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Culinary Imagination as a Survival Tool

Ethel Mulvany and the Changi Jail Prisoners of War Cookbook, Singapore, 1942-1945

Suzanne Evans

Making a cookbook when you are a starving prisoner of war seems perverse at first, but it is precisely what Canadian Ethel Rogers Mulvany did. While interned by the Japanese in Changi Jail, Singapore (1942-1945) she collected recipes from her fellow female prisoners and had them transcribed into two ledger books. When she was liberated in September 1945, Mulvany took the collection with her thinking only that "there was so little to bring away that I seemed to want something under my arm."¹ In 1946,

back in Toronto, Canada and having regained some of her health, she had 20,000 copies of the book printed and raised \$18,000 to send food to former prisoners of war still hospitalized in England.² Mulvany chose a poignantly straightforward title for her 100-page book: *Prisoners of War Cook Book: This is a Collection of Recipes Made by Starving Prisoners of War When They Were Interned in Changi Jail, Singapore*.

Mulvany was a survivor right from the beginning. She was born in 1904 in the middle of winter on the remote island of Manitoulin in Lake Huron, Ontario. Eight days later on 30 December, her mother died. Ethel was adopted by the local Presbyterian minister and his wife, Henry and Isabella Rogers and flourished under their care. She did well in school and at age 16 became a teacher herself for a few years before leaving the island to study and do social work in Toronto and Montreal. In May 1933 she set out on a trip to the Orient as organizing director of the Canadian Society for Literature and the Arts. While overseas she married British army doctor, Denis Mulvany and the two lived in Lucknow, India until March 1940 when Dennis was posted to Singapore. There, Ethel Mulvany

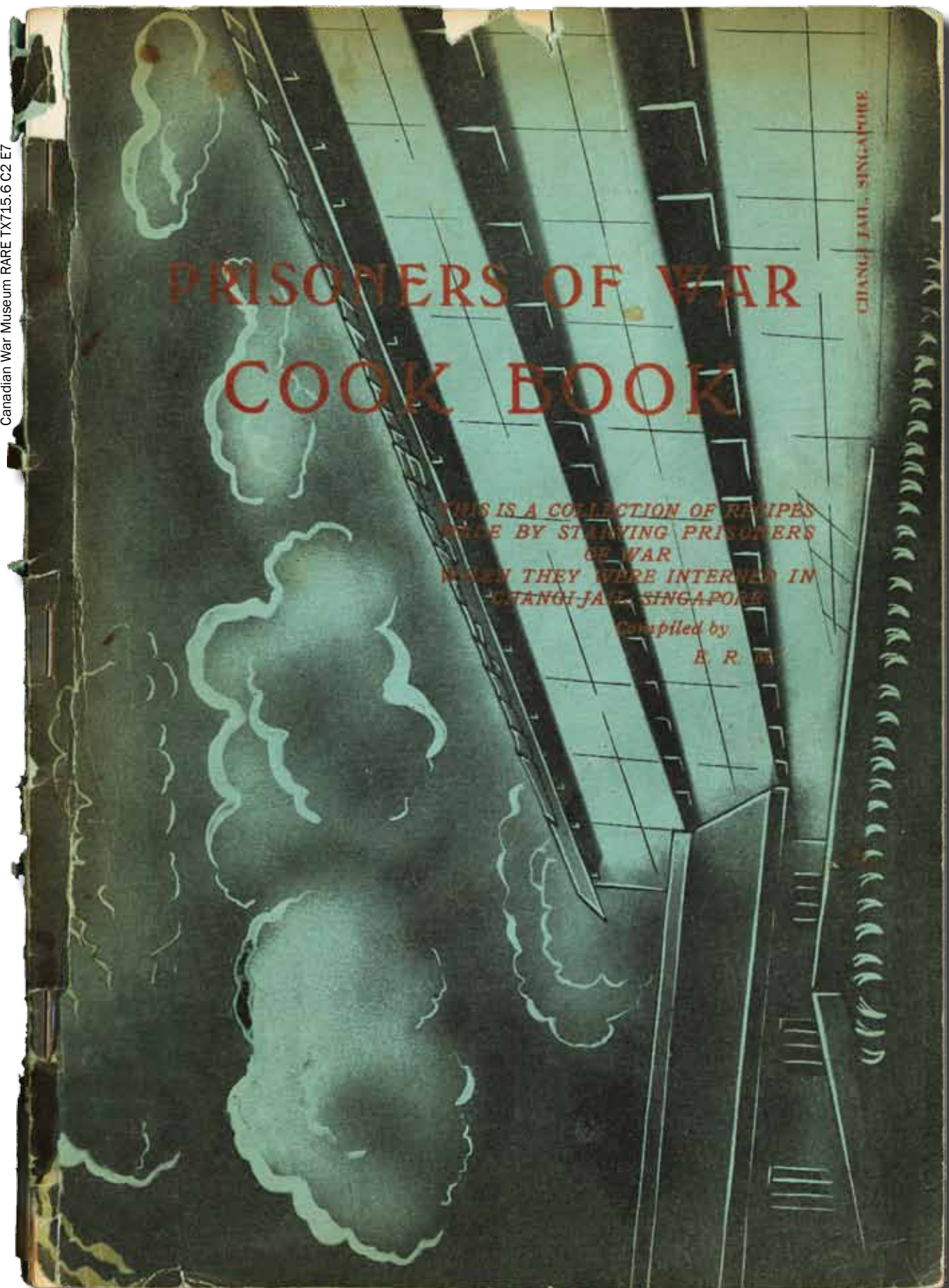
joined the Australian Red Cross and became a senior representative. During the battle for the city in early 1942 she drove an ambulance and put her first aid knowledge to use.

