

Nuts, Figs and Halva

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

"Maybe get me a pen when you are out and about in the stores," my mother would request of me in her latter years when she was no longer able to do all of her shopping independently. "And . . . get me a good one."

The mailman was a daily visitor to our home as letters were regularly sent to and received from South America, Belgium, Germany and Russia. "Who ARE all of these people you are writing to?" I would quiz my mother as I regularly surveyed the dining room table filled with pages and pages of thin airline paper filled with news and events of our life in Canada. Once again, I watched her shake her pen regularly in the mistaken belief she had run out of ink. And so my love affair with writing also began as I developed relationships with cousins and aunts and uncles across the pond. I also joined a pen pal club and developed dozens of friendships in Australia, England, Switzerland and across North America. In grade eight, our history teacher Miss Malott married a wild life ranger and moved to Kenya much to our dismay. But as promised, she hooked us all up with a pen pal. But, alas, my mother did not approve of this fellow who began to correspond with me after he sent a photo of himself posing beside some type of wild game, and he quickly became a pen pal of the past. Our mailman Clair Gunn knew the countless children in our neighbourhood by name, but he knew me the best of all, because during his rounds, if he spotted me out, he would call out, "Quick girly, run home. Quick. You've got mail!"

The week before Christmas, my dad and I would go to a local florist to buy a fresh Christmas tree, always disagreeing on the height. It was never tall enough for me. A few, very fragile decorations had been brought from Germany, and I always thought that our dressed tree was the most beautiful one on the block compared to the tinsel and artificial trees which had recently made their debut. "Quick, cut a few snips of pine off of the tree," my mom would say as she then tucked them neatly into her Christmas letters before sealing the envelopes. "This way they will also have a piece of us with them during Christmas." When letters from my Tante Ida in Germany arrived, they always had the same footnote. "Ade aus der alten Heimat."

"Oh, the church in Leipzig was so beautiful, especially on Christmas Eve," my mother would often relay to me. "We were all so excited because it was all about us children. We had practiced so hard for the program and could hardly contain ourselves in the days leading up to it. When the back doors of the church opened that night, we would all gasp. It was sooo beautiful. And after the service everyone got a bag of candy, nuts and an orange. The orange was always a real treat for us."

After our Christmas Eve service, we would gather with my aunt and uncle and feast on oranges, figs, nuts and halva, which came in a tin with a camel on it and was ordered in by a local German grocer each Christmas. Onkel Hans would haul out his old accordion and play his self-taught Christmas carols as we all sang along, off key I am sure. "Yes, and we always had these candies which were really a treat for us. They were like a toffee. I know it sounds corny, but they were wrapped in white and yellow paper and had a cow on them with a stamp that said "made in Poland," I relayed to Magda, one of our recently hired nurses, who also happened to be from Poland. Her eyes lit up as she began to nod her head in affirmation. Her blonde pony tail flew about. "Oh, I know EXACTLY what you are talking about! They sell them at the Polish store in Windsor. I LOVE them too!" I gasped as my other co-workers rolled their eyes and we all shrieked with laughter, covering our mouths so as

not to wake our patients. Several days later, as promised, I proudly shared the bag of cow candies with my brother and my aunt, while my husband wondered what all the excitement was about.

During the winter months we helped Onkel Hans shred dozens of newspapers as he prepared for yet another litter of his highly anticipated and sought after German Short Hairs to be born to his faithful companion Damka. Damka only understood Russian you see, and spent countless hours with him scouring the local woods and fields. During the infamous Y2K of December 1999 some panic ensued when projected water and food shortages circulated about. People had begun stockpiling food. I had done none of the above, since I had my backup plan in the form of my Onkel Hans. Having survived Stalin's gulag, he was the most resourceful man I had ever met, other than my parents that is. Yet he never talked about it. Not even once. I had assured my husband, "Don't worry, he will get us through. Guaranteed!"

On New Year's Day my mother would make batches of the highly anticipated "Portzilche," a fried fritter made with raisins and served with icing sugar. They were also called "New Years Cookies," something which I could never quite figure out. On a recent New Years, one of my Russian German patients from Mexico announced to me, "Yes, we have made New Years cookies. Try them. We only make them at this time of year," as she opened the bedside table of the patient and retrieved a plate of homemade goodies, the contents of which were totally foreign to me. I have only recently become aware of the vast variations and interpretations of Russian German food.

On this day in early December, I again sit at our dining room table surrounded by pages of copied yet personalized computerized letters to tuck into my Christmas cards. "What can you possibly be printing on that computer?" my husband asks, as I tell him that we are out of ink (again). As a footnote to my cousins in Germany I add, "Martina and I are going to Bessarabia in August 2015. Would anybody else in the family like to join us?" I then cut a few snips of pine to tuck into the letters before I seal the envelopes. I also keep a few branches to tuck into the inverted vase on the newly laid tombstone of my parents.