



RUMBA UNDER FIRE

THE ARTS OF SURVIVAL
FROM WEST POINT TO DELHI

EDITED BY IRINA DUMITRESCU

WAR AND THE FOOD OF DREAMS

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARA DE SILVA

Cara De Silva with Irina Dumitrescu

I discovered Cara De Silva's work on my own bookshelf, in the form of In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín, her edition of a recipe collection written from memory in the Theresienstadt/Terezín concentration camp.¹ It is a moving document, listing instructions for deviled eggs, candied fruits, caramels, cherry-plum dumplings, and coffee cake, recalled and written down in the midst

1 Cara De Silva, ed., *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson, 1996). For reflections on the volume, see Charlotte Innes, "The Food of Memory," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1997, <http://articles.latimes.com/1997/jul/23/food/fo-15271>; Judith Tydor Baumel, "'You Said the Words You Wanted Me to Hear but I Heard The Words You Couldn't Bring Yourself to Say': Women's First Person Accounts of the Holocaust," *Oral History Review* 27.1 (2000): 17–56; Rona Kaufman, "Testifying, Silencing, Monumentalizing, Swallowing: Coming to Terms with *In Memory's Kitchen*," *jac* 24.2 (2004): 427–45; Marlene Kadar, "Wounding Events and the Limits of Autobiography," in *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005): 81–104; Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission," *Poetics Today* 27.2 (2006): 353–83; Daniel E. Feinberg and Alice Crosetto, "Cookbooks: Preserving Jewish Tradition," *Judaica Librarianship* 16 (2011): 149–72; Marie I. Drews, "Cooking *In Memory's Kitchen*: Re-Presenting Recipes, Remembering the Holocaust," in *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food & Meaning*, ed. Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008): 53–70.

of starvation. In one of her poems, Mina Pächter, one of the book's authors and the woman through whom it survived, describes the degradation to which Terezín's cultured, educated inmates were subjected:

*Der Professor kommt täglich her
Früher las er den Homer
Und im Urtext: Herakles und Mark Aurel
Heute liest er nur Tagesbefehl
Und den Zettel der Menage.*

*The professor visits every day
He used to read the Odyssey
In Greek and Latin: Heracles
And works of Mark Aurelius
Now reads just daily proclamations
And chits that list starvation rations.²*

In another poem, Pächter portrays two sisters in Terezín: "sie kochen zusammen oft nur platonisch" (they cook together, often only platonically),³ offering a darkly witty twist on what a classical education might achieve in times of extreme need. This platonic cooking, with only the imagination as ingredient, seems to describe the "cook-book" at the centre of *In Memory's Kitchen*.

I asked Cara De Silva to speak with me about Pächter's book, how she came to edit it, and about the wider phenomenon of wartime cook-books. In April of 2015 we met on Skype; the text below is an edited version of our interview, to which I have added footnotes. Despite the editing, we have chosen to preserve some of the oral nature of the text, in the hope that the emotion we both felt during our conversation would come across in writing.

2 De Silva, *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín*, 81–82. Translated here by David Stern, Mina Pächter's grandson.

3 De Silva, *In Memory's Kitchen*, 86. My translation.



IRINA: Tell me about Mina Pächter's cookbook. Where was it written down? How did it arrive in the United States?

CARA: The *kochbuch*, so haunting, so poignant, was set down in the concentration camp of Terezín, also known as Theresienstadt. Mina Pächter was one of what we think were four or five women who participated in its creation. I say that because Bianca Steiner Brown, who translated the recipes for publication (they were in German and Czech), thought she recognized that number of distinct hands in it. But it was through Mina herself that the cookbook survived.

I initially came to see the manuscript because I belonged to a group called the Culinary Historians of New York and knew somebody there, a great collector of cookbooks named Dalia Carmel. Dalia was friends with Mina Pächter's daughter, Anny Stern, and one day Anny suddenly said to her: "You are interested in cookbooks? I'll show you a cookbook!" And with that she pulled out of a drawer a fragile, hand-sewn group of pages covered with recipes in tremulous writing.

Let me supply a little context. During the Holocaust many prisoners talked about food a lot, not only about starving, which one might expect, but about particular dishes, about recipes, about where in their hometown they considered the best place to get an ingredient. They did what was sometimes called "Cooking with the Mouth." Much less common, although more common than I originally thought, was the creation of "cookbooks." When I first saw the Terezín manuscript I believed it was an anomaly, because who could imagine the setting down of recipes by people interned in camps or other places of imprisonment? After all, in general, there was no paper, there were no pencils. You had to be in a place where it was possible to do such a thing. Yes, there were what

one might describe as “oral cookbooks,” but the fact that the Terezín cookbook was written down is one of the things that make the *kochbuch* so important. Mina and four friends or bunk mates found bits of paper and a way to hold them together and inscribed recipes on them, about eighty in all.