She maintained her role as Red Cross Representative at Changi Jail and became involved in projects to give occupation and pleasure to the prisoners. In addition to the

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Résumé: Ethel Mulvany, une Canadienne ayant survécu à son internement à Singapour de 1942 à 1945, publia le Prisoners of War Cook Book en 1946. Le sous-titre de l'ouvrage donne froid dans le dos : This is a Collection of Recipes Made by Starving Prisoners of War When They Were Interned in Changi Jail, Singapore (Voici une collection de recettes faites par des prisonnières de guerres affamées pendant leur internement à Changi Jail, Singapour). Confrontées à la famine, les prisonnières se rassemblaient pour réciter les recettes de leurs mets préférés. En parlant et rêvant ainsi de nourriture, les femmes contribuaient à réduire la douleur causée par la faim. Pour Mulvany et les autres, il s'agissait d'une tactique de survie. Révélateur d'un lieu où les journaux personnels étaient interdits, le livre de recettes des prisonnières de guerre de Mulvany est d'importance historique et relate la culture des prisonnières de guerre ainsi que le rôle crucial de la créativité dans les pires circonstances.

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Abstract: Canadian Ethel Mulvany, a survivor of internment in Singapore 1942-45, published the Prisoners of War Cook Book in 1946. The subtitle is chilling: This is a Collection of Recipes Made by Starving Prisoners of War When They Were Interned in Changi Jail, Singapore. Faced with starvation, the women prisoners gathered to recite the recipes of their favourite meals. By discussing and dreaming about food in this way the women were helping to slacken the pain of hunger. For Mulvany and the others it was a survival tactic. In a place where no diaries were allowed, Mulvany's prisoner of war cookbook has historical significance and reveals the women's POW culture and the importance of creativity in the worst of circumstances.

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cookbook, she organized shopping trips into the Singapore market for food and necessities. She oversaw the creation of a Red Cross hut designed to provide privacy and quiet, both of which were at a premium in the overcrowded jail. Better known was her idea to make signature quilts to give to Japanese, Australian and British hospitals. Now referred to as the Changi quilts, these works of hand and heart reside in museums in Australia and England.³

The Mulvanys were interned separately in Singapore and seldom saw each other. Both survived the war but their marriage did not. She returned to Canada and later began the "Treasure Van," part of the World University Service of Canada. She bought crafts internationally and sold them at university campuses across Canada. In her sixties she received her B.A. at Laurentian University and retired to Manitoulin Island where she died in 1992. Ethel Mulvany, or "Mul" as she was called in Changi, was a force of nature throughout her life. In 1994 journalist Freddy Bloom, who was interned with Mulvany at Changi, succinctly summed up her memory of Mulvany during those years of imprisonment, "Ethel was larger than life, very beautiful with more energy than any human body could bear."⁴ It was this unbearable energy that helped Mulvany cook with dreams.

