



## **Mebos, more than just strange word by Gail Loon Lustig**

Most of the pleasurable culinary treats I came to love were made by my grandmother, Celia, my father's mother. She knew just how to fry fish, make desserts with fruit and condensed milk, orange cakes that dripped chocolate icing and babkas that were simply delicious. Some of these dishes she must have known forever; there were others she picked up in her new country at the tip of Africa, far from the Dvinsk of her childhood.

Celia got tremendous pleasure from feeding us, her seven grandchildren who drooled at the food she served when we spent lunchtimes with her. There were of course her special dishes made for my father such as P'tcha, the jelly of calves' feet which lost her many points on my 'love scale', but seeing the twinkle in my father's eyes when he knew he was in for a treat, compensated the utter loathing of the wobbly dish covered with a cloth.

I could continue writing about Celia's amazing talents for many pages both out of a deep respect for her efforts and the love I felt for her, but the treat that I really want to talk about is somewhat esoteric compared to Celia's creations. It isn't quite as Jewish as the others, certainly not around for generations in my family, but to this day, reminds me of my mother, her three sisters, my host of cousins all over, most of whom I believe will agree with me.

The love of mebos must have begun for my mother in her home in Schoonder Street in the Gardens, Cape Town. Who knows just who taught her about it? Definitely not Yetta or Isador, her parents. I guess as a child, she sniffed out the small cylindrical slabs of smooth salty sweet apricots from somewhere, knew just where to buy them, how many to eat at once- for you see, they are very filling and tend to lump themselves at the top of your tummy after just one or two.

Travelling to the city on a Saturday with my mother from Bellville where we lived, almost always included a visit to her beloved cousin, Sam. He would break into a smile when he saw Rita approaching, leave everything and to come and talk to her on the pavement outside his shop, with me at her side. They could speak for hours, he in his heavy Yiddish accent and my mother giggling at his tales and opinions. The only reason I behaved well was that I knew that very soon we'd be venturing towards the Parade and Wellington's Fruit Growers.

And invariably, that's where we landed, in the shop that smelled of cheeses foreign and off-putting to children that stretched from one street to another.

The mebos would be taken from the drawer, and then scooped into brown paper bags, generously filled, to take home. As soon as we entered the car, we would start nibbling at

them, all the while singing songs with my mother whose mood was at its best after a successful morning shopping in Town. The dark terracotta colour of the individual pieces of rubbery dried apricot fascinated me; they were quite sticky and salty, and the taste addictive. I grew to love them.

When I moved to Israel at the age of 24, besides loving seeing my family on return visits, I would visit Wellington's Market and stock up on mebos. On my last visit to Cape Town before the Covid epidemic and Oct 7<sup>th</sup> and its ramifications, I visited my friend Angela, who studied Medicine with me at UCT. Angela lives in Walmer Estate, under the Mountain. I brought her a Protea plant as a gift for her garden. She had prepared a bunch of Proteas to give me! Imagine my joy when asked if there was anything I'd like to buy - I immediately confessed to her that I'd love some mebos. Her charming smile I remembered so well set us off to the corner grocery shop where the owner happily showed me the stock of mebos waiting to fly to Israel.

We chatted about our common passion.

'I'll be leaving soon back to India, life here has become too problematic, very scary. Sad after all these years in Cape Town. I'm not sure I'll see these over there'.

'Same here, I said!' No-one's heard of mebos in Israel....

I can happily say that just writing about this tiny aspect of my life as a child growing up under the Mountain, fills me with joy, nostalgia and much more.

I'm not sure if and when I'll be travelling to Cape Town again. I'm well aware that it's hard to conjure up the memory of a smell and taste even though the image is so clear. For now, I'll rely on simply thinking about Mebos and hoping.....

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**Mebos -More Than Just a Strange Word written by Gail Loon Lustig  
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