

# A Soviet Refugee Visits the Supermarket; As a child, I learned to take abundance for granted. Maybe now we'll all learn not to.

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## FULL TEXT

Lately I've been obsessed with my first memory of a supermarket. I couldn't believe the sheer amount of bright packaging sparkling from every shelf. I turned to my mom, whose face also looked blank with incomprehension. Walking through the aisles, I was scared to touch anything. I wanted to touch everything.

I was an 8-year-old refugee from the Soviet Union. As I grew older, I got used to the world of stocked shelves—as opposed to my native country, where you waited in line and purchased what was available. If you happened to spot something you desired, you threw yourself at it with the force of a Russian tank.

Which is what I instinctively did when my new world reverted to my old world. "No, don't go here," a barricaded employee yelled as I lunged for the last bunch of avocados in a Stop & Shop. I froze midstep while he increased the space between us.

"Sorry," I mumbled with a mouthful of sweater—I'd tied its cowl neck over my face like that character from Bazooka Joe. Person after masked person shuffled by at a distance. By the time I swiped my card through the Saran-wrapped register, I was in a panic.

If the state of a nation's grocery stores is a marker of its well-being, then we are unwell. When that was the case in the Soviet Union, my family—born of Holocaust and Gulag survivors—grabbed the chance to leave. In 1989 we headed to Austria, then Italy, waiting for asylum in America. We feasted on whatever free-world goods we could afford, mostly cheap sugar: Smacks cereal mixed with yogurt (who knew it was meant for milk?), soda, Entenmann's cakes, Pop-Tarts.

As our budget grew and I learned to navigate a supermarket, guided by my grandmother with her clipped coupons, I discovered my own favorite snacks, and also healthy novelties like avocados. I never imagined I'd dive for the last bunch in the land of plenty.

Yet here we are, vying for toilet paper, hand sanitizer and fresh produce. I know how hard it is to see beyond the uncertainty and deprivation. But perhaps one day we'll walk into a supermarket filled to the brim with colorful packaging, and revel in it. Maybe for the first—or second—time in our lives we'll truly appreciate having everything at our fingertips.

Ms. Kanzer is writing a book on her life experiences as an immigrant.

Credit: By Jessie Kanzer

## DETAILS

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