The cookbook came to national public attention in Canada more than a decade after it was published when *Maclean's* magazine journalist Sidney Katz transformed an extraordinary series of one-hour taped interviews he did with Ethel Mulvany into an article, "Miracle at Changi Prison: A Study in Survival," published 12 August 1961. These fascinating conversations stray over much of Mulvany's life but their main focus was on her prisoner of war (POW) experiences, including the story of the cookbook's beginnings. The stories

she tells on tape overlap with those she describes in her unpublished 119-page memoir, "The Burning of Singapore." Together they provide an informative background to the development of the cookbook.

Until recently there has not been much interest in the historical analysis of cookbooks in general, but it is now a growing field with the examination of internee cookbooks just beginning. These other cookbooks provide a measure by which Mulvany's can be compared. They were often, but not solely, composed by women, and were all produced under similarly dire conditions of war-induced hunger in places ranging from China to Germany. Most are held in archives around the world while a few have been published.⁵ In spite of being small and regular in form, recipes are valued by scholars for the stories they carry. Canadian folklorist Diane Tye argues that these pieces of writing "are similar to brief diary entries."⁶ A comparable claim is made by culinary historian Cara de Silva about the recipes gathered by Mina Pachter while she was imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp. De Silva thinks of these recipes as "a collective memoir" which is "in some ways as revealing as prose."⁷

In the few discussions of prisoner of war cookbooks to date the issue of gender plays a role. Myrna Goldenberg asserts that whereas "most narratives and oral histories by men relate terrible hunger and the memory of wonderful food in the abstract," the response to hunger in women's memoirs is "rooted in the imagination, situated in the kitchen, and remembered through socialization."⁸ De Silva suggests that the different reactions by men and women to hunger can easily be explained by experience. Furthermore, she adds that women were not alone in producing these unusual cookbooks: "While it is likely that, in general, more women

than men concerned themselves with recipes in the camps – it was primarily women who cooked at home, after all – there was at least one other World War II cookbook created by men."⁹ Although Goldenberg's concern is with gender differences, she speaks to the broader issue of endurance, a factor relevant to a study of the Changi cookbook. By delineating the practical and concrete nature of food talk she develops insights helpful for understanding how a culinary imagination can be a survival tool. She argues that not only does the sharing of recipes strengthen social relationships, it fosters a sense of hope that one day some of the women will be free to make at least one of the recipes they have learned.

Like other prisoners' recipe collections, the *Prisoner of War Cook Book* is not a wartime cookbook in the style of how to make more with less. It is quite the opposite – a collection of such rich confections and meaty main-course dishes that you might think the prisoners were teasing each other with descriptions of the unattainable. But Ethel Mulvany was a practical person. She believed that by discussing and writing recipes the prisoners involved in the cookbook enterprise were helping themselves slacken the pain of hunger. She wrote in her memoir, "Many of us slept with the feeling of having had a meal, after two or three hours of recipe writing."¹⁰ For Mulvany and the other contributors it was a survival tactic. She knew the truth of what the editors of a recently published collection of essays on POWs' creative projects spoke of when they summed up a prevailing theme among all their authors: "the artistic and the creative had a (utilitarian) function behind barbed wire: that of survival."¹¹

In a place such as Changi where the Japanese forbade diaries, Mulvany's prisoner of war cookbook has historical significance.¹² An examination of recipe titles,