That we have it involves an incredible story of mother-to-daughter transmission. I tell it here as it was recounted to me by the daughter, Anny Stern. On Yom Kippur 1944, as Mina Pächter, the mother, lay dying of starvation in the camp hospital, she gave a friend a package that contained the cookbook and asked him to deliver it to her daughter. Anny and her husband and son had left for Palestine in 1939, but Mina had refused to go with them, insisting that “no one will hurt an old woman.” And now, because of the war, Mina couldn’t give her friend the address. As a consequence, he simply kept the package with him in Teplice, a town in Czechoslovakia, where he had an antique store or an art store of some kind. Then one day a cousin of his came into the shop and announced plans for a forthcoming trip to Israel (formerly Palestine). Mina’s friend handed the package to his cousin and asked that his deathbed promise be fulfilled. But by the time his cousin got word of Anny’s whereabouts, it was only to discover that she and her family had recently moved to the United States. So now it was the cousin who kept the package with no way of delivering it.

A decade and a half later, a man from Ohio came to a meeting of Czech Jews in New York bearing the parcel. Nobody knows who he was or how he got the *kochbuch*, nor where it was in the meantime. But, at some point during the meeting he asked if anyone there knew Anny Stern. Someone raised their hand and said, “I think I do.” Later that day, about twenty-five years after her mother had died in Terezín, Anny’s telephone rang in a high-rise apartment in New York. And a stranger’s voice said, “Is this Anny Stern?” “Yes,” Anny responded. “Then,” said the voice, “I have a package for you from your mother.” When she first saw it, Anny told me, it

was like her mother's hand was reaching out to her from the dead. She didn't open the package for a number of years, because it was too painful.

I: She didn't even open it?

C: No. She just kept it in the drawer. She saw the handwriting on the outside. She recognized it as her mother's, and she put the package away. It was a long time before she finally found the courage to take it out and open it, and there in front of her were all these recipes written down by starving women.

Eventually, she showed it to Dalia and the present part of this extraordinary tale began. Dalia asked Bianca Steiner Brown, also a member of the Culinary Historians of New York, to translate a few of the recipes simply to see what the manuscript held. What Dalia didn't know, however, was that Bianca herself had special knowledge of what those pages contained, not only because she had been born in Czechoslovakia, was a brilliant cook, and a food professional, but because she herself had been interned in Terezín and had heard the food and cooking conversations that took place among the women. She was a teenager at the time, too young to really understand, and told me she thought they were crazy to be talking about food while they were starving. It was only much later that, on reflection, she came to it with great awareness.

So Dalia first went to Bianca to translate a few of the recipes. And then Dalia came to me. I was on the staff of a major American newspaper called *Newsday*/*New York Newsday*, then one of the largest in the country, and I realized immediately this had to be a story. Fortunately, my editors agreed. It became a feature article that stunned readers. Went out on the wires. Grabbed everyone's attention. And calls started coming in from Holocaust Museums that wanted the *kochbuch* for their collections.

It is, by the way, in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

I: That was what I was going to ask.

C: Yes. It's not on display but it is held and protected there, and people can request it. Anybody can see it.

In fact, it was in part because of the reaction of the Holocaust museums to the article that I ended up doing *In Memory's Kitchen*. When I started getting all these emails from the museums expressing a desire to have the manuscript (of course, it wasn't mine to give), it quickly became clear that the story of it needed to become a book. And that I was going to be the one who undertook it.

To be frank, I was really apprehensive. I am a very empathic person. I knew the process was going to be very painful. But I also knew that not doing it would be much worse. From the moral perspective, I really didn't have a choice. It was clearly of the greatest importance to memorialize its authors, to create in any way I could a vessel for their voices, to help people understand what food means beyond simple bodily nourishment, to contribute a new and heart-rending dimension to the burgeoning field of food studies.

More than that, I knew in my heart that I was the right person to do it. Even though the stories I heard growing up were about pogroms and I didn't have anybody that I knew of in the Holocaust itself, I grew up with it as I did with the older stories. Also, although I am a secular Jew, I'm very Jewish. The sense of obligation to these women, which I still carry with me as a daily part of life, was extremely strong. So I did it, and I cried every day for a year. There was no way to think about it and their circumstances as they set the recipes down, without my eyes brimming over. Sometimes I would fall into a friend's arms, emotionally exhausted, but, in general, I found that no matter how I felt, I couldn't complain without censoring myself. I discovered that once I had talked to survivors, undertaken work on their behalf, I could never freely complain about my own pain in response because no

matter how much I hurt, it was so nothing in comparison to their suffering.

