

Cooking in Times of Oppression

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Extended Abstract

In 2017, Marije Vogelzang staged an interactive performance, *Black Confetti*, at the historical museum in Rotterdam. The event was designed to make people experience the hardships of the wartime past. Using authentic recipes copied from the newspapers published during the war, Vogelzang made dishes based on the inventiveness of the crisis. Faced with hunger and struggling for survival, people's selfless creative action in the kitchen and efforts to record the moment in recipes and culinary fantasies from the past proved to be a helpful tool for making it through the most oppressive situations. The effectiveness of this strategy was showcased not only by the Dutch "Hunger Winter," but also by the attitude of women at the Terezín labor camp, Giuseppe Chioni's *Arte culinaria*, a cookbook written amid the utter deprivation of a POW camp in Hannover and other circumstances demonstrating that cooking is more than mere nourishment in times of oppression. A basic mechanism for maintaining identity, which also gives us a sense of continuity and security, food naturally becomes an element in survival strategies. It can embody resistance, help preserve culture and identity, and provide solace.

One Nazi strategy involved a propagandistic fabrication of illusions of normalcy. In 2009, at a meeting after the premiere of theatre performance *Pasażerka* (*Passenger*) in Wrocław, Zofia Posmysz recounted food control at Auschwitz, where the daily ritual was always concluded with a Nazi functionary's statement "Schmeckt gut," (tastes good) after which the prisoners could begin to eat. Exemplifying normalization implemented in the state of crisis, this practice normalized violence, but there are stories of war survivors in which similar practices served as defense mechanisms. There is evidence for self-hypnosis through culinary recipes. Impractical cookery books are evoked by Tessa Capponi-Borawska and Agnieszka Dorotkiewicz in their *Smak kwiatów pomarańczy. Rozmowy o kuchni i kulturze* (*The flavor of orange blossom: Conversations about cuisine and culture*). They cite Chioni, who wrote *Arte culinaria* in 1918, when starving at a POW camp near Hannover. In a preface to his recipe collection, Chioni explains his reasons for undertaking this effort: "

Only think of the long stints without food, which forced us to curl up in beds to lessen the cramps of hunger we felt and to remain motionless all days long not to squander energy, and you'll understand why it was natural for all of us, homesick as we were, to recall the delicious food the caring and gentle hands of our mothers and wives had made for us.¹

Wartime collections of recipes were also put together by American POWs at a Japanese camp in the Philippines.² After the war, they were published as *Recipes out of Bilibid*.³ In her introduction to the volume, Dorothy Wagner wrote:

Discussion of [food] preparation and the heated arguments concerning the superiority of one method over another served as more than an anodyne for their tortured nerves. It strengthened their resolution to survive, if only because it made more vivid, not what they sought to escape from, but what they were resolved to return to.⁴

Like Chioni, who listed wartime recipes for carrot, bean, and molasses loafs and those for rich chocolate cakes, liver dumplings, and sophisticated pâtés he remembered from before the times of scarcity, the women who recorded recipes at Terezin suffered hunger, with some of them starving to death at the time.⁵ Bella Szwarcman, the daughter of one of them, thinks of their recipe copybook as registering the ubiquitous need for creativity, which does not vanish even in the hardest of times.

Under extreme circumstances, it may represent the last chance for escape because, as Szwarcman argues: “In this act, you move beyond the situation into which you’ve been hurled; you step outside it.”⁶ A similar emergency strategy was also adopted by Alicja B. Toklas, who, as the wartime fasting went on and on, “betook herself to ‘the passionate reading of elaborate recipes in very large cookbooks.’”⁷ In her foreword to *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, M.F.K. Fisher observes that this was “what people have always done in times of hunger.”⁸

¹ Qtd. in Tessa Capponi-Borawska and Agnieszka Dorotkiewicz, *Smak kwiatów pomarańczy. Rozmowy o kuchni i kulturze* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2018), 160.

² See Cara De Silva, “Introduction,” in *In Memory’s Kitchen. A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*, ed. Cara De Silva, trans. Bianca Steiner Brown (Northvale, NJ, and London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), xxx.

³ *Recipes out of Bilibid*, collected by Halstead C. Fowler, compiled by Dorothy Wagner (New York: George W. Stewart Publisher, 1946).

⁴ Qtd. in De Silva, “Introduction,” xxxi.

⁵ See Capponi-Borawska and Dorotkiewicz, *Smak*, 159.

⁶ Qtd. in Capponi-Borawska and Dorotkiewicz, *Smak*, 159.

⁷ M[ary] F[rances] K[ennedy] Fisher, “Foreword,” in Alice B. Toklas, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2021), xi.

⁸ Fisher, “Foreword.”