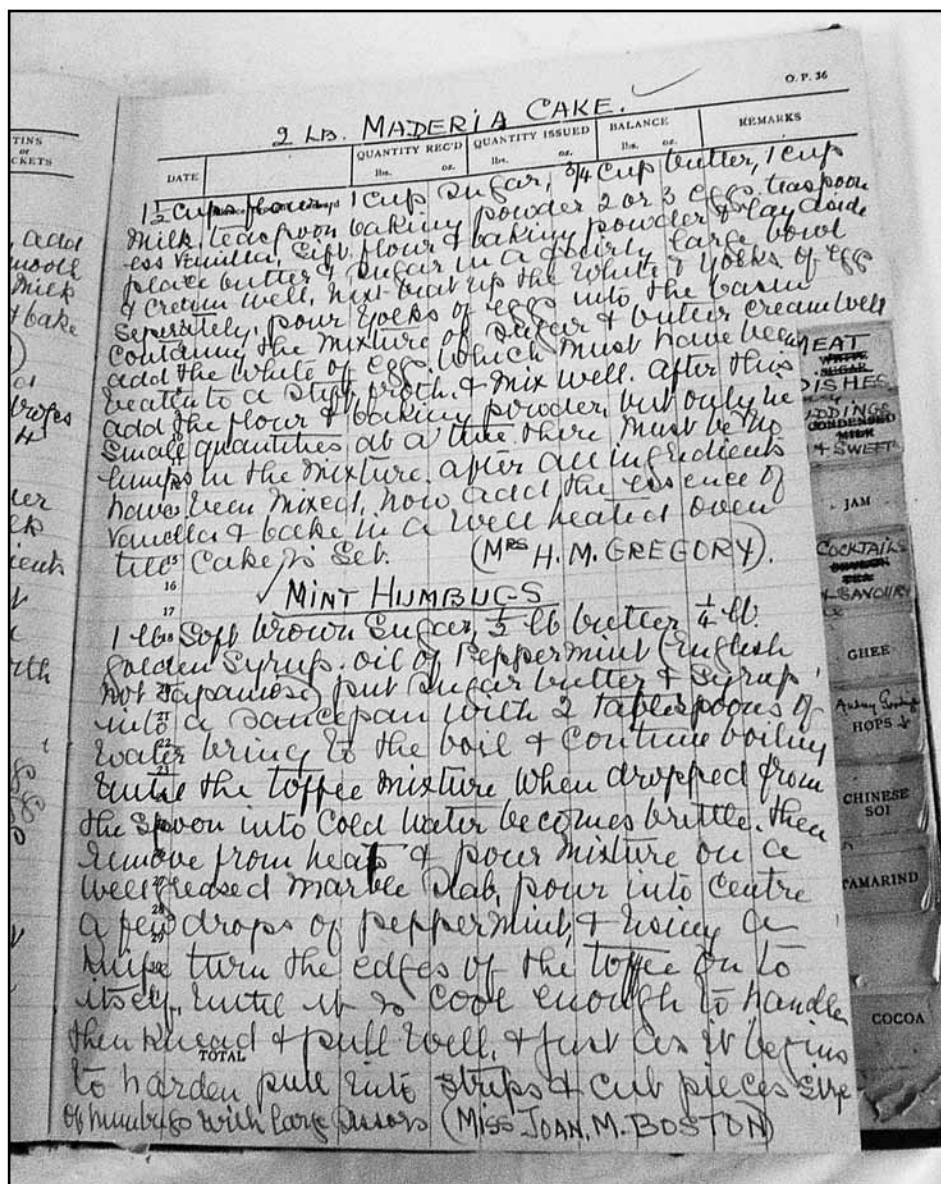
Portrait of Ethel Rogers Mulvany done in Changi Jail by Joan Stanley-Cary

ingredients and method descriptions provides a guide to the women's POW culture. In a unique way it reveals the conditions of Changi and highlights the prisoners' quotidian needs and desires. From this perspective the cookbook not only opens up the possibility for new avenues of exploration but also helps to identify some of the limitations of the existing research. Mulvany was not alone in appreciating the act of cooking with the imagination as is evidenced by the communal nature of the Changi book and by the fact that though rare, it is not one-of-a-kind. In this way her work has something to say about both the specifics of Changi Jail and the sustaining creativity of the human mind.

Changi Tea Parties

After the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, civilians, mainly British, Australian, American, Dutch and Eurasian, were interned in Changi Jail, a high security British prison newly built in 1936. The men were segregated from the women and children and all lived in crowded, harsh conditions. Built to house 600, 3,500 civilians were packed into the jail in a space of less than eleven acres of concrete buildings and exercise yards.¹³ Mulvany, like all the other women, shared her one-person cell with two others. The three had to arrange themselves around a raised concrete slab, intended for a bed, and

a squat toilet. The ventilation in the jail, so important in a hot and humid climate, was very poor. The soldiers captured on the island, including Ethel's husband Denis, were imprisoned a few miles away at the military compound. The experiences of Changi prisoners are known internationally but for Australians the name Changi has taken on mythic proportions. Historian Joan Beaumont writes that Changi became "emblematic of the suffering of over 22,000 Australian service men and women who were captured in the Asia Pacific region, almost a third of whom had died in captivity."¹⁴ Despite this renown the stories of the women imprisoned by the Japanese in Changi and elsewhere are not well known and not only because diaries