Ultimately, as editor, I asked Bianca to translate all the recipes in the manuscript, which she did with great pain and as homage to her fellow prisoners. I wrote the introduction and edited the text and the recipes, produced the other material for the book. On publication, *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* burst upon the scene. (The great response to my article had been just a prelude.) Magazine and newspaper stories appeared everywhere, both across the United States and in much of the world. The book became one of *The New York Times Book Review's* most noteworthy books of the year. In time, it was included in a variety of critical studies, women's studies, food studies.

Not surprisingly artifacts such as the book, or rather the manuscript on which it was based, had been largely unheard of. It was extremely moving. It was startling. It was a new way to approach the Holocaust. A more straightforward connection. Everyone eats. And that was the primary reason for the phenomenal extent of the media coverage. But initially that coverage, though so wonderful, also came with a problem.

When I first began talking about *In Memory's Kitchen* to the press and lecturing to live audiences, I realized that despite what I had written in the introduction, many people were thinking of the published version as a real cookbook. A Holocaust cookbook. I felt profound dismay about that. And so I began to emphasize even more than I already had that it was not meant to be that, that its contents were dream recipes, a number of which didn't work because the authors were often dying of starvation as they were writing them down. Their recipes in some cases appeared to be compromised by protein deficiency and, in general, by the pitiful state they were in physically and mentally. In a sense, the condition of some of recipes bore witness. Of course, all of them could be cooked by an expert who knew the cuisine. Or by somebody who

wanted to compare the recipes to versions in a Middle European or Czechoslovakian cookbook and then prepare them. However, essentially the manuscript is a memoir in recipes.

But women, even though they are usually the nourishers, don't always understand the larger meaning of recipes. And men understand perhaps even less. They don't see that food and cooking it go far beyond the pot, and far beyond taste, and far beyond dinner and the table. And so they don't understand that every recipe tells a story beyond the rules it sets out for a dish, and that recipes written in these circumstances tell an even bigger story. And in the case of the Terezín recipes, they didn't get the breadth of their meaning until I started being interviewed a great deal and until scholars got a hold of it, and until I began speaking and emphasizing that this was, in its way, even though written in food, a form of autobiography, a chronicle of life and culture before the Nazis.

I: I was going to tell you that I very deliberately avoided this book for a long time. This one year when my husband still lived in New York and I was living in Dallas, I would go to a bookstore called Half Price Books several times a week. Of course, I always went to the cookbooks and in the East European section of the cookbooks was *In Memory's Kitchen*. It wasn't in Judaica or history...

C: That's a whole other issue, why it was there.

I: It was Dallas. Somebody had to file the book and they filed it there. I was always looking for interesting Eastern European cookbooks because I don't actually cook too much in my tradition, and I would pick it up and I would open it and I would put it back. I think that the thought at the back of my mind was that I don't want to deal with this. And then at some point I finally bought it. I didn't necessarily want to deal with it but I couldn't leave it on the shelf either.

C: Ah, yes. I really understand that.

I: I also didn't look at it for a long time. It was in the context of *Rumba Under Fire* that I started to look at *In Memory's Kitchen*, and then it made sense to me in a different way. There is a little bit of a danger in getting too close. A lot of the recipes are from my childhood, and the language, German, is the language I live in now. And yet German carries with it the trauma of the past century. But you were talking about the book's genre.

C: Well, yes. The book went to thirty-two publishers before anyone would take it, and one of the central reasons for that was that the publishers who turned it down one after the other were saying things like, "How would we sell it? Where would it be in the bookstore? Where would it be filed? Would it be in the cookbook section? Would it be among Holocaust books? In the Jewish studies section?" And then, "This is a remarkable document. It should be published. But not by us."

Finally, the company that had the foresight to become the book's publisher bought it for very little, but since I was undertaking it as a mitzvah, or good deed, project, I would have done it even for a penny. (I should mention here that everybody, my agent, the publicist, the people closest in, were also doing it as a good deed. I referred to us as the Mitzvah Team.) Anyway, that is how the book began its life. And later, after it was in print, I began to see what the publishers had been talking about regarding categories, because mostly this powerful remnant of the Holocaust was filed among regular cookbooks, right along with Julia Child and *The Joy of Cooking*. Where you found it in Dallas, Irina, in the Eastern European section, was actually better than the usual filing here.

I also had a horrible and related experience with a well-known rabbi who thought that this really was "a Holocaust cookbook." He believed I was exploiting the Holocaust. And his protest appeared in a magazine. I thought I would die. I

was so outraged, not only that somebody would think that of me, but also that he did not understand what this was at all. The organization he was part of went crazy with embarrassment because they didn't agree with him. But to him it was only a collection of recipes and, as I said, most people knew recipes largely as things you take to the stove and cook. It had no further meaning for him. I wrote in fury and explained.

I: Do you think it's because it's food? Because it's traditionally the province of women?

