

## Emma's Shtetl Chicken Soup

As told to Leslie by her grandmother who learned it from her own mother Greta, and so on back in time.

**Summer of 1888:** Emma wore her heavy boots and home spun dress as she made her way through the narrow cobbled streets in Balut, the Jewish Ghetto in Lodz, Poland. She was on her way to the butcher. Even as a girl she had a purposeful stride as she threaded her way through the alleys, beyond the tailor's shop, foot pedals whirring, and the the local produce on this Market Day. Most people were inured to the smell of draymen's horses that were housed in close quarters within the shtetl, but Emma covered her nose as she scurried beyond it.

Greta had sent her only daughter to buy a chicken for their Sabbath meal. All nine family members would share in the weekly treat of one chicken boiled in a shisel with vegetables. At ten years of age, Emma had learned to select the best chicken from the kosher butcher's yard. Mimicking her mother, she extended her arm and pointed straight to the fattest chicken. The butcher grabbed it, wrung its neck, and handed it to Emma to carry home. There was no clean, white butcher paper in those days, so Emma put it in her homespun sack.

Because Emma's mother wanted to choose a live chicken rather trust the koshering to the butcher, she wasted no time to kosher the chicken at home before preparing it for the soup. Emma had learned the laws of kashrut as a toddler whenever proscriptions about food arose. Now she watched her mother perform the ritual of removing all vestiges of blood from the chicken. "Never drink the blood from an animal," the Torah said.

Koshering is a big deal! Consider this. All water had to be drawn from a community well and heated over the flame in the wall oven. No running water, no gas stove, no electricity. The chicken must be koshered within seventy-two hours of slaughter and soaked at exactly the correct temperature. Further, each religious branch of Judaism has its own unique process for koshering. Emma's family was devout, but not extreme in their religious practice, so they didn't follow any of the sects that demanded more rigorous laws.

Upon arriving home with the newly slaughtered bird, Emma took the chicken outside and plucked whatever feathers she could from the bird. Then my great-grandma Greta slit the throat and soaked the chicken in warm water to open the pores, but not hot enough to cook the chicken. Then she salted it heavily for no less than eighteen minutes on a slanted board with drainage holes and finally rinsed it to remove any residual blood.

That done, Greta singed the pinfeathers over the open flame of their wall oven. She also singed the heart and liver because they are blood laden. Finally, the chicken was ready to cook.

**Chicken Soup in the twenty-first century:** Today we buy our chicken already koshered. Even though they are somewhat more expensive, I like them better because I don't have to clean out the blood and veins before cooking. In my opinion kosher chickens taste better.

In my childhood, Emma lived with our family, and she did go to the butcher to choose her chicken live from the back yard of the butcher shop when I was very young. I don't know if the butcher koshered it, but I don't recall her doing it in our kitchen.

By the time I saw the chicken, head and feet hanging, she was ready to singe the pinfeathers over the fire on the gas stove. What a smell! Unforgettable. I can still recall it from childhood.

She pulled out the giblets from the inside, and often found a yolk or two that she gave me to eat raw. Don't try that today even if you could find a chicken with yolks inside.

Today, you have to hold the chicken under running water and scoop out the lungs, kidneys, and bloody detritus that cling to the rib cage, especially if the chicken isn't kosher. I use a serrated grapefruit spoon. Otherwise the soup will taste bitter from the bile. Don't forget to remove the giblets, usually in a paper sack. Next, tear out the fat pads from the neck area under the skin, which you can melt for chicken fat if you want it for your chopped liver. I also cut away any visible fat pads under the skin.

Dump the cleaned chicken into a big pot half filled with chicken broth. It should be enough to almost cover the chicken when everything else is added. Emma just used water, but I like to use a teaspoon or two of bouillon. The best comes in an 8-ounce glass jar called "Better Than Bouillon" chicken base.

Add the ingredients exactly as I tell you. I never vary it, and I always add it the way Emma did. It's become a kind of mantra from my childhood. To redeem my obsessive behavior in recent years, I've added lemon juice at the end. It seems to lighten the flavor.

2 onions, quartered

Several cloves of chopped garlic

One celery root (slice off all of the outer dirt with a paring knife)

One parsnip, peeled

A bunch of whole carrots, peeled

One yellow summer squash

The neck (take off the skin), heart and gizzard (pipik) of the chicken, which you have retrieved from a paper sack in the cavity. I save the liver in the freezer for chopped liver.

Salt, peppercorns or ground pepper

Boil this with the lid open just a crack for about 2 hours or until the chicken falls apart. Could be 3 hours with a tough bird!

Use a slotted spoon to remove the chicken to a big bowl. Take out and save the whole carrots.

Pour the soup through a strainer into another large, clean pot or bowl. Mash the vegetables into the strainer so that the fine mush goes into the broth and throw the leftover mush away. I don't like the way it looks with gushy vegetables floating in the soup, and I don't recall seeing any vegetables in Emma's soup. She put homemade lukshen (egg noodles) into the soup sometimes and knaidlach at other times, not only at Passover.

Now you can pour the broth back into its original pot adding the carrots and giblets. Refrigerate it overnight so that the fat comes to the surface, and skim it off before reheating. Keep the chicken aside to eat cold with ketchup! (That's the way I like it.) You don't have to shred it into the soup for nine people to share for Shabbos, but you could, if you want to make a meal of chicken soup.

Add cooked knaidlach or noodles to the broth and heat.

Correct for seasoning. I squeeze fresh lemon in to taste.

At this point I recall Emma pulling the feet from the pot and sucking on them. Guess we won't see that today.

Enjoy yours! Freeze some to use as Jewish penicillin.

Note to my readers: Emma, the protagonist in my novel *Beyond the Silk Mill*, was a character modeled after my own grandmother who lived with us, but her story in no way resembles a memoir. She did come from Poland and from a weaving family, she sold corsets door to door in Paterson, but there the resemblance ends.