A page from Book I of the original handwritten Changi cookbook.

colonial politics. Another change in their accustomed life-style concerned the camp cooking. This was done by the men in the kitchen situated on the men's side of the jail and the food was then taken to the women's side and distributed by the women. According to Archer it was common for men to do all the cooking in Japanese POW camps largely because of the heavy work involved. Chopping wood for fuel, hauling sacks of rice and preparing large quantities of food in blistering heat was physically exhausting work. Interestingly, in this role reversal the value of cooking took on a quality of manliness. The strength required for the job gave the men a sense of achievement in fulfilling their traditional roles as providers.¹⁸

Food rations at Changi jail, insufficient to begin with, were reduced throughout the war in quantity and quality. According to a postwar medical report, the food at Changi jail "was at no time except during the months of July and August 1945, adequate in quantity, or in food essential to maintain the internees in reasonable health."¹⁹ Until they were liberated in September 1945, the prisoners suffered terribly from semi-starvation and related conditions such as beriberi, tropical ulcers, dysentery and oedema.²⁰

We do not know exactly when the cookbook project started or how long it took but Mulvany says in the forward that the collection began after the prisoners had been jailed for "many months" and certainly it was long enough for the prisoners to have suffered significant weight loss; as she adds the biographical detail, "I made this collection when I weighed 85 pounds."²¹ In August 1942, the prisoners voiced their objections about the food by submitting a petition demanding an increase in rations from the Japanese.²² Perhaps it was at this time that the project began.

were forbidden. Bernice Archer, author of *The Internment of Western Civilians under the Japanese 1941-1945*, notes that although approximately 40,000 civilian women were imprisoned by the Japanese, "public knowledge of the women's war experiences are [sic] sketchy, and in some places...the women have been erased from the public memory."¹⁵ Under these circumstances it is all the more interesting to study the POW cookbook for the small but valuable window it opens onto the lives of these almost forgotten prisoners and

the creativity they showed. Although not a combatant, it is clear from the title of the cookbook that Mulvany considered herself and the other women to be prisoners of war.¹⁶

The women were responsible for their own organization at Changi. They appointed a camp commandant who liaised with the Japanese High Command and they had several committees to oversee the daily functioning of the prison.¹⁷ Self-government opened up a whole new arena for women accustomed to deferring to men in the world of

Hunger made food such a natural topic of conversation that the prisoners often gathered in groups of five or ten in the Changi courtyard to discuss edibles.²³ In her interview with Sidney Katz, Mulvany said that as inspiration at one of these gatherings, she had recited lines from the poem "The Depression Ends" by Canadian author E.J. Pratt.²⁴ Written in 1932 at the height of the Depression, the poem is a dream-like vision of a table set in the sky laden with sumptuous dishes reserved exclusively for the world's destitute. For their part, the women imagined they were setting their own tables at home and inviting each other to share their favourite dishes while they explained how each one would be made.²⁵ Mulvany referred to these sessions as "tea-parties" and, just as for the real thing, they all "dressed up in the best we had," some wearing imaginary corsages.²⁶ Mulvany remembered Euphemia Redfearn, an Australian housewife, starting a session by "setting the table in words."²⁷ Redfearn took care of all the details from the essential but hard to come by salt to the luxury of a centrepiece placed on the imaginary table. "'I would have wayside daisies,' she said, 'with sprigs of fern.'"²⁸ Mulvany felt that in the time spent discussing food, "you lived in a different world. You lived in a party world."²⁹

Fellow internee Lucy Constance Macindoe described food-talking sessions in rhymes. While in prison she wrote in the autograph book of another Changi prisoner, Violet Klattig,

Our wildest dreams are now of something to eat/Some talk of a savoury, and others a sweet!/ We converse together of nice little meals/Of how we'll enjoy them, and how good it feels/When we sit down again to a table well set...

But in the end she says, "The dream it has vanished, once more we must scoop/Up a dollop of rice, and a ladle of soup."³⁰

The women discussed, described and argued about food "for a few hours a day for months."³¹ After the recipes were talked through each woman wrote her contributions down on stripped off margins of old copies of *The Straits Times* of Singapore that Mulvany had found in the dungeon of the jail. It was the job of the elderly and weak to copy the recipes into the first of the two old jail ledgers given to Mulvany by the Japanese.³² The ledgers, labelled Book I and II, have many but not all of the same recipes. Book I, transcribed in a wide variety of handwriting, has approximately 320 recipes most of which include the contributor's name. Book II, in Mulvany's handwriting alone, includes more than 50 menu-plans for seven-course meals and roughly 450 recipes not all of which are attributed to a particular POW. The printed cookbook that is the focus of this paper includes just over 400 of the original recipes.

