

The Day We Made Perishki

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, October 2014

"Ach, why sure we can do it," my cousin Martina assured me as I timidly suggested we might try to make my mother's infamous rhubarb perishki.

After finding a bag of frozen rhubarb in a local retail outlet, we proceeded to tell everyone of our aspirations, which appeared to dim as the days went by. We scoured the aisles of Walmart for 10 minutes looking for dry yeast, being redirected several times. I again hoped to run into some Old Order Mennonite girls in one of the aisles, but it was not to be. "We need *Voll Milch*, 1.5%," Martina said, but we settled for 2%.

Once home, I retrieved my mother's large oval enamel bowl with red trim from the fruit cellar, which, I am compelled to say, does not hold any jars of canned fruit. After sanitizing our hands with the large bottle of disinfectant I keep glued to the kitchen counter, we were good to go. We each donned one of my mother's hand sewn cotton kitchen aprons as I asked Martina, "Now why in the world would I have a kitchen scale?" I rolled my eyes I am sure. "We have to WEIGH the flour?? Really?" After pausing and surveying my kitchen, I suddenly had a revelation of days gone by and retrieved the Weight Watcher's scale from above the stove. I dusted it off and together we navigated the German and Canadian metric systems.

I took off my rings to mix the dough, just as my mother had always done, as Martina advised me to use the electric mixer. I again rolled my eyes and began to mix until she felt it could be kneaded by hand. After two minutes I told Martina I was done, when she promptly chastised me that I had not kneaded nearly long enough. I preheated the oven as she prepared to insert the bowl of dough onto the center rack. She had plopped a dish towel over the ball of dough as she assured me "Oh, I do it all the time at home." Looking for alternatives, I promptly plopped the bowl on the fireplace hearth and turned on the gas, as I tried not to think about the two mice my husband had caught on the hearth with his peanut butter-laden traps a few days earlier. "This would be the modern way to get the dough to rise," I rationalized to myself and to Martina.

As we patiently waited to see the gingham towel on the bowl of dough magically rise, Martina began to prepare a casserole of potatoes, chicken and cauliflower from a recipe in a German magazine she had brought along. Ever conscious of controlling infection and cross contamination, I quickly took the chicken to the laundry room and cut it into thin strips as she requested. By this time the dough had risen enough to be kneaded again as my husband returned from his walk and bluntly asked us, "Do you guys even know what you are doing?"

I ignored him and sanitized my hands again and put the cutting board with contaminated chicken in the dishwasher. I dusted the kitchen counters with flour as the rolling and cutting of the dough began. "In Germany we use parchment paper," Martina announced, as I dragged out a roll of ruffled wax paper, which I had used for a Sunday School craft and which I had bought at the Dollar Store. "Oh, this will do," Martina said in her thick accent, as we lined my mother's baking sheets. I then suddenly realized that over the years I should have paid more attention to the technique of crimping the edges of the perishki, as Martina plopped her first two on the pan.

"No! That's not right!" I said as I shook my head and looked at the flat blob of dough, flat as a pancake. "I think it's like this." Slowly and methodically we filled the pans, then waited as the aroma of a bakery filled my kitchen. Proudly we arranged the perishki on a platter to take to my niece's home for supper. "What's with the ones that don't have a top?" my husband asked, and I retorted that those were "open-faced perishki."

Several hours later at the home of my niece, Martina and I proudly showcased the fruits of our labour, as my ninety-year-old aunt, who has always prided herself on the fact that she uses reduced sugar and fats in all of her baking, announced to the guests at the table that the perishki needed more sugar. Nevertheless, the perishki were given a thumb's up as both of my nieces reminded me that Oma would preheat her oven and then set the bowl of dough on the door to rise.

As we depart for home, Aaron, the boyfriend of one of my nieces tells me that he will gladly take home the last two perishki and pack them in his lunch for the next day. My smile fades as my niece says, "Oh, he'll eat anything...." In a corner of my mind I can hear my husband saying, "Oh, Louise doesn't bake much.... She thinks she's a writer...."