

The Pyrex Bowl

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, September 2013

As I opened the front screen door, I could hear the innocent high pitched squeals of young children at play on the school yard a stone's throw away. The noise resonated in my ears as it echoed off the lumbar warehouse behind us. A sudden wave of nostalgia suddenly swept over me as I deeply inhaled the warm Indian summer, air laden with the scent of ripe tomatoes from the local Heinz 57 processing plant a few blocks away. It was a familiar and comforting smell to me, one that I had always associated with the passing of the seasons. My comforting flashback was suddenly crudely interrupted as, through the door leading into our adjoining garage, I suddenly heard the sound of glass crashing to the cement floor. I immediately poked my head out to see what my husband was up to this time. "Well, you're not gonna to believe this," he slowly began, as he was already starting to gather up the shreds of bright yellow colorful glass with the broom. "I was moving your mother's china cabinet and I didn't realize that it was indeed two separate pieces. So it tipped. And this bowl broke." "What? Are you kidding me? I LOVE that bowl. It's PYREX! My favorite bowl! I can't believe this!" I continued, on the verge of tears. "Well, it's only a bowl," he added, attempting to cheer me up as I tried, but failed, to detect even a hint of remorse in his voice. My cheek was wet with tears as I quickly closed the garage door.

Living in an agricultural community meant an abundance of student jobs over the long summer break, and even in my formative years, I labored diligently alongside my mother in the sandy soil. Green beans, raspberries, strawberries, cucumbers and tomatoes, the latter of which were picked with stems, or without stems for a few cents more. It was not unusual for students to gather uptown at the unemployment office early in the mornings as the farmers would arrive and pile their quotas of students for the day in the backs of their pickups. My friends and I would also ride our bikes up Oak Street to the Evans farm to detassel hybrid corn for Funk seeds, and long before the mandatory high school sex education classes, many of us already knew the intricacies of cross pollination.

When my mother was not doing housekeeping outside of our home, she spent endless hours each summer canning over a hot stove with huge pots of boiling water. Cherries, peaches, pears, watermelon, crab apples, pickles. The list seemed endless. Her jam varieties could easily rival any found on any grocery store shelf, plum always being my favorite. In her small telephone directory many of the local farmers are still listed along with their specialties. "Epp's with the peaches." "Mantler's with the pickles." "Braun's with the sour cherries" and so on. The shelves in her fruit cellar were always brimming.

My mother made wareneki mostly with cheese, but also with a variety of fruits, sour cherries being the family favorite. "At home in Bessarabia we also made them with pumpkin," my 88 year old aunt recently reminded me just the other day. "We sprinkled the pumpkin with sugar and cinnamon and then baked them wrapped in dough in the oven. Oh, and with grapes too." "What? I'd never heard of that," I thought to myself. My mother scoured our county each summer for small dark plums called "Krekel", which were not always so easy to find.

Large pots of borscht, either the red or green variety, were cooked with smoked pork pieces, as was bean soup.

Chicken noodle soup of course boasted thin homemade noodles, yet my mother also made a variety of cold fruit soups, foreign to any of my childhood friends. Stachelbeeren mousse, cooked with milk, and plumenmousse were special treats growing up in Leipzig my aunt relayed, and were made for special celebrations, yet in Canada my mother often made them as a treat for us during the long hot summers. Goat's cheese was stocked in our fridge even long before it became popular on North American restaurant menus. "I was at the butcher's," my mother would announce, unwrapping some pig's feet from the familiar brown paper to make Silze. After boiling them and placing them in a bowl covered with clear gelatin, it was a favorite of mine. Served cold from the fridge and dipped in vinegar, silze was also a popular summer treat for us growing up. Large casseroles of Holubzi were crowded into the oven after she rolled the cabbage almost effortlessly.

Sunday supper usually consisted of cold meats, boiled eggs, baked bread and buns pickles, and potato salad, and often I would help set the table before the guests arrived. The Sunday china and cutlery were retrieved from the china cabinet, a gift I had bought my mother with one of my first paychecks after graduating from nursing. "Take the potato salad out last," my mother would advise, as I would retrieve the large bright banana yellow Pyrex bowl from the fridge and place it in the middle of the table.

I spent the day yesterday canning tomato sauce, the one and only thing that I can. My son who has lived away at University for 5 years recently announced that Prego didn't taste that bad after all. This morning as my husband carried the 37 jars downstairs into the fruit cellar, I was happy to be able to again cross this off my list. Although my shelves are not brimming, I know once again that my mother would be proud.

"Mom, Rachel (her 17 year old granddaughter) is working at Nickel's Orchards again this summer," I relay to her on a recent visit. "Remember, you always bought your peaches there, and your sour cherries, by the pail." My mother smiles as my dad recalls the directions to the orchard. "Maybe go to the butcher's on Oak Street and get some meat for Holubzi," my mother requests as she changes the subject. "Ok, I'll see what I can do... half beef and half pork, right?" as I see her nod in agreement. "And maybe bring some potatoes, I don't think I have any," she adds, looking around the room. "Oh, maybe just forget it," she dejectedly states "I don't have my peeler, or my oven." As I prepare to leave the room to rush home and cook supper for my family she looks up at the clock on the wall. "Well, I see it's almost time to eat again. Maybe go over to the china cabinet quickly and help me set the table before the guests arrive..."