The Pragmatism of Play

Throughout the war there were starving prisoners in other parts of the world doing exactly as the Changi prisoners were, talking and writing about food to help subdue the pain of hunger. In her introduction to *In Memory's Kitchen* De Silva refers to Susan E. Cernyak-Spatz, a survivor of the concentration camps of both Terezin and Auschwitz, Poland who said that people in both places spoke of food so much that there was a camp expression for it: "We called it cooking with the mouth."³³ Bianca Steiner Brown, who was also a prisoner at Terezin, explained that "[i]n order to survive you had to have an imagination. Fantasies about food were like a fantasy that you have

about how the outside is if you are inside."³⁴

There is both a playful and purposeful aspect to these fantasies and those of the Changi "tea-parties." George Eisen writes about the nature of play in the concentration camps of Europe but his arguments hold true for Changi, where inhumane treatment forced prisoners to rely on their imaginations for sustenance, arguably a form of play. According to Eisen, play is "the manifestation of a creative energy – an inherent psychological energy – that can burst forth in any circumstance or environment."³⁵ In the camps, however, play and games were transformed such that they "came to serve a purpose not normally attributed to them."³⁶ For both adults and children they became "defense mechanisms."³⁷ Eisen explains that adult play was not only well planned and rational it served an end. For prisoners "[t]rapped in a chronic powerlessness, adult play represented an important escape and coping mechanism both in the emotional and mental realms."³⁸ He continues on to say that whereas children's play was about adjusting to reality, their elders found "every means, among them play, had to be harnessed to provide badly needed counterbalances to the crippling effects of reality."³⁹ Part of this counterbalance created by the Changi cookbook was the formation of a make-believe world to which the POWs could retreat – one that was inhabited by fictional characters and marked by the faraway signposts of home.

In her article Goldenberg focuses not on playfulness but on the coping aspects of the defense mechanism of food talk, stating it "was salutary because it fostered social relationships, reinforced religious values and rituals, and strengthened women's sense of purpose. In turn

this strengthened their self-esteem and dignity, contributing to their will to survive."⁴⁰ Although Mulvany never discussed the value of sharing recipes in such words, she did believe in the pragmatic value of the project. Imaginary parties, the writing of recipes and copying them into the ledger books provided what she described as "employment" in a place where there was little to do and an unending amount of time in which to do it.⁴¹ In her 1961 interview with Katz she explained the importance of writing the recipes: "we had our little tea parties, and then we must put these recipes down, because when you don't put something down, you reckon it's only going into the air."⁴² She did not want their efforts wasted, but most important for her was that food-talk "stimulated the flow of our salivary glands and stomach juices and made us feel more alive."⁴³ Mulvany articulated what many other prisoners of war experienced literally in their gut: thinking and talking about food activates the body.

Her theory of the physical effect of talking about food is supported by the work of science writer Sharman Apt Russell in her book *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (2005). Russell describes how the process of digestion can begin with the mere thought of food. Chemical messages flow through the cerebral cortex to nerve cells that in turn send messages to the stomach and pancreas that then produce digestive acids and mucus. Salivary glands are stimulated, the mouth waters and the body is primed.⁴⁴ Helping themselves in this way would have contributed to the women's sense of self-confidence and purpose of which Goldenberg speaks.

Hope is elusive at the best of times and under these conditions it would have waxed and waned according to the latest rumours, recent camp illnesses and deaths, and importantly, the amount of food. Likely Mulvany began this

project when food quantities were decreasing, hunger pangs were increasing and the need for hope was intense. A point Goldenberg makes, relating to issues of dignity and esteem, is that the sharing of recipes is a form of teaching in which students and teachers alternate roles, respecting and valuing each other's knowledge and skills. This activity would have bolstered an underlying sense of hope, for as Goldenberg says, "we don't teach or transmit knowledge and skills if we don't trust that there will be a future."⁴⁵

