

Claire Bruell

Frank and Alice Briess

For Claire Bruell, the experience of being a child of Holocaust survivors who found refuge in New Zealand is inextricably linked with the memory of aromas which came from her mother's kitchen. It is memory also which has led her to delve into the past in search of vestiges of a former way of life, peopled with ghosts, now vanished.

There is a chilling image which has stayed with me since the age of about 12. I am sitting in the kitchen of a friend whose mother is cooking me pancakes (palatschinken). For some reason I can no longer remember, we two are alone. She is from Eastern Europe, an excellent cook and plies me with fresh aromatic pancakes, one after another, oozing melted chocolate. At the same time she is telling me an unimaginable story of her experiences in Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp during the war. The juxtaposition of the terrible images from her story with the delicious richness and runny texture of the chocolate pancakes left an impression forever etched into my mind, as clearly as the sight of the number tattooed on her arm. I don't know why she confided in me. Thus I gained an insight into the demons that must have plagued her and many others who shared similar experiences, for the rest of their lives. Instinctively I knew that her confidences were not something I should share with others.

As a Second Generation person, this memory and others like it have led me to dig into the past. I seek out family details and cook recipes from my mother, grandmother and mother-in-law to a point which others might consider obsessive. These links through food to a culture prevalent in far away times and places are important to me.

Palatschinken are tasty, filled with jam, honey, lemon and sugar or even a sweet cottage cheese mixture, but a melted chocolate filling is the ultimate. Here is my family's recipe for palatschinken, the first thing I ever learnt to cook.

PALATSCHINKEN

250 grams flour

2 eggs

1/2 litre milk (approx)

Pinch salt

60 grams sugar (optional)

Mix all ingredients and beat to a runny batter.

In a pan, melt a little butter.

Pour in sufficient to cover the base of the pan thinly.

When pancake starts to brown, flip over and cook until slightly browned on both sides.

Turn out onto a plate and continue to cook pancakes until all the batter has been used.

My mother was Alice (known as Lizzie) Briess (nee LÁwy). She was born in Lundenburg, (now Breclav) a small town near Bruenn (Brno) in Czechoslovakia where her father was the local doctor. When Lizzie expressed a desire to attend University her father Isidor would agree to her studying only medicine. She studied at the Charles University in Prague in the 1930s but married my father Frank Briess just short of sitting the final exams for her degree. They married on 6th June 1937 and settled in Olmuetz (Czech Olomouc) where Frank worked in the family grain business.

My parents fled the Germans and in October 1939 arrived in Auckland. They went farming in what is now suburban West Auckland. At home in Czechoslovakia there had been a cook and servants. This was a different life! Lizzie and Frank wrote weekly to their parents in Czechoslovakia. Lizzie's letters to her mother Marta were often about housekeeping and cooking. Fortunately they kept carbon copies of their typed letters, describing in detail their lives in New Zealand during the early war years.

Undated-(1940)

'The only news from the farm to report is that we bought a goose. We locked her up in the pigsty at night and during the day we let her walk around a fenced off paddock. You're not allowed to fatten geese here. We fed the goose on maize and grass, looked after and protected her for 4 weeks and then we killed her. We were very proud that by correct feeding we were able to get rid of the fishy taste which the gooseflesh here usually has. Here, the geese wander freely over the

farm and eat whatever takes their fancy, even fish. That's why the gooseflesh tastes so bad. We had a proper Friday night dinner - young goose with sauce and barches (challah). Lovely!

16/3/1940

'Franz goes to work and I begin cleaning up and cooking. Once a week I wash the bedclothes, as you wrote in my cookbook it should be done. Do you remember that? Washing is easier here in that we have a machine that looks like a mangle on a trough and we can wring out the washing. Summer and winter you can dry the washing outside. Once a week I bake bread with sour dough and yeast and once a week I iron... Today's lunch Naturschnitzl, cucumber salad, new potatoes and a butter cake...

18/5/1940

Although I won't be as good a cook as you for a long time, I surprise myself at how well I get on and how good the results are. The guests always say so and I have a good reputation as a cook.. We have a trolley, which is important here as I have no servants. I put everything in the kitchen on the trolley and wheel it in... On the buffet I have the candlesticks and the cups which you gave me for my birthday present."

This is a recipe for the caraway seed bread which Lizzie baked on the farm each week. For me what makes the bread special is the use of large amounts of caraway seed which give the bread its distinctive flavour.

CARAWAY BREAD

2 tsp granular yeast

1 tsp sugar

Water

Caraway seed to taste (4 tblsp?)

Salt (to taste)

5 cups of mixed flours - white, stoneground wholemeal, rye.

(I use about 2-3 cups of white flour and the rest darker flour)

Leave yeast, sugar and water to 'work' in a container until bubbling.

Place all dry ingredients in cake mixer together with bubbling yeast mixture and beat with a cup or so of the water.

Add water as required so that the resulting dough comes away easily from the sides of the mixer. It is a fairly heavy dough but should be elastic and still a bit sticky to touch. It can be baked without a mould 'stand alone' or in a loaf tin. Keep adding water little by little until the dough forms a ball around the dough hook in the mixer. Butter or spray loaf tin, roasting tin or whatever container you want to cook the loaf in. Place loaf in pan and pat top down flat.

Wet top by sprinkling water roughly on top.

Sprinkle caraway seeds over the bread and pat down to make the seeds stick. This bread only requires one rising.

Bake about 10 minutes on a higher heat to brown the top (180 deg) and then turn down for about 30 minutes to 150 deg.

Bread is ready when a wooden skewer can be inserted in the middle and comes out clean of unbaked dough. Turn out immediately - don't leave sitting in the tin or the bottom becomes soggy.

27/6/1940 (letter to Frank's sister Marianne and her husband Otto in America)

Today we checked on how our sauerkraut is getting on. I tell you it's just great! First we'll try a small amount, then we'll sell it. We want to do the same with pickled gherkins. By the way, can you get them in America? I am also interested to hear if you can get Hungarian salami and how much it costs. My mouth waters! Can you get rollmops? You can't get these things here. I suppose because it's too warm.

3/2/1941

"I'm very proud of my first lot of salted gherkins. They turned out well. This week I'll do 100 more and I'll also do 2 dozen mustard gherkins. They keep longer. As well as these, I bottled 20 jars of plums. As you can see I'm taking good care of our stomachs. I enjoy it and I'm proud when things come out well. Of course, I've also got plum jam...and three months later..The sweet and sour gherkins turned out quite well. The massergurken have already been eaten up and I still have about 11 jars of mustard gherkins. They keep well and we treat ourselves with them. I'm so pleased I'll do some again, hopefully soon. Slowly I'm making everything. I'm collecting recipes. I

always think of you, what you would say about it, when something turns out particularly well. I also bake bread all the time"

These letters were written during the war years by, my parents.

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