

COMMENTARY

A warm pie and a sense of belonging

Your Turn

Fraser Lang
Guest columnist

"... I learned a fundamental lesson: that we cannot and must not lose our sense of history and our memory, for they constitute our identity. We cannot be prisoners of the present and wander out of history. For a society without a deep historical memory, the future ceases to exist and the present becomes a meaningless cacophony."

— Vartan Gregorian, Brown University president 1989-1997

Gregorian, an Armenian from Tabriz, Iran, emigrated to the United States and received a doctorate from Stanford. He became an internationally known scholar, academic leader, and philanthropic figure.

The quote above was in an obituary of Gregorian, who died on April 15. It resonated with me.

My father came to this country at the age of 12 from Glasgow, Scotland. He and his family settled in the Fairlawn section of Pawtucket. My mother was born in Rhode Island but her parents were from Edinburgh and she grew up on Mineral Spring Avenue in Pawtucket within walking distance of the Lorraine Mills, where my grandfather worked as an accountant. Scottish and English immigrants constituted much of the labor force in the textile mills in Pawtucket and Central Falls and so a large part of the population of those cities.

Our family celebrated its Scottish heritage — involved in The St. Andrew's Society, Clan Fraser, The Daughters of the Heather and the Fairlawn Bowling Club.

Because the Fairlawn area was thick with British immigrants, there was a proliferation of fish and chip shops. And then there was — and is! — Hartley's, a store offering meat pies. Our family consumed those pastries on special occa-



Hartley's Pork Pies of Rhode Island has been in business on Smithfield Avenue in Lincoln since 1954. JOHN FREIDAH/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

sions and as occasional treats.

As I pass the mid-point of my eighth decade, I have warm memories from decades ago that flood back when I drive around the area. I am now more aware than before that they evoke a sense of "belonging" — of being part of something that has deep roots.

The fish and chip shops are gone. Clan Fraser Hall is no more. The Daughters of the Heather is defunct. The Fairlawn Bowling Club has disappeared.

The area now offers pizza, Chinese food and empanadas. The population reflects more recent immigration — from Mexico, Central America, the Domin-

ican Republic, Southeast Asia and Portugal. Amidst all this change, Hartley's Meat Pies has survived in a modest store on Smithfield Avenue.

I enter the shop with anticipation. Space is tight. Four customers are a crowd. The odor of freshly baked pastry greets me as I observe the dark wood-paneled walls and the decorations, including a large photo of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in 1953, as well as a colorful map of Britain. But the real prize is a photo of Winston Churchill with Elizabeth's parents, King George I and Queen Mary. It is a step back in time that never fails to energize me.

The business was founded in Fall River, in 1900; the Pawtucket branch dates from 1954. Little has changed — the counter, the walls and the decor. The recipes are the same. The price for the pies may have changed but it is still a bargain at \$3 each. Pork, beef, chicken and salmon (Friday only) comprise the menu. This fare may not be everyone's gourmet treat but for me it is a simple pleasure that evokes warm memories.

I am deeply grateful to still have Hartley's in my life. As Gregorian would have suggested, this history, memory and sense of place constitute much of my identity.

These neighborhoods that bring back such resonant memories now nurture the same sense of belonging for people from places very different than Scotland. That's how it should be. This is America at its best.

My wish is that decades from now, when today's new immigrants return to their old haunts, they will find their personal "Hartley's" to remind them where they come from and where they are going.

Fraser Lang, of Providence, is retired from a career in publishing, including a decade as publisher of *The Block Island Times* and two decades as owner of *Manisses Communications Group*.



Hartley's pork pies. SANDOR BODO/PROVIDENCE JOURNAL