C: I think it is that, in part. I doubt that a woman rabbi would have had the same reaction. And I have heard other stories about men understanding in only limited terms what it is about the subject that might sometimes come to women more intuitively. And although men also collected recipes under duress, I doubt that it was in exactly the same way and out of the same need that drives women.

There was also a certain amount of conflict when all the articles about the book began to run in newspapers and magazines here and abroad. I felt that since this was not a cookbook as such, and since some of the recipes didn't work because of the condition the women were in, there should be no attempt to make any of them usable for publication. But everyone wanted exactly that. So I gave in, and Bianca, a superb cook who knew the cuisine so well, took about ten of the recipes she had worked on at the beginning as part of investigating the cookbook and wrote them up professionally. And then we had recipes that could be given to the press for people to make at home with the knowledge that the dish would be delicious. And that turned out to have its good side. There were people who told me that they pulled out one of those recipes, and that they were going to make it on Passover or Rosh Hashanah every year in memory of the women of the Holocaust. So very moving. Later, when, as I just mentioned, people told me that every year on a Jewish holy day, they were going to make one of those dishes in the book in memory of

the women of the Holocaust, I found it so poetically just that they would do that.

I: I have a couple of questions based on that. I was reading Rona Kaufman's article on *In Memory's Kitchen*. She starts being uncomfortable with it, particularly with an article Laura Shapiro published about the book in which she had a recipe for Mina Pächter's chocolate torte.

C: Yes, that was in *Newsweek*.

I: And Kaufman wrote, "When I read that Shapiro was going to eat the cake that came from one of the recipes, I felt a little sick to my stomach. I imagined that she was eating not Pachter's torte but Pachter's body."⁴

C: My reaction is so different from that. For instance, when *In Memory's Kitchen* was published, I really wanted to have a book event around it. But how do you have a party for the publication of a book about the Holocaust? Well, a friend offered one of the rooms in her beautiful restaurant for it, and we had *Yahrzeit* (memorial) candles and a rabbi to preside. He spoke and I spoke and there were other events around it, but for me the biggest thing, and I will never forget it, was that the chef of the restaurant, Andrew D'Amico, along with Rozanne Gold, who is a well known cookbook author, undertook to make a number of recipes from the book. Some from Bianca's versions. Some not. They were both professionals and could bring their expertise to a recipe in the book if it did not work perfectly.

Well, when I walked over to that table and I saw the dishes they prepared laid out on it, but even more when I tasted them, I was overcome. I was so grateful to the chefs for what they had done. Not only was I tasting history, but in each dish I could feel the women's lives, their joy, their pain, their

4 Kaufman, "Testifying, Silencing, Monumentalizing, Swallowing," 427. Kaufman spells Pächter's name without umlaut.

longing! Even if the recipes were slightly modified, I was overwhelmed by this sense—I can't say it better than this—that I was eating the foods of their dreams. And I can still taste those dishes as they were realized that day and experience those dreams. It was a privilege. The opposite, I think, of what Kaufman said in her review. Rather a deep way to honor the women who created the book, to, for a few moments, live their fantasies.

I: It strikes me that recipes, especially in the whole context of the creation of the Terezín cookbook, imply a future, right?

C: Yes. But I think that whether the women who wrote the book had a future, whether they lived or died, and whether they were cognizant of their hope of a future or not, their spirits were driven at least in part by hope when they wrote these recipes down. But there were many other elements involved, too. Food is a powerful identity marker, much more so than most people realize. What we eat, and where we eat it, and who we cooked for, and the conversation at the table, the occasion, these are such intensely important parts of who we are and what we remember.

Writing those things down evokes a gentler time in the past, even when you are in the middle of hell. It expresses a hope not only that you might live, but that somehow, if someone makes those recipes again, if somebody carries on your heritage by doing it, that you are living on in those recipes in some way.

However, recipes in these circumstances are also a kind of weapon, not a bazooka or an Uzi, but a weapon of self defense, precisely because of the mightiness of food as a form of psychological reinforcement, as an identity marker, as a way of fighting back against someone who is trying to exterminate your heritage, your history, your birthright, and your deepest self. When you write or speak of or recollect the recipes that have marked your life, you are profoundly strengthening your sense of who you are.

I have heard that in Auschwitz—where, somebody said to me long ago, if they had had paper and could have made a cookbook it would have been thousands of pages long—women talked about food constantly. They would shout recipes to each other over the fences, so that if one of them didn't live, the other one might carry on and remember. That is just such a powerful image to me, knowing what else was going on in Auschwitz of course, but also knowing about the women's relationships in Auschwitz.

