and pre-packaged meats. Realizing she cannot read the labels, she says, in a voiceover, "I was so far away from home and couldn't understand anything."⁶⁸ She could easily have been one of the interviewees for this project, several of whom had to struggle to negotiate the demands of the grocery store and supermarket—especially the language dynamics of these stores.

Rosa Valentti, for example, discussed shopping for food in Italy, remembering that since everything was loose in barrels, she could see the food, judge its quality and decide how much to buy. Entering into a Canadian-style supermarket, however, she found so much of the food in pre-packaged forms and could not read or speak English to figure out what it was. In response, she improvised, purchasing items on the basis of the commercial images found on labels or at the suggestions of Italian-speaking friends. Once back home, she opened the tins to smell and taste the food, using her senses to judge the quality of the item. If she liked the smell and taste, she cut the label from the can and on her next trip to the

store matched it to the item she wanted; what did not meet her standards ended up in the bottom of the garbage bin. As she explained, "that's the way you learn, you learn by mistake, the hard way."⁶⁹ Interestingly, even women shoppers who could read English labels were not necessarily expected to do so. In post-1945 North America, large letters and gaudy packaging were designed to attract women's apparently fleeting attentions to grocery store displays and entice them to purchase the item.⁷⁰ Valentti's trial-and-error method allowed her to once again judge the quality of the foods, giving her a measure of authority in a space that had threatened to disempower her as a non-English-speaking immigrant woman.

Much like Valentti, Elisabeth Meier's grandmother lacked the English language skills to ask for certain foods and ingredients. As German-born Meier explained, after her parents divorced, her grandmother moved in allowing her mother to go out to work. While her mother supported them financially by cleaning houses until late at night, her grandmother prepared meals and took care of her granddaughter. When her mother immigrated to Montreal in search of better paying work, she left her daughter in the care of her grandmother and sent money each month. It would take her mother two years, and working two jobs, to save enough to bring them to Canada. In this case, Meier's grandmother had little choice in the matter. As Meier

⁶⁸ Donald Ginsberg, *Arrival* (National Film Board of Canada, 1957), 29 min., 32 sec.; from National Film Board of Canada, MPEG, <http://www.nfb.ca/film/arrival/> (accessed 6 May 2012).

⁶⁹ Valentti, interview.

⁷⁰ Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 208-209.

recalled, her grandmother did not want to leave Germany, but “she came because my mother would be at work all day and who would I have?” Living in Canada, Meier recalled that food and cooking were often the most difficult adjustments for her grandmother. Unable to communicate with her words, Meier recalled her grandmother turned to her body language when entering grocery stores, her philosophy being “if I have hands then I can make myself understood.” “She would point to let’s say some sliced meat,” explained Meier holding-up a hand of five, “and they knew she wanted four slices or five slices.” Yet she also complained that the flour, eggs, and lard were not up to her standards because recipes turned out differently than they had in Germany.⁷¹ The strategy of moving-in or living with parents, especially after the break-up of a marriage was not unique to immigrants—as it provided a financial and child care strategy for many non-immigrant women as well.⁷² What was unique, however, was the interruption in foodways experienced by Meier’s grandmother and her somewhat forced relocation across national boundaries. Although this grandmother worked out a system to communicate in this foreign space, she still could not get the exact ingredients she wanted. Moreover, her frustration with ingredients was perhaps symbolic of her unhappiness living in Canada.

Similar to kitchens, women’s reactions to supermarkets were also very much shaped by the deprivation they had ex-

perienced in their homelands. Charlotte Aimes had powerful memories of trying to help her struggling family during the war. When I asked her to describe life in German-occupied Paris, she quietly said “very painful.” During the first year of occupation, her family of five went without fuel. They struggled to get enough food, since rations were insufficient and this urban family had no green space to grow vegetables. As Aimes told me, the persistent deprivation eventually took its toll on her father, who became very sick, so sick “he almost died of hunger and cold.” Compelled “to do something to get food and help my father,” she headed to the countryside. With help from two friends, one who had connections to a soap factory, and another who found spare parts to assemble a bicycle, Aimes travelled three hours by train and then cycled for two hours to finally reach Normandy, where she traded soap for food with the regions’ farmers. She managed to collect butter, eggs, and chicken, the whole time being extremely careful because, as she explained, “the Germans were after us and sometimes they wanted us to open the bags or the suitcase and confiscated what we had.” But for her, the risk was worth it because her father and family depended on the extra bits she got on these trips. It also gave her a sense of purpose in a situation that had left her feeling helpless. And if the scarcity of food significantly marked Aimes’ pre-migration experience, and her memories of it, the contrasting abundance she encountered in Canada certainly

⁷¹ Meier, interview.

