

## The Real Taste of Chocolate Eclairs by Gail Loon Lustig

The view of Table Mountain and the delicious pink guavas from the tree outside my bedroom were probably the two best reasons for becoming attached to our house overlooking the National Road which headed northwards across the country.

Besides the name, 'Boston Estate' where we lived, there was nothing particularly attractive or romantic about living in Bellville. A mixed English, Afrikaans speaking population with people of colour living in the south of the town in Apartheid South Africa. Our family was securely connected to the Jewish community of about one hundred families which provided a nursery school, prayers in the local synagogue, Hebrew lessons for the children and plenty socializing at the regular youth movement weekend meetings. A shining light in our home, nurturing our identity, was our mother, Rita, a Hebrew teacher who had studied the language since the age of 5, then spent a year in Palestine and whose eyes twinkled any time she had the chance to talk *Ivrit*.

The façade of our town which had a main road, a Standard Bank, a post-office, a stationery shop with a bell that rang as the door opened or shut and of course my father's surgery where he practiced as a general practitioner for years, was agreeable, but nothing spectacular in any way.

There was, however, one saving grace for the ordinariness of the town in the early 60's. I am referring to a bakery located on the Main Road between the dry cleaner's and a French hairdresser, Roger.

This was 'C'est Si Bon', a Hansel and Gretl fantasy, where the fragrance of freshly baked confectionaries gushed out the door into the street embracing passersby who dived into the shop, unable to resist the temptation.

The bakery was run by a husband-and-wife team; he, Belgian, she German. The owner was bald-headed and short. His wife made up for that with a hair bun placed neatly on the top of her head. Their European accents fitted the atmosphere of a high street in a wintry Belgium or Berlin.

They had worked hard at perfecting the design of the space inside where pastries and cakes were aesthetically arranged behind spotlessly clean glass panes on trays displaying the colours, and freshness of the wares.

The custard slices, chocolate brandy balls, cream cakes with strawberries or other fruit, the chocolate eclairs and petit fours, marzipan, German cheesecake, apple doughnuts,

Swiss Roll, created a spectacular display. For those with a savoury tooth, the sausage rolls and breads were favourite choices.

The local population of Bellville and the surrounding towns were soon smitten with the treats that C'est si Bon offered. Bellville High School opposite provided a constant flow of students who would pop in for a snack and a treat. They knew the son of the owners who studied with them. Their taste buds had been tickled by the sensual pleasure of world class baking. Birthday celebrations were highlighted with 3 tiered cakes from the *konditorei*. It became an ultimate treat to pay a visit.

Then one day, this all changed.

By then the reputation of the bakery had become so well known that lovers of good confectionery and pastries would travel from Cape Town to the sleepy town of 40,000 inhabitants. This in itself was unusual. Trekking out to Bellville, away from the confines of the Mountain, the sea, the elegance of Adderley Street, the charm of the Southern Suburbs became an outing, mostly undertaken on the weekend. After all, the Northern suburbs were pretty boring, no places to picnic or enjoy the delights of nature, no consumer temptations. There were those who'd come for Sunday tea and a shmooze with relatives, but other than that, pretty uninviting.

But, the news and reputation of C'est si Bon had spread. The opportunity of 'trying' the chocolate eclairs, custard slices and other delights, became a drawcard. The bakery would be filled with a constant hum of squeals and smiles, the customers' heads rubbing against the glass case, excitedly pointing to their choices for purchase and taking home in charming cardboard boxes that protected the treats.

One particular rainy Sunday in winter, at about mid-morning, a customer in his late forties, walked into the shop with his wife. They had spoken about making the trip to Bellville for a long time. At their weekly card games, their friends offered the delights of the bakery during the tea break. They were the talk of the evening, consuming the chatter of the usual gossipy banter at such get togethers. They were eager to buy some pastries and a cake for their daughter's birthday party. It would be covered heavily with creamy meringues and have 'Happy Birthday, Gill' in pink icing written over the top.

Within minutes of entering the bakery, Issy felt the ground shaking under his feet. His head throbbed with the sudden realization of what he had seen. He let out a scream that filled the air, instantly stifling the chatter of the other customers. Pointing his shaking finger at the owner and almost choking as he shouted in a thick European accent; "YOU, YOU killed my family, you Nazi!!" It's you! I remember you from the Camps!

There was silence in the bakery. The owner's face revealed nothing. He continued cashing money at the till.

The Holocaust survivor left the bakery immediately, his wife supporting his arm as they turned towards the car.

The story of the event made its way around in no time. It flew in and out of the windows of the small Jewish community in Bellville and the surrounding towns and became the topic of conversation for a while. There were those who refused to buy at C'est si Bon although the temptation of the delightful goodies there was too great to boycott the place.

What happened after this fateful Sunday? you might ask.

South Africa in the 60's was a fast-developing independent Republic, ensconced in the laws of Apartheid, ignoring the press, the media of the outside world. An undemocratic state. The crimes of WW2 were known but not really discussed publicly. Nazi criminals had made their way out of Germany and fled to havens using the Ratlines created to assist them in their escape. They were supported by the Catholic church. South America was a popular destination as were other countries such as the U.S, Australia, Switzerland and Spain. South Africa was not reported as one of the havens and yet we know today that there certainly was support of Nazis by groups such as the Ossewabrandwag, an Afrikaner Nationalist organization.

It is not unreasonable to believe that Nazi criminals reached South Africa, found their niche in the compartmentalized reality of life in the country. And yes, Bellville was indeed distanced from the big city of Cape Town, a sleepy refuge to settle comfortably in. Who would have thought that a Holocaust survivor would uncover and confront the very man that had tortured his family amidst custard slices and petit fours?

For many years this story has troubled me. There are very few people to ask about the authenticity of the tale. And then a few months ago, on Face Book, I became a friend of someone who knew the owner of C'est Si Bon and confirmed that by his admission he was indeed in the S.S.

And what indeed became of the bakery and the owners? How did the incident affect them? We really have nothing to go on but for the fact that soon afterwards, they moved location, 45 kilometers north along the National Road, just where it turned off to a sea side resort, the Strand. To all accounts, the bakery enjoyed similar success thereafter, serving a more laid back population of the area. After the death of the owner, his wife and son relocated to Palma de Mallorca a popular German resort and asylum for Nazis after WW2.

And Issy? I have no idea. I can only imagine the heartache he must have felt, the frustration at not being able to do anything about his discovery in the country he now called his home, the nightmare of his loss and reality. Whom could he tell? How did that

visit to the renowned bakery in Bellville really affect him? I hear him telling his friends during the coffee break at the 'card' evenings and see their incredulous faces at a loss for words of comfort. After all, WW2 happened 'overseas', and although a reminder of the pogroms in the reality of their forebears' lives in Eastern Europe, remained intangible, unreal..

In today's world, this story becomes even more poignant and sad. This story begged to be told and now that it has, I feel a sense of relief.

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Written by Gail Loon Lustig in March 2024

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