There are a lot of things I found out in further studies after I wrote the introduction to the book. One of them was how the older women taught the younger women to cook as part of carrying on their heritage. There was no food, but they taught them in words. I am not saying that people were aware of what they were doing. It was a cultural thing, perhaps also connected to the custom at that time of women creating a homemade cookbook for their children, so as to give it to their daughters when they got married, and maybe even to their sons and daughters-in-law. I think in a way that the authors of the manuscript, by writing down recipes in Terezín, were carrying on that tradition, doing something they would have done if they had not been in a concentration camp. Teaching cooking to younger women, shouting recipes to each other, and when possible, writing down recipes may have been part of that.

A few years ago I was speaking at the University of Wisconsin and a couple of weeks before I went, I heard about a poem whose subject was Auschwitz and food. I hadn't read it, but I felt instinctively that I absolutely had to make it part of my talk. But I couldn't find it. And it was making me crazy. As a lecturer, as a scholar, as great believer in the power of poetry, I really needed that poem. I knew it had been written by a woman named Ursula Duba and I bought her book. But it wasn't there. I searched through interviews with her trying to find a way to get to her. Nothing. But, then, finally, in desperation, at the very last minute, the night before I left for the conference, I made a final attempt. I searched for her

on Facebook. And, thank you, social media, I found her at last. And within an hour I had the poem. It is called “How I Learned to Cook,” and it recounts a conversation between two women, one, the poet, and the other her old friend who had survived this infamous *Lager*. “So what did you talk about all day in Auschwitz?” the poet asks her friend. “Did you talk about your fears of dying, about the fate of your family or relatives, how all this had come about, the insanity of it all?” And her friend answers, “Oh, No . . . None of that. We talked about food mostly. And recipes.” And then she goes on to talk about what dishes and techniques she learned from the older women there. She describes recipe after recipe:

in Auschwitz
 I learned how important it is
 to gently fold the flour into the beaten eggs
 for a successful pound cake
 and how you can’t rush a yeast dough
 it needs time to rise⁵

I’ve never spoken since without that poem, or rather parts of it since it is so long, being the first thing that I mention. And then I talk about a little verse that was written in Terezín by a child (she soon died in a death camp), about how the women talked of food.

Ten o’clock strikes suddenly,
 and the windows of Dresden’s barracks darken.
 The women have a lot to talk about;
 they remember their homes,
 and dinners they made.⁶

5 Ursula Duba, “How I Learned to Cook,” in *Tales from a Child of the Enemy* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 75–77, at 76.

6 Eva Schulzová, “An Evening in Terezín,” in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children’s Drawings and Poems from Terezín Concentration Camp 1942–1944*, ed. Hana Volaková (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 42–43.

It's very powerful to realize how common this talk of food was.

I: Could food do things poetry couldn't?

C: You have to tell me what you mean.

I: Well, for *Rumba Under Fire* I was reading memoirs of Romanian political prisoners from the fifties and sixties. A lot of them were intellectuals and professors, and they kept their spirit alive in prison by recollecting literature and movies, or by composing poetry. In one prison there were many scholars and they basically organized a seminar which they would take turns teaching from memory. I was reading your description of Terezín and the way it was set up as this model ghetto, where you could say there was an opportunity to keep Jewish culture alive. But that culture was also abused and instrumentalised for horrible ends. I don't know what it would mean to write poetry or put on a play or do this work of the spirit in a context where you were serving this Nazi ideology, or at least this lie that is being built up around you. Whereas recipes wouldn't do that, right?

C: I am not sure what you mean? That recipes couldn't be made to serve Nazi ideology? Or that you don't think writing down or confecting or reciting recipes is doing the work of the spirit? If the latter, I disagree. But no matter. As to the rest, even though Terezín, with all its horrors, was being used to promote the idea of a model ghetto, the Paradise Ghetto (as the Nazis called it, pitching it like ad men), to which early on, before deportations began, the Reich tried to coax the Jews to come voluntarily to wait out the war, and even though it was in that context that the Jews were allowed a certain amount of freedom, I think there would be pleasure and identity to be found in surviving in it. A friend of mine has reconstructed a powerful cabaret piece, a satire that came out

of Terezín.⁷ Remember that a lot of this was occulted. There were paintings hidden under the floorboards. In real life it was a camp and what you did in the daytime and what you did at nighttime were different. But I think the lectures in Terezín and the education which you'd go after so strongly, and which is part of the culture, would still have functioned in reaffirming identity. Even though you were surrounded by lies, even though you could be on your way to a death camp the next day, it would still have power. And yet they did this, and, aware or not aware, through their behavior they were saying "Fuck you!" They persisted in cultural and intellectual life. This satiric cabaret piece is an amazingly powerful thing. Works like that, or like the poetry that children were encouraged to write in Terezín to deal with their feelings, still served a purpose.

