

INTRODUCTION

It is an intriguing picture. No one knows exactly where or when it was made. The only man I recognise is the man with the beard, my Uncle Iwan. There he stands, in full evening dress. His gaze is serious and is focused on the camera. On his lapel he carries a mark of distinction. In fact, take a better look and you will see that more men are wearing a badge or a medal. Uncle Iwan is surrounded by ladies and gentlemen in evening dress in a chic restaurant. It is like a scene from a roaring twenties film. What was he doing there and how did he end up living among the British upper classes? Who was this man who exchanged dreary and gloomy Holland for elegant Paris and exotic Algiers and eventually settled in Edwardian London?

The Dutch family Kriens from The Hague is a family with a very colourful history. A very extensive family, with branches all over the world and a pedigree that goes back all the way to knights in medieval Switzerland. There is enough drama to fill an adventure book with. One of the family members that greatly appeals to the imagination is Uncle Iwan (1871-1957). The story goes that Iwan ran away from home when he was fifteen years old because he wanted to become a cook, something his father did not approve of. A bit of a maverick he must have been. And yet, it was Iwan who was to set up a cookery school in London after years of wandering through Europe. Incredible though it may seem, the story certainly appears to be true. There is evidence in a number of family photos, one of which shows Uncle Iwan in the company of the world-famous chef Auguste Escoffier during a gala dinner.

Much to my surprise no one had ever made any attempts to find out about Uncle Iwan's history. Where does one start? Thanks to the Internet, it is no longer necessary to visit all kinds of archives and image banks to search for material. Simply type in a name on your computer and see what comes up! In 2011, my husband, a namesake and second cousin of the illustrious uncle, was searching the web for his own website, which had miraculously disappeared due to computer problems. Having Googled his own name he found a press release, referring to a book in which - to his great surprise - his name was mentioned. The book, entitled *Sweet Peas, Suffragettes and Showmen. Events that Changed the World in the RHS Halls*, turned out to be about the exhibition building of the Royal Horticultural Society in London. The RHS Halls are located next to Westminster Kingsway College, which houses England's oldest cookery school. The halls were opened in 1904 and were used not only for flower shows, but also for numerous other exhibitions and events, including cookery exhibitions and demonstrations. The press release my husband had stumbled across referred to 'the famous Dutch chef Iwan Kriens', who used to give cookery demonstrations at the RHS Halls. As we found out Iwan Kriens had been headmaster of the London County Council (LCC) Cookery Technical School

at the Westminster Technical Institute for 27 years. The school, which nowadays goes by the name of Westminster Kingsway College, still has an impressive reputation and can boast names like Sophie Wright, Jamie Oliver and Ainsley Harriot among its alumni. This chance discovery was to be the beginning of our research into the life story of Uncle Iwan.

We contacted René Dee, the author of the book on the RHS Halls we had found. It was René who introduced us to Westminster Kingsway College, which subsequently invited us to a visit. Much to our delight we were received as guests of honour, were treated to a sumptuous lunch at the school's restaurant, The Vincent Rooms, and were presented with a copy of *Carry on Cooking. Catering for a Century in Westminster 1910-2010 Westminster Kingsway College Departments of Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, a book on the history of the school. The book provided more information about Iwan Kriens and showed pictures we did not know. Thus the mysterious Uncle Iwan slowly but surely came to life.

It was through René Dee's book about the RHS Halls that we also became acquainted with a fascinating club of cookery fanatics, the Universal Cookery & Food Association (UCFA), in which Uncle Iwan appeared to have played a prominent role. We now Googled Iwan's name more frequently and found several newspaper articles that had been dedicated to him, in which he was described as 'the wizard of the kitchen' and 'the best cooking instructor of Europe'. As time went by we became more and more curious. We discovered that Iwan had written two books: *The Economy of Carving*, about cutting meat at minimum loss, and a wartime cookery book, entitled *The Victory Cookery Book*. The latter was co-written together with one Mrs C.S. Peel. Naturally, we immediately thought of Emma Peel, the sexy assistant to secret agent John Steed in the '60s television series *The Avengers*. The life of 'our' Dorothy Peel proved no less interesting, as will appear later on in my book. We were fortunate enough to find both books in second-hand bookstores. One of them turned out to be Uncle Iwan's own copy of *The Victory Cookery Book*, with handwritten comments and observations!

Interestingly enough, the recipes from Iwan's wartime cookery book and the writer's ideas on healthy food have hardly dated, although some ingredients have gone out of fashion, such as sago and semolina. They are generally simple recipes, using seasonal vegetables and foods that at the time were available only on rationing coupons, and only in small quantities, if at all. The authors show great inventiveness and creativity in finding alternatives for ingredients that were either not available at the time, or scarce. The book contains a number of basic principles for cooking a healthy and nutritious meal. Superfoods as we now have them, did not exist yet, but Iwan Kriens and Dorothy Peel were already aware of the unique features of certain vegetables and cereals. The importance of drinking water, the medicinal effect of a home-made broth, the advantages of steaming instead of cooking vegetables and fish, the role of

carbohydrates and minerals, all of which topics that nowadays are presented as totally new or innovative ideas by trendy chefs and health gurus, can be found in this simple cookery book from 1918. Due to the limited use of wheat and milk and a creative use of alternative ingredients, some of these wartime recipes would today still be suitable for people with food intolerances.

Characteristically, all of the recipes stress that any kind of wastage should be avoided. After all, fuel, water and food were scarce as a result of the First World War. One hundred years later this idea is still very topical, not because of a war situation, but because of climate change and because the natural resources of our planet are being depleted. If the family history in itself was not sufficient reason for me to write a book about Iwan Kriens, it was this modern element that inspired me to tell the life story of this completely unknown Dutchman, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, trained English chefs and waiters for jobs in the high-end hotels, restaurants and institutions. A strong-willed man who, together with his colleague and co-writer Dorothy Peel, taught the English to survive the war on a ration of potatoes, rice flour, corn flour, tapioca, vegetables, only a little meat and the occasional egg. As a matter of fact, food rationing proved beneficial for the nation as a whole. During the war the British generally lived healthier lives than before the war, if only because they now consumed a great deal less sugar. The 1918 rations for sugar, meat and fat are similar to the total intake recommended by the Health Council today. At the same time, labourers and housewives who were doing heavy work in and around the house, without the help of our modern machines, were using more calories than their modern-day counterparts would do nowadays.

I decided to include a number of recipes from *The Victory Cookery Book* in my book. Not surprisingly, I would have to try them first! I soon discovered that this would be a time-consuming task, so I asked a few friends to test and evaluate all sorts of dishes and recipes. This resulted in an elaborate and vivid E-mail exchange on measuring (the cookery book uses the original English sizes with gills, quarters, pints, lb's and oz's), oven temperatures (none of the recipes indicate how long something should be in the oven nor at which temperature), ingredients (what is *allspice* and where does one buy it?) and all kinds of methods of preparation. The result is a small anthology, taken from *The Victory Cookery Book*. Innovative, not too difficult and simply delicious, also in peacetime.



Family portrait of the Kriens family, around 1892. Standing (from left to right): Uvar, Otto, Iwan, Ilmer. Seated (from left to right): Arie, Frits, Hermine, Eliza. On the wall a portrait of Ernst, who had died a few years earlier.