Sweets and Meats

The cookbook has a simple alphabetical index showing traditional food groupings. An immediately striking feature is the number of recipes for sweets and meats. An abundance of cakes, puddings, candies and cookies fill the pages as do a range of red meat recipes and fowl dishes. Semiotics scholar Wendy Leeds-Herwitz suggests that during wartime people gravitate toward foods remembered from childhood that are considered comforting. She gives the example of changing eating patterns in Israel in 1991 when the country was being bombed by Iraq. "Since the first missile fell, the sale of chocolate has increased by 37%, the number of cookies has almost doubled and the sale of frozen pizzas, instant soups and pre-made hamburger patties has gone up by as much as 80%."⁴⁶ Although the Israelis had not forgotten their vegetables, it is interesting to note, "For reasons not entirely clear, but to the delight of many children, the sale of broccoli, cauliflower and spinach has also fallen off."⁴⁷

The emphasis on sweets is seen in the prisoner recipe collections produced by the women of Changi, Chefoo, Terezin, Ravensbrück and Christianstadt. Most people have a

natural craving for sweetness but sugar also carries with it a history of luxury in British and European cultures. The starving women cooking with dreams were completely free to indulge their imaginations with sugary treats.⁴⁸ This was certainly true for Lily Casey while she was imprisoned in Chefoo, China during the war. Her great granddaughter, British author Frances Osbourne based her book *Lilla's Feast* on Casey's recipe collection, describing it as having "chapter after chapter full of sugary, gooey treats. They take up a good part of her book. Recipe after recipe of indulgent dishes."⁴⁹ The same can be said for Edith Peer's cookbook, *Ravensbrück 1945, Fantasy Cooking Behind Barbed Wire*, written while she was in the all-female concentration camp at Ravensbrück, northern Germany. Desperately hungry and cold, Peer gathered paper and pencils and asked her fellow inmates to write down their recipes. While the book contains 10 recipes for vegetables, there are 56 for sweets.⁵⁰ The recipes that Mina Pachter collected while in Teresin also show this tendency. Strudels, cakes and sweet dumplings outnumber all the meat, vegetable and bread recipes combined. Ruth Kluger, imprisoned in Poland's Christianstadt labour camp during the war, remembered a competitive feel to the talk of confections during evening recipe recitals. Kluger describes cooking matches: "A favourite game was to surpass each other with the recital of generous amounts of butter, eggs, and sugar in fantasy baking contests."⁵¹

Cakes are of particular interest as they contrast with everyday foods. They are associated with special occasions and celebrations, such as birthdays, weddings and, in the case of Mulvany's cookbook, jubilees. Not only can cakes be made in an inspiring variety of flavours, they also have an imminently decorate-able

Fruit Candy

2 lbs. sugar
1 lb. butter
1 lb. raisins
1 lb. dates
1 lb. figs
2 oz. candied peel
1 lb. almonds
1 tbspn. vinegar

Stone and cut the raisins and dates also figs and candied peel. Blanch and cut the almonds, all rather small. Put the sugar, butter and vinegar into a preserving pan and boil until it thickens, then add the rest of the ingredients and stir until thoroughly blended. Pour the mixture on the sheets of buttered paper and roll up like a jelly pudding. When cooled remove the paper and cut in slices.

Cocunut Tablet

1 lb. dissicated or finely grated cocanut
1 lb. sugar
1 lb. grated malacca
teacup water.
Put the grated malacca, sugar and water into a preserving pan and stir carefully over fire until it thickens then add the flavouring and pour it onto a flat dish which has been rinsed out with cold water. When set mark in squares and when nearly cold cut in pieces. Instead of putting it onto a buttered dish the mixture may be formed with the hands into balls or rolls. Each wrapped in paper.

Mint Humbugs

1 lb. soft brown sugar
1 lb. butter
1 lb. golden syrup
Oil of peppermint (English not Japanese)

Put sugar, butter and syrup into a saucepan with 2 tbsps. of water. Bring to the boil and continue boiling until the taffy mixture when dropped from the spoon into cold water becomes brittle. Then remove from heat and pour mixture on a well greased marble slab. Pour into centre a few drops of peppermint and using a knife turn the edges of the taffy onto itself, until it is cool enough to handle, then knead and pull well and just as it begins to harden pull into strips and cut pieces size of humbugs with large scissors.