As for what you said before about the Romanian camps—"A lot of them were intellectuals and professors, and they kept their spirit alive in prison by recollecting literature and movies, or by composing poetry. In one prison there were many scholars and they basically organized a seminar which they would take turns teaching from memory"—well, the same kind of thing happened in Terezín, of which it has been said that the population there was the flower of Czechoslovakian Jewry. There, too, there were professors, scholars, artists, professionals. However, in Terezín it was at least in part both women and men who taught. Freidl Dicker-Brandeis, an artist, designer, and teacher who had been at the Weimar Bauhaus was a very significant figure in the camp. Mina Pächter herself used to lecture on the Prague Baroque, a style of architecture, but she also wrote down recipes. I would be curious to know though whether the Romanians you quoted were mostly men.

7 *The Last Cyclist*, based on a cabaret written in the Terezín Ghetto by Karel Švenk in 1944, reconstructed and reimagined by Naomi Patz. See <http://www.thelastcyclist.com/> for more information on the play's textual history.

l: They were mostly men.

C: Not that men didn't ever gather recipes. Some did. And very actively so. However, the purpose of gathering for them may not have been identical to that which drove women. Food and its preparation, the setting of a fine table, was a large part of who women were. Women nourished people, creating "blood and bone" with their recipes. I think talking and writing about food is one aspect of that act of remembering and recreating life. What each of these categories brings is different and I think poetry can be extremely powerful, but what food brings is powerful, too. Very.

l: One of the women prisoners whose memoir I read talked about being young among a group of older women. Like Bianca Steiner Brown, she thought the older women were silly too when she first arrived and they started telling her their stories. If I remember correctly in her memoir she writes about building a cake in her mind. The cake would become more and more elaborate, and she worked on it until she could taste it. She fed on this imaginary cake while she was in prison.

C: I think the ability to do that is central to what we are discussing. There are many stories about how food functioned in such situations. To me, one of the most compelling of the realizations I have come to about this is how people managed, how they helped themselves survive with imaginary food. Not food in their mouths, just food in their minds, in their hearts, in their memories. I often quote a Chinese writer, Zhang Xianliang, who was in a labor camp, and who speaks very powerfully in his book, *Grass Soup*, about how two extra grains of rice could make a difference to whether a man survived another day or two.⁸ It was obviously not because of the

8 Zhang Xianliang, *Grass Soup*, trans. Martha Avery (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994).

protein or the nutritive value of two grains of rice, he writes, but because of the hope they gave a man. It provided him with the strength to keep going. Though these two grains of rice were meaningless nutritionally, they were powerful encouragement psychologically.

There are many things that I have come across in this vein, showing how food and fantasy and memory worked in these circumstances. One of them is in a memoir called *Childhood in Times of War*, written by Andrew Salamon, himself a child during the Holocaust, who was hidden, with others, in the pit of a sawmill. The children spent the days underneath the piles of sawdust and would come out at night. In his book, he refers so beautifully to them, to the degree that anything could be beautiful about this, as a “band of starving dreamers.”⁹ He describes their games, which involved food and imagining. The point was to make the other person drop with desire by talking about foods you remembered. The winner was the person who brought everybody to their knees with longing. That image stays with me of these little eight- and nine-year-olds feasting on their memory, a band of starving dreamers.

I: They were remembering their childhood because their childhood was over earlier than it should have been.

C: Possibly. Boys and girls, still children, remembering their lost childhoods. How pitiful that would be. But though that might have been the case, I have come to suspect that that isn't necessarily what was happening. This phenomenon is too universal. It seems to occur wherever people are starving, under great duress, and they are literate and can find a pencil, or they have a mouth with which to tell someone else. They fantasize. And not only adults. Children, too. During the Siege of Leningrad, one sixteen-year-old kept a diary

9 Andrew Salamon, “Food Fantasies,” *Childhood in Times of War* (Remember.org, 1995), <http://remember.org/jean/chap4/part2/fantasies>.

and wrote the day before her seventeenth birthday about how “when things are back to normal, she and her mother will eat fried potatoes, ‘golden and sizzling, straight from the pan’, salami ‘thick enough to really sink your teeth into’ and hot, buttery blinis with jam’ — ‘Dear God, we’re going to eat so much we’ll frighten ourselves.’”¹⁰

Because of the work I engaged in after *In Memory’s Kitchen* it absolutely became plain to me that this happened continually. One of my concentrations is the meaning of food and the power of food far beyond physical nourishment.

I already knew from doing *In Memory’s Kitchen* that a cookbook written by prisoners of war in a camp in the Philippines had been published in 1946. It was happening exactly at the same time as the events in *In Memory’s Kitchen* were going on. And the recipe collection of these prisoners of war was also written down. It is called *Recipes out of Bilibid*.¹¹ I didn’t know until much later to what degree this happened in other prisoner-of-war camps, but I was to find out that it was very much the same. However, it was largely men doing the obsessing, probably because they outnumbered the women. This happened not only during World War II, but also during World War I, an obsession with food and recipes and cooking as the POWs starved, and too often ate garbage or slop.

