

So, this is Easter

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, April 2017

Since I am not a regular moviegoer, my friend was surprised yet receptive this week when I suggested we see "Beauty and the Beast," which had made its debut in our small town. Slouching down in my cozy seat, I quickly became mesmerized by the powerful swells of the familiar opening music and vibrant panoramic landscapes. "What country does this actually take place in again?" she whispered to me, as I could not help but get slightly annoyed with her. "It's all computer generated, I am sure," I said, as I rolled my eyes and gave her a sideways glance. I reminded myself that it had been years since either one of us had in fact watched a Disney fairy tale. As the strains of music softened, the narrator, in a thick English brogue, commenced his oratory. "Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young prince lived in a shining castle." I settled in comfortably for the ride.

The choreography throughout the movie was absolutely superb, culminating with Belle donning that infamous yellow ball gown bedecked with heavenly sprinkles of gold, as she glided across the mirrored ballroom with her newly revealed handsome prince. As my friend and I exited the back door of the theater we were both still wiping our eyes and sniffing. "One Halloween when Rachel was eight she wanted to be Belle and I rented for her a long yellow gown," I told my friend, as I searched for my car in the parking lot. "Hey, look over there across the street," I motioned to her. "See that little white house? That's the first place my dad rented when we came to Canada. When I was a kid. Looks sort of run down now." Two men, whom I did not recognize, stood talking in the driveway and looked over at us. I was momentarily tempted to approach them as the front door of the house was open, but I did not. I again thought of the ice rinks my dad built in the back yard every winter. On the night of our first Halloween in Canada, we all sat huddled together in the dark behind the front bedroom window, fearful of what might evolve that evening. Saturday afternoons in the summer, I sat on our wooden front porch and watched custodians clean up barrels of cartoon matinee paper garbage in the back entrance of the theater. Since I was not allowed to grace the doorsteps of the place, just the aroma of those empty popcorn boxes piqued my curiosity. As I drove home from the theater down the short one-way street, I gazed into the small neglected back yard where my mother had once carefully hidden painted Easter eggs amongst the emerging spring flowers and bushes.

Sitting in Tim Horton's recently with ninety-two-year-old Aunt Hulda, who lived in Leipzig, Bessarabia until the deportation in 1940, we talked about the upcoming Easter celebrations and how things have changed over the years. "It was such a wonderful time in Leipzig," she began. "We decorated our eggs with onion skins, which gave them such a nice, rich brown colour. We painted stripes on them or sometimes even wrote our names on the shells. Several weeks before Easter, each child received a flower pot and we planted barley seeds, which germinated just in time for Easter. When we were younger our mother hid the eggs in the sprouted grasses, but as we got older we placed them in our pots ourselves. There was no candy, only sometimes at Christmas when Opa would go to the market in Tarutino and bring us each a candy cane. We had a cemetery in Leipzig, for the fallen soldiers from World War I. It was the responsibility of the local school kids to keep it clean, so we pulled the weeds and maintained it, as most of the dead did not have relatives in town. They were the graves of mostly Russians but also some other ethnic groups, and we wanted everything to look nice when the families came at Easter. They sometimes walked for days to get to Leipzig to pay their respects. At Easter, we baked Paska in

various containers, using the same recipe I have today and took it to these graves and placed them there. When the relatives arrived, they sang as they walked around the cemetery. We Germans had a sunrise service on a neighbouring hill in Leipzig every Easter. It was so beautiful. Saturday evening everyone swept the street and spread sand on the road so things looked nice for Sunday. There were no weeds to be seen and our yards and properties were also kept in the same manner. The young people took their instruments to the hillside for the sunrise service and afterwards we gathered at the church. It was so beautiful. The balcony and everything. Then we always had a special meal. Rice and dried fruit were specialties and not eaten every day. And of course, we always had plenty of chickens and geese to eat. We were never hungry that's for sure. Many adults fasted at Easter and as kids we too pretended to fast, not even knowing what it entailed or signified. By eleven o'clock in the morning we usually broke our fast and wanted to eat. We never worked on Sundays. It was such a nice time. Once upon a time."

"Everyone was self-sufficient in Bessarabia. But once we were deported to Siberia in 1945, that was a different story. There we quickly learned what hunger was. The local Russians had a cemetery in Martuk and there were people around who remembered what Easter actually was about. On that day, they took blankets and pieces of bread to the cemetery and laid them on the ground. It was really just an open field with animals running all over it. There were no markers or anything. One year on Easter, one of the older Kazakhs, who worked on the same collective farm as we, informed us we did not have to go to work that day. He wanted to go to the market to buy his wife a new pair of shoes so he said we didn't have to go to work either. Unbelievably, he actually convinced us not to go. We knew it was sowing time and before long our boss came to find us. He was drunk again, as usual. We all told him we were on strike that day and would not work since it was Easter. After he threatened to fine and discipline us we promptly agreed to go back to work, and your dad quickly went and hitched up the oxen. We worked all day."

The week before Easter my mother baked an assortment of Paska in different sized containers, including large empty Crisco tins. Large quantities of eggs and butter were mixed together to reveal a rich, golden yellow hue, visible only with the first thrust of the knife. The Paska lined up on the counters were like a row of soldiers standing at attention, waiting to cool under freshly starched, hand embroidered linens, the tops then decorated with icing and coloured sprinkles.

Two days ago, as I was out for a walk with the little two-year-old I was babysitting, we stopped at our local Hospice to visit a longtime family friend, who had relocated to our area several years ago from Niagara Falls. Our families had visited often over the years. As I sat on her bed, we chatted a bit and I again asked her daughter exactly where her mom was born. "In Romania, in Beresina," she said, as I nodded my head, acknowledging that I understood. Upon leaving that day I prayed with our friend as my little charge waved and said "Auf Wiedersehen." (goodbye). Our friend passed later that day.

At the funeral, I will sit in the local Lutheran church and listen to the old beloved hymns. Chances are there will be one in German thrown in as well. I will think of the beautiful old Lutheran church in Leipzig, totally plundered by the Soviets, now reduced to a couple of musty storage rooms with tacky bright blue tile. If I had not seen it with my own eyes I never would have believed it. I will print out a copy of the hymn sung by Germans from Bessarabia, the "Heimatlied der Bessarabiendeutschen" (Homeland Hymn of the Bessarabian Germans) for the daughter of the deceased. We will gather in the fellowship hall for coffee, *Torte* and other German delicacies prepared and served by the women of the church. As we exit down the stairs into the basement to find our seats someone will inevitably ask me, "So how is it that you know the deceased?"

"Well, you see, once upon a time there was this country, named Bessarabia. It doesn't exist anymore, only in memory. And you know.... I think they even had a king...."

"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."