

## The Cup

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

For several months it has sat on my stovetop as part of my kitchen décor, portraying, I felt, an eclectic blend of both the old and the new. The crudely fashioned tin cup sits in sharp contrast to the fashionable black, brown and white glass ceramic backsplash which my husband installed last winter. "What's this?" he asks, picking up the cup, and examining it by turning it over in his hands. For years it sat in my mother's kitchen cupboard, and many years ago I would watch my grandmother drink peppermint tea out of it with leaves she had picked from the garden. Made of aluminum, very lightweight with a curved and soldered handle, it is dark brown in color, although black charred remnants, maybe from fire, are visible on the sides, giving it a rather rough feel. I recently asked my 88 year old aunt the history of the cup. She shrugged her shoulders and told me it was from Russia, but that, unfortunately, was all that she could tell me about it.

Laughingly, my mother would relay going down to the river for water in Martuk, Kazakhstan, where in the polluted stagnant pool people gathered to bathe, not only themselves but also their animals as others nearby gathered buckets of drinking water. It also served as the local sewer for the surrounding areas. "Yes, we would have to put a piece of cloth between our mouths and the cup so that we wouldn't swallow all the tadpoles, frogs, and the larvae!" "Was this the cup that she used at the river?" I mused to myself.

In Leipzig, Bessarabia, rickety caravans of transient gypsies regularly visited the towns, and as mothers saw them approaching up the winding dusty road from the hillsides they would call their children inside for safety. Rumors were always rampant about the stealing of children and livestock. "What in the world did they even sell?" I once asked her, with a puzzled look on my face. "Oh, housewares and tin and metal products and such. Most of which they had made themselves. They always wanted to make a deal." "Was this a cup they had made?" I questioned myself. "Did she then use it to draw fresh water from the community well in Leipzig, Bessarabia? Was it then a cup my grandmother had gathered from her kitchen as she packed on short notice upon her resettlement from Bessarabia to Poland, then to Germany and then east to Kazakhstan?" I asked myself.

In the Ukraine during the great famine of the 1930's, my Oma Regehr would tell me about the imposed rationing of food and grains as she struggled to feed her four children. "The rations were meagre," she would tell me, as mothers would have to use great innovation to make the food stretch. "Was this the cup she had used as she went to the mill in Halbsatdt, Ukraine, which is still standing today, to present her coupon and collect her quota?" I thought to myself.

"These potatoes, they certainly could use some more salt," my father would regularly announce at the supper table, as someone promptly jumped up to get him the salt shaker. Having contracted malaria in Siberia, my mother had no sense of taste or smell whatsoever, and although she was an excellent cook, tasting the food before serving was never witnessed in our home. "Was she drinking the mosquito infected water out of this cup when she fell ill?" I wondered to myself.

"Was my mother holding this cup as stood at the bedside of her dying 10 year son? As he begged her for water for his parched lips minutes before he died, was she, with great sorrow, willing to give him a last drink, against the doctor's orders?" I questioned myself.

It is well after midnight and the patient calls again. He is restless and unsettled and is now asking for water. I retrieve fresh water and ice and hold the straw to his lips as he satisfies his thirst. "How many times have I done that?" I say to myself. "Thousands I am sure." Now satisfied, he resettles easily even though there is ongoing commotion in the hallway.

"Hey, have you guys watched that new reality TV show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding?*" one of my co-workers exclaims. "I can't believe those people!" she continues, as I smile to myself. "Where do they find all those characters for those shows anyway?" I remain stoically silent. I vow to tuck that story in my memory bank and save it for a rainy day.

I am standing at my kitchen stove cooking supper as I glance at the now infamous cup on the stovetop. Oh the stories it could tell! I again look at my recipe on the counter beside me as I gather my ingredients. As usual, I skip the salt. Even if I do a taste test before the meal is served, I wouldn't know either way if it is actually needed or not...