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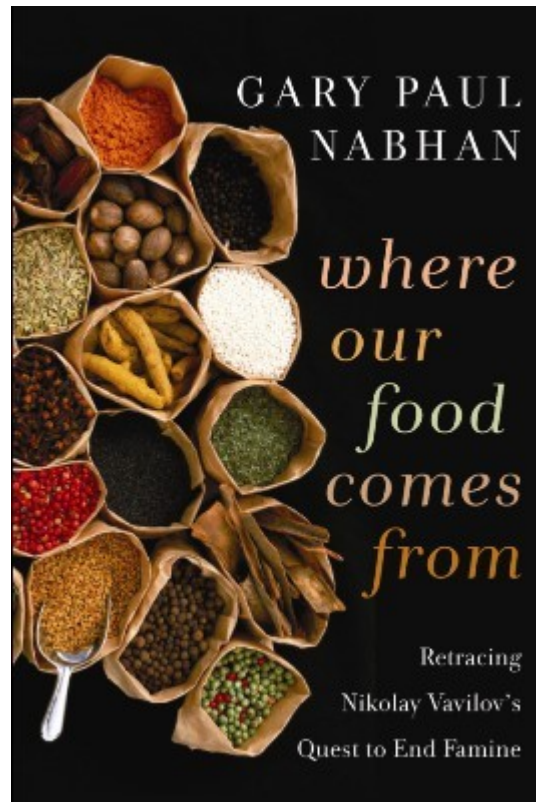
A Martyr For the Cause of Food Security

When most people think of national treasures, seeds don't come to mind. But when Hitler seized the Russian city of Leningrad, scientists gave their lives to protect the Vavilov Institutes's seed bank. Seven starved to death rather than eat their precious seeds. One was taken by rats. The man who founded the seed bank was Nikolay Vavilov. The seed bank is a national treasure today, but in the forties Vavilov was starved to death in a Communist holding cell. *Where Our Food Comes From* is his story.

Vavilov was a pioneer in the field of botany. He was the first to conceptualize "centers of diversity," regions that have a higher variety of flora and fauna. He led the way in linking that diversity to linguistics. He was among the first to recognize the loss of agricultural biodiversity through "genetic erosion." He traveled the globe, quickly picking up local dialects so he could speak to peasant farmers directly. In his world travels, he collected more than 150,000 varieties of seeds. His mission was to discover seeds that could fight the famines killing Russian citizens by the million, but some farmers he met were so taken with Vavilov that they dedicated their lives to continuing his mission within their own regions. The seeds Vavilov collected are saving lives to this day, and his research paved the way for an understanding of food security: why it matters and how we can achieve it.

Chapter five serves as an example of the import of food security. In the 1860s, Napoleon convinced the Lebanese to grow less food crops and in their place to plant mulberry trees for the production of silk. It seemed like a good idea when the Lebanese were able to gain half their income from the new silk trade. More and more farmers began to use these profits to import the foods they used to grow. Several wars later, the silk trade fell apart and the Lebanese did not have enough food to feed their population. Nabhan describes the effects of the famine:

"Because many husbands either had been drafted or had fled the country and had no way to send money back to their wives, an unprecedented percentage of women were forced to work as prostitutes for the occupying forces of the Turks, and many succumbed to venereal disease or violence. The famine became so widespread in the



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countryside that some people survived only by scavenging meat from dead dogs, dead camels, or human corpses.”

The Levant, once called “The breadbasket of the earth,” lost 100,000 lives to this famine.

Gary Paul Nabhan, the author of *Where Our Food Comes From*, is himself a respected ethnobiologist. For his research he did more than crack open a few books; he rewalked the world journeys Vavilov took. Nabhan puts Vavilov's research in a modern context. He shows how logging is a front for the narcotics trade, as farmers can make a thousand times the profit if they raze their maize to grow marijuana or poppies instead. He explains how the changes in agriculture in The Pamirs have been a result of, among other things, climate change. When discussing the tradition farmers have of sharing seeds, for an example Nabhan turned to the US practice of widely spraying the herbicide Roundup on Columbian farms. While this practice was intended to kill the plants that grow cocaine, it made many farmers dependent on GMO, Roundup-resistant seeds. But the farmers traded the seeds that were most resistant to the herbicide until they had, through natural selection, created their own resistant strains.

Where Our Food Comes From isn't so much a list of foods and the countries they hail from. It is a description of the centers of diversity, what they offer, and the challenges they face. For example, nothing may be more American than apple pie, but it is likely that apples are originally from the forests of Kazakhstan. Imagine whole forests filled so with wild apple trees that from afar one can smell the apple blossoms and the fallen fruit. Each forest contains delicious flavors never tasted outside of their wild origins. However, since 1960 Nabhan reports that 70 to 80 percent of the apple forests of that region have been destroyed.

Sadly, many of these journeys reflect on the loss of genetic diversity of the modern age. It reinforces the importance of Vavilov's work. If you want a book that gets into the muck of GMOs, biodiversity and free trade policies, *Where Our Food Comes From* may be for you.