Filmmaker Jan Thompson, who was presenting at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery at the same time I was years ago, was talking about how her father was a psychiatrist who had dealt with soldiers in World War II and many of them recalled food memories. Among the things she mentioned, and has mentioned in other work since, was a soldier mentally laying out an entire farm while he was in a POW camp. I remember, too, hearing that soldiers put up

10 Anna Reid, “Ration Book,” review of *The Diary of Lena Mukhina: A Girl’s Life in the Siege of Leningrad*, ed. Valentin Kovalchuk, Aleksandr Rupasov, and Aleksandr Chistikov, *Literary Review* 433 (2015), <https://literaryreview.co.uk/ration-book>.

11 H.C. Fowler and Dorothy Wagner, eds., *Recipes out of Bilibid* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1946).

pinups of bread instead of Betty Grable or other movie stars. Subsequent to that, when I began to read more, I began to discover much more about what soldiers did. One woman walked around in a prisoner of war camp collecting recipes for her bridge parties! Can you imagine? There was in particular an important Italian cookbook created during WWI. It was put together by an officer named Giuseppe Chioni, who went through the camp collecting recipes.¹² There were soldiers there from all over Italy, so he ended up creating a regional cookbook of Italian food out of prisoner-of-war memories. One of Chioni's most memorable observations is expressed in a comment he makes. He says he doesn't know where or how these "warriors became cooks." What a powerful perception about the obsession with food that results from extreme deprivation. It really stayed with me.

But then I started reading about starvation more generally and the phenomena it creates. On one of Sir Ernest Shackleton's expeditions to Antarctica, the emaciated men could not stop talking about foods they remembered from the past and meals they would prepare for each other in the future, when (and if) they got back to civilization. Their endless marches were also spent inventing imaginary dishes and cooking them in their heads. "No French chef ever devoted more thought to the invention of new dishes than we did," wrote Shackleton.¹³ Creativity born of starvation again made men, in this case, explorers, into cooks.

I was particularly struck, too, by a starvation study that was done after the war in Minneapolis, at the University of Minnesota. It was a study to find out how to re-feed people who had starved, so that they wouldn't die. The person who did that study was Ancel Keys, who first talked about the

12 Giuseppe Chioni and Giosuè Fiorentino, *La fame e la memoria, ricettari della grande guerra. Cellelagher 1917-1918* (Feltre: Libreria Agorà, 2008).

13 Ernest Henry Shackleton, *The Heart of the Atlantic and South* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 246.

Mediterranean diet.¹⁴ They used conscientious objectors who did their service by starving. Half-starving. They were given bits of food, as in the concentration camps, but basically they were starved. What was so striking to me when I was reading this was that here were people who could allegedly leave, they could do their service in some way other than staying, and yet their response to starving was the same as in a concentration camp. They obsessed about food. They obsessed about cookbooks. They read cookbooks constantly. There is an expression that was apparently used in the study to describe boys lying on their stomachs and turning pages of cookbooks: it was called “stomach masturbation.”¹⁵ And, again, as a result of this experience with starvation, a number of them said that they wanted to change professions and become cooks.

I: Wow...

C: All of this has illustrated to me, almost beyond anything I could have imagined before, the importance of food to identity, to who you are. I keep repeating it, but it merits repeating. Its value to the spirit as well as to the body is almost indescribable. So its worth for maintaining your identity, your culture, in the face of someone like Hitler, who was trying to exterminate everything about you and your heritage is immeasurable. More broadly, it has shown me how imagination and memory functioned in these circumstances and how they sustained people. Obviously not everyone in the Holocaust, not every POW, not every person who is starving, or *in extremis*, engaged in food-related talk and activities, in writing if they could, or

14 Ansel Keys, Josef Brožek, Austin Henschel, Olaf Mickelsen, and Henry Longstreet Taylor, *The Biology of Human Starvation*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950).

15 Hilde O. Bluhm, “How Did They Survive? Mechanisms of Defense in Nazi Concentration Camps,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 53.1 (1999): 96–122, at 112. Originally published in *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 2.1 (1948): 3–32.

just in fantasizing. There were some to whom the thought of focusing on food while starving was incomprehensible, but others, aware or not, used the fantasizing and remembering an aid to psychological and emotional survival.

As I began to discover more and more about the subject, I found an article in the *New York Times* about a diet that involved imaginary eating to sustain you. The dieter actually goes through the motions of eating, of cutting pretend food and eating it off a real, but empty plate. Almost unimaginable that it would succeed. But the person who wrote that article said it worked for him. It really makes you wonder if this, too, was part of the reason for the concentration on imaginary food and cooking in the camps.

