Baking Bread for the Week

Bread was the most important part of our diet. Each week mother baked about 20 large, round loaves of rye bread. The preparation for this baking began on Wednesday night when mother mixed flour, water, yeast and other ingredients in a large, round container made of wooden slats fastened with iron reams. If a large water barrel were cut in half at the center, there would be two such containers, but this container was larger than half of such a barrel.

After the mixing, kneading and pummeling with her hands, mother covered the container with a tablecloth for the night.

Before retiring that evening I placed in the front part of the oven enough kindling wood and several pieces from the split logs to start a fire the next morning, when we both rose earlier than usual. The first thing mother did was to take the tablecloth off the container. Yes, all was well. The dough in the container was increased to more than double its former size, and she was pleased. While I made the Sammovar, she started the fire in the oven and made other preparations for the baking. Before the Sammovar began boiling, I prayed quickly (she didn’t mind if I didn’t pray with ecstasy), and by then the Sammovar was ready. We both had tea, with milk that had been cooking slowly all night by a very small fire in the front part of the oven. This milk had a very thick top, a teaspoon of which made the tea very tasty. We also ate bread spread with preserves, and in the summer raw fruit. While she attended to the preliminary fire in the oven, I threw down from the attic enough wood for heating the oven for baking not only bread for the week, but also Challeh and goodies for the Sabbath.

After the preliminary fire in the oven had had a good start, it (the fire) was shoveled into the deep part of the oven and allowed to get even a better start there. Thereafter, I brought in the wood from the hall and placed as many pieces in the oven as it was possible and gradually spread all the burning wood equally in all parts of the oven.

While I prepared the oven to the proper temperature, my mother would tear out chunks of dough in approximately equal size. This she kneaded, pummeled and shaped into large, round loaves leaving one end slightly roughened. (This rough part was usually a favorite; it was rubbed with garlic and considered a delicacy. It was probably the original “garlic bread”). The loaves were then placed on a large table ready to be shoveled into the oven.

The upper and flat end of a long-handled shovel-like tool was then well covered with flour and a loaf of bread was placed on this flat end and shoveled deep into the oven. This was repeated until all the loaves were in the oven. Then an iron door with a handle on the outside was placed either by me or mother right in front of the opening of the oven to keep the heat in.

After an estimated time, mother would put this shovel-like tool into the oven and pull out the first available loaf to see if it was well baked and ready to be taken out. Usually this was the case. Sometimes when the bread was not quite ready she would manage to pull out a loaf from the very depth of the oven to make certain that none would be under baked or over-baked. Only on rare occasions was it necessary to resort to these maneuvers; usually mother’s estimated time was right. Upon removal, mother would lift each loaf, weigh it in her hands and in her mind, tap it at the bottom to make sure that is was properly baked (which was usually the case), and when satisfied, smiled approvingly. She then turned the load over to me for brushing off from the bottom the ashes and flour, if any, clinging to it, and for placing on the large table in the kitchen to cool off.

By David B. Schreiber

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