

Hefariebala and the German Bake Oven

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Bread making has been known to mankind nearly from the beginning of time when grains were taken into the diet. In the beginning, grain was pounded into a mash, then cooked - often on heated stones. From this simple preparation developed the varieties of breads that we know today.

The first "raised" dough likely was invented when leftover dough was incorporated into a new batch of dough, the older dough having had time to incubate wild yeast to a more active ingredient. This accident, however, bore little resemblance to modern yeast. In Teplitz, Bessarabia, for making raised bread we used a residue from wine-making that was called Hefariebala or yeast patties.

The details of how these were made has nearly been lost. Most of my own relatives that might be old enough to know this information are gone. I had to search long and hard to find someone who still remembers. With the help of a friend in Germany I found a lady in her 90's who remembers it well. She passed on to me the secret of how these were made.

The beginnings of Hefariebala started with wine that had begun to ferment. At that point, the wine was warmed in a big pot and another pot of corn flour was placed close by. When the warm wine began to foam, the foam was ladled off and mixed into the corn flour to produce a mash. The mash was worked into a thick paste which was then allowed to rest. Then the mash was shaped into round patties about 3 inches across and about as thick as a finger. These patties were then set out on a clean sheet to dry. When dry, the Hefariebala patties were stored in a fabric bag hung in a cool area.

The day before bread was to be baked, the required Hefariebala patties were broken into pieces and placed in warm water to dissolve. Into this mixture, flour was stirred to make the bread dough. This was covered and allowed to sit overnight. Early the next morning, the women began kneading the bread dough. Kneading the dough broke up the air bubbles and also developed the gluten in the flour. Both of these processes were necessary to produce bread with a fine, light grain. This was hard work, especially when making the many loaves of bread required to feed large families and often farm workers as well. Each loaf of bread contained 3-4 pounds of dough, and most women made 6-10 loaves of bread at a time, depending on the size of their families. Each portion of dough was shaped into a round loaf and placed into a round baking pan. Then the loaves were brushed with an egg wash to give it a nice brown top when it was baked.

Our bake oven in Teplitz, Bessarabia was spacious with a round ceiling. To heat the bake oven, my mother used scrap wood and shavings from Dad's wagon-making shop. Other women in the village used corn stalks along with other fuels. Fuel in general was hard to come by. For that reason, baking was carefully planned to utilize the entire capacity of the oven in order to conomize on the fuel use.

Along with bread baking, the women in my village often also made Suessbrot (braided sweet-bread or egg bread) or Streusel Kuchen (sweet-dough in a shallow pan, basted with egg and topped with streusel). On

occasion, a ham was wrapped in a sheet of bread dough and baked in the oven along with the bread. The result was a tasty and juicy ham. The bread-crust from such a ham did not go to waste. It was a delicious snack!

On bread-baking day, mothers often had left-over bread dough. We kids really looked forward to bread-baking day, for snacks were often made from the bread-dough scraps. Mom would make one or more Bezel or Blazeda made from round pieces of bread dough rolled flat and then brushed with bacon fat and sprinkled with coarse salt. When baked to a crisp, these were a treat!

When the bread-baking was finished, the heat of the oven was not wasted. Mother would use the warm oven to dry pans of fruit to make fruitcakes we called Huzla or Schnitz which were essentially slabs of dried fruit which were then sliced. Oven-dried fruit was also stored to later make Doerrobst-Suppe or Fruit-Soup, a popular way to serve dried fruit in the winter-time. If the oven heat was not needed for food-related tasks, Dad would use the warm oven to dry hubs and spokes for his wagon-making business.

We especially enjoyed our home-made bread when it was fresh. Our bread and Kuchen were stored in the cool cellar on a board that was suspended from the ceiling so that no rodents could nibble on the goodies. The cool environment also helped keep the bread fresh, but after several days the bread did start to become stale and was not relished as much. My mother generally made bread every 10 days to two weeks - more often in the summer when the work was more demanding and often hired help also had to be fed. My grandmothers turned old bread into a treat by dampening it, and then spreading it with goose grease and sprinkling it with a bit of sugar.

Here is a story about Hasenbrot that the old-timers might relate to. What is Hasenbrot? One day my grandfather took his team out to do some field work. Oma packed his lunch Brotsack - a fabric bag - with bread, sausage and wine. I greeted Opa in the yard as he came home late in the day. Before Opa unhitched his horses, he said, I have something for you. Oh? Yes! What is it? Hasenbrot. In the kitchen, I ask Oma if I can get my Hasenbrot. She opened the Brotsack and pulled out a piece of Grandpa's bread that looked the same as the bread on the table. I must have looked a bit surprised, and so Oma explained. After Opa had eaten his lunch out in the field, he placed the Brotsack under the wagon and covered it up. While he was back at work a rabbit came by and sniffed it, trying to get in. In the process, he jumped over the Brotsack a few times. "Now you know," Oma said. I ate the bread eagerly, and remember well even today how good it tasted. And for you, I am glad to share this story!