I: You know, this brings up a question I had. I was thinking about who we are when we receive these recipe collections, how we can read them, to what extent can we empathize with them or understand them. I suspect that people who are likely to have access to these books and the leisure to read them probably also have enough food in their fridge. If you are spending money to buy the edited version of *In Memory's Kitchen*, for example, you probably also have money for lunch that day. I don't even know if we can understand hunger from descriptions of hunger. I suspect not.

C: I suspect not, too.

I: Is it important that we understand the hunger?

C: Well, I think that it can bring you closer to read what people wrote when they were starving to death, when they were dying or about to be sent to the camps in the East, and really had nothing except disgusting slop in front of them. It can bring you closer to see people fantasize and call up from memory wonderful meals. I think the question is where in

your being you understand it. Most intelligent people could probably understand it in their heads, but whether it means understanding it in the very deepest sense, I doubt. I work on this all the time and I can imagine what they went through, it moves me beyond words and even to tears. Yet, of course, I don't really know what it means to starve. What we say when we say the word "hunger" is not what this is about. People say all the time, "I'm starving!"

I: "I'm starving to death."

C: Yes, and it's just meaningless. Because it's not starving. It's not what happens to your body or what happens to your mind as you waste away, or as you are denied those foods that encapsulate your identity. You can't understand what it means to suffer from protein deficiency and from absolute starvation, to watch your body turn skeletal, to see that your mind can't function anymore. To not recognize yourself. How could we know that? I can think about what it would be like. I can talk to you about it. I can feel about it very deeply, as you do. But I think the most that people can learn from it, even if its only intellectual, though for some people probably it goes deeper, is, again, the power of food to sustain us mentally and spiritually. Even as your body is wasting away and being destroyed, you can turn to food for the power to survive another day, another month.

I: I've read critiques of this kind of work we are doing on poetry in prison, or on art in prison, claiming that it presents a version of the past that is too positive, or too uplifting.

C: I've read similar things.

I: I have to say, I personally am pretty firmly on the side of being astounded at the ability of human beings to draw on

these practices, especially when they are fighting for their humanity, when everything around them conspires to make them into animals or less than animals.

C: Yes, they were fighting for their humanity and people also fight this way for their heritage, their cultural patrimony, all as a way of sustaining their deepest selves. I've also read those critiques, and to me these practices and the examination of them don't take away from the darkness. I talked to many people beyond the book, and my belief, and I can't express it often enough, is that doing these things helped them to hold on in the most dire and dreadful circumstances. It was not just what was happening to them, but what they were witnessing. The entire idea of genocide, of trying to wipe out an entire people, is such an inconceivable thing. They had to face the disappearance of friends or even family suddenly gone from the camp, and know that they themselves might be on a transport the next day. I feel it's an incredible expression of the power of the human spirit to survive.

Once, for another purpose, I interviewed a group of survivors who got together regularly in London, England. As you know, survivors deal with this material very differently. Some never talk about it, some always want to talk about it. Some don't even tell their children. Bianca told me that until we spoke together at the Holocaust Museum in Washington right after *In Memory's Kitchen* was published, her children had not known a lot of what had happened to her and her husband. I've heard many such stories.

Well, when I first came into the room with all those survivors in London and said that I wanted to talk to them about their thoughts about food and cooking during the Holocaust, and their memories, and what it had been like, they reacted to a person, men and women, as though I must be crazy to want to talk about a subject like that. It was trifling. It was not important when they had suffered so long and gone through

so much. Initially, I thought they were going to ignore me completely.

But once the first person considered a little longer and decided to talk to me about his food recollections, the room lit up. It was amazing how it changed. They had been taught to think of food as trivial, unlike the two of us, who know that it is such a huge subject that it is now acceptable on a scholarly level. And in their minds, especially trivial given the enormity of the Holocaust. But once they gave in to the profound pull of the subject and started to discuss their memories and dreams of food during the Holocaust, a line actually formed of people who wanted to tell me what they remembered. They had received the world's message that cooking is not important, not a serious topic, and certainly was not one in the context of their suffering and the Nazi horror, but then life took over. And the stories came pouring forth.

Eventually, what at first had seemed so unlikely to me when I began to work on *In Memory's Kitchen*, the talking about and even recording of recipes in time of great jeopardy and suffering, came not to seem unusual at all. In fact, I now believe that wherever people are literate and can find a pencil and a sheet of paper (one cooking manuscript I know of was written on propaganda leaflets for the Third Reich), foodways, cooking traditions, recipes, are likely to be called up and remembered. Indeed, I am sure that somewhere in this too often barbarous world, they are being talked about, and even recorded, right now.