⁷² Heather Murray, interview, 25 June 2012; Duquette, interview.

shaped her post-migration experience and how she remembered it. "I always remember we went to some kind of grocery store," she told me, "and I can still remember those piles of oranges, and piles of apples," as she used her hands to sketch the pyramids of fruit in the air. "That is what struck me after being deprived for so long. Everything was such abundance.... And you could get anything you wanted you know."⁷³ The supermarket was, for Aimes, a marvel; it not only offered an abundance of fruit and fully-stocked shelves, but also represented a place of security and modern convenience. Many years later, she still marvelled at the simplicity of it all, walking to the neighbourhood store confident she would purchase food and not have it taken from her on the way home.

The availability of food in grocery stores and supermarkets did not always guarantee newcomer women found the ingredients and foods they wanted, however. While Charlotte Aimes was impressed by the abundance of food, she still could not get the type of French cheese she craved and the processed, American cheddar cheeses available in her local grocery store were frankly, unsatisfying. At one point, Aimes became so desperate for *Camembert* that she tried to bring a wheel back after a visit to Paris. But the *Camembert* spoiled over the week-long journey on the ship and filled up her tiny cabin with a smell so terrible she initially mistook it for one of her son's dirty diapers.⁷⁴

Lottie Frenssen had better luck when Mr. Winklemeyer's refrigerated van pulled up outside her West Ferris home. Answering a knock on her door, she was elated to discover she could finally purchase German liverwurst and rye bread, which were not stocked in North Bay grocery stores. As she explained, "He had everything in there our hearts desired. And I said to Mr. Winklemeyer PLEASE come back every Thursday." Thankfully, he did, and Frenssen said, "that's how we got back into it." This refrigerated van allowed Frenssen to purchase and consume the German foods she and her family so dearly missed. When her husband came home that night, she could not contain her excitement. "Oh do I have a treat for you!" she said. "Tomorrow you get your rye bread and liverwurst on it."⁷⁵ In North Bay especially, the supermarket was at once a place of abundance and little variety. A lack of demand for so-called "ethnic" specialty items, meant few grocery stores regularly stocked them, prompting immigrant women to find strategies to get foods and ingredients their "hearts desired." The lack of variety also affected North Bay's ethnic Canadian women, including Jewish Canadian women who had to order their kosher meat from southern cities like Toronto and Ottawa because the small Jewish population of this northern Ontario city could not hold on to a rabbi, let alone a kosher butcher. It arrived by train and was packed in ice.⁷⁶ As women negotiated

⁷³ Aimes, interview.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Frenssen, interview.

⁷⁶ Brown, interview; Brooky Robbins, interview with Sharon Gubbay Helfer, Ontario Jewish Associ-

a sense of place in North Bay, the grocery store and supermarket became spaces of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion, where language, race, and longing defined one's sense of belonging to this northern Ontario city.

Conclusion

Reflecting on women's feelings of place in North Bay, *Nugget* columnist Ruth Millet asked why was it that one woman moves and becomes "a real part of the community" whereas another "years later still feels that she doesn't belong and that home is somewhere else?" She attributed it to attitude, saying the first type "makes up her mind immediately that wherever she lives is home" while the latter simply "refuses to stop thinking of home as being the place she left."⁷⁷ The stories of newcomer women used here help us to complicate Millet's understanding of place-making. As their stories illustrate, women who came to North Bay, however reluctantly, brought with them family histories and conflicts and memories of tastes and smells that, despite their best efforts, they could not quite leave behind or recreate. This continuing attachment informed their decisions, perceptions of life, and sense of place in this northern Ontario city.

The analysis in this article also points to differences that might not have been captured except through careful listening for individual details. In their responses to questions, for example, the women

revealed how they had made different choices, at times influenced by their desire to conform to a gender ideal, or to resist it, and other times, responding to pressing family needs. Their memories also allow us to consider how such on-going negotiations affected their construction of themselves as immigrant women who had struggled to rebuild meaningful lives in a small northern city that, although unlike Toronto with its comparatively larger immigrant neighbourhoods, still offered them the possibility of more food, both new and familiar. By interpreting these memories, however fragmented, we can begin to probe how women dealt with the subtleties of food-related spaces after coming to Canada. As regards the importance of kitchen and supermarket spaces to women's sense of connection to North Bay, this article has shown how these intimate and public spaces helped to structure the daily lives and personal identities of immigrant women. Especially in their narratives, these immigrant women revealed how their purchase, production, and consumption of foods engendered both positive and negative feelings of place, space, and identity. Place-making was indeed much more complicated than Millet recognized. Furthermore, turning a food-related space into a place with intimate connotations involved a profound transformation that spoke to immigrant women's desire to re-establish a family and home and cultivate a sense of belonging in new and challenging contexts.

ation Archives, 6 January 2008; Cynthia Flesher, interview with Sharron Gubbay Helfer, 6 February 2008.

⁷⁷ Ruth Millet, "We, the Women," *North Bay Nugget*, 14 December 1949.