

A Recipe from Wartime by Ruth Chevion

One time, Ala, the young Polish woman who was hiding my mother, gave my mother a little notebook. It was a lined soft cover 6" X 8" notebook with about 25 pages.

I hope you can imagine how precious this would be dear reader. I remember my mother talking about the emptiness of her time over those two years. I remember her describing how the time passed so slowly. She would promise herself not to look at the clock for at least an hour, but when she looked it had only gone five minutes.

Now I ask you...if you were in my mother's position, and someone gave you a blank lined notebook, what would you do with it? What would you write in it? It's something to think about, isn't it?

Would it be feelings? Poetry? The first chapter of your book? Thoughts?

Here's what my mother did with her notebook: She copied out recipes for elegant cakes and desserts. I'm not sure whose recipes these were. Probably Aunt Fela. Ala later became something of a political activist, so I don't picture her in an apron whisking up desserts. In any event, somehow my mother found these recipes, and it was to these culinary delights that she dedicated her notebook.

My mother's wartime notebook, filled cover to cover with recipes for desserts and cakes, survived the war. Mom brought it with her to America. I still have it. The pages are all yellow and dry by now, cracking at the edges, but the recipes are still legible. All the writing is in pencil in my mother's round European script, all in Polish.

What I love about the notebook is that it bespeaks a certain optimism. It means to me that my mother was able to suffer deeply without tipping over into depression. She maintained a certain equanimity. In extreme circumstances, like a hunted wounded animal hiding in a lair, she maintained herself. What valuable knowledge from the holocaust this is — just to know that we can do this, that our minds are that capable.

I would like to share with you, dear reader, the one recipe from the notebook that became my mother's favorite. She often made it for company. It's a five-star juicy chocolatey thing that you scoop out of a bowl with a big spoon, like a trifle. It has no flour and no baking so it's pretty easy. Here it is:

Lady Finger Dessert (Legumina Biszkoptowa)

Ingredients:

- 2 packages of store bought soft lady fingers.
- 1 1/2 cups hot milk
- Some apricot jam
- 4-5 ounces semi-sweet chocolate
- 3 tbs sugar
- 2 egg yolks
- Whipped cream, chocolate chips and berries for decoration

Instructions:

- The lady finger cookies come split in two, so open them and spread some apricot jam inside each one.
- Make three layers of lady fingers in a bowl that can go to the table and put some jam between the layers also. (No need for oven proof as there is no baking in this recipe.)
- Mix 1/2 cup of the milk with 1 tbs sugar, and sprinkle that over the lady fingers, not to soak, only to moisten.
- Melt the chocolate into the remaining hot milk, and let it cool while you beat the eggs.
- In a bowl, beat 2 egg yolks with 2 tbs sugar to a whitish yellow color.
- Mix the cooled chocolate mixture into the beaten egg yolks.
- Pour the the whole wet mixture over the lady fingers. Using a fork, encourage the chocolate to reach the bottom layer.
- Refrigerate a few hours or overnight.
- Top with whipped cream. Decorate with chocolate chips and berries.

Enjoy!