Basic recipe for Ice Cream

1 can evaporated milk
2 eggs
2 Heaped tbsps. sugar.
Pinch of salt
flavouring
Put milk into pan and heat over slow fire, whisk eggs, sugar and salt until creamy and pour warm milk over mixture. Return to fire and cook until mixture thickens. Remove from fire, add flavouring and allow to cool before putting in the freezer.

Peanut Brittle

1 cup roasted chopped peanuts
1 1/3 lbs. white sugar

Put sugar in fry pan. Stir over slow fire until pale coffee colour and clear. Add nuts and pour quickly into buttered tray or small traylets.

Peanut Candy

1 1/2 cups sugar
1/2 cup milk
1 cup roasted peanuts
1 dessertspoon butter
vanilla

Boil milk and sugar. Add butter and boil until mixture forms ball in cold water. Beat, add vanilla. Beat. Pour into buttered tray and make in squares.

Marrons au Suere (french)

1 lb. chestnuts
7 oz. loaf sugar
1/2 glass water
granulated sugar.

Peel and roast chestnuts. Dissolve sugar in water and add chestnuts and keep hot until well saturated with syrup. Take out and sprinkle with granulated sugar. Squeeze juice of lemon over and serve hot. If served with whipped cream and sponge fingers this makes a nice pudding.

Malt Caramel

1 tin condensed milk
1 cup sugar
1 cup malt
1/2 cup butter.

Boil all. Soft ball stage makes soft candy.
Hard ball stage makes hard candy.

Maple Cream

1 lbs. brown sugar
1/2 lb. chopped nutmeats
1/2 pt sweet cream
maple flavouring

Boil sugar and cream until a soft ball will form when a little is dropped in cold water. Add the nuts and flavouring, beat until firm enough to spread in buttered pans. Cut in squares when almost cold.

Lime Jello

1 pt. lime Jello
1 small tin seedless grapes

Chill. Cream.

A two-page spread from the printed cookbook. Note that both the handwritten and printed versions of the recipe for "Mint Humbugs" calls for "Oil of peppermint (English not Japanese)!"

architecture. They can be whatever you want, from trains to turtledoves. Cakes are foods we learn to love as children, and as food historian Mimi Sheraton says in her book *The Bialy Eaters*, "Few aspects of life inspire such persistent nostalgia as the foods of one's childhood, reminders of the joyful security of home and family."⁵²

Changi Prisoners and their Culture

Many community cookbooks include the name of the

contributor with each recipe. In Book I of the original handwritten Changi cookbooks most of the recipes are attributed to an individual, however, the printed version of the text does not include names. Mulvany did not even use her own name but simply stated the book was "Compiled by E.R.M." She claimed that the reason she did not include the contributors' names in the printed cookbook was that so many had died that to name them was to disturb the peace of the dead; "I took their names away, I felt, better not call them... that sort

of thing."⁵³ Although Mulvany would have keenly felt the loss of her POW friends and contributors it may also be that the cost of printing played into her decision to omit the names of the women who would at any rate have been unknown to Canadian buyers of the cookbook.⁵⁴ The language of the book as a whole is informal, full of idiosyncrasies in terms of style of measurement, instruction and spelling. In her article "Claiming a Piece of the Pie: How the Language of Recipes Defines Community" food scholar Colleen Cotter suggests

that this quality, common to community cookbooks as opposed to professionally published ones, is due to the fact that “the authors and addressees share a more symmetrical, peer-to-peer relationship and do not presume to set themselves apart, either by culinary expertise or editorial control.”⁵⁵ Certainly the recipe for “Tapioca Cream” assumed the reader had considerable culinary experience. With no quantities or even proportions included, the complete entry read, “Boil tapioca. Add milk and sugar. When cool add stiffly beaten egg whites and cream. Chill.”⁵⁶

For the most part the recipe titles indicate that British cooking was the dominant culinary influence reflecting the background of a majority of the women who participated in the project. The original ledgers did include some recipes outside the usual British fare but still from places within the Empire. Likely Mulvany chose not to include them in the printed cookbook because their ingredients would have been unknown and unavailable to most Canadian cooks in 1946. For example, the contributions of “Fowl Badum” and “Papaya Musket” from internee Mrs. Rosiland Von Hagt (née Passe), who was born and raised in what was then called Ceylon, called for saffron, roasted chillies, fenugreek, coriander, cumin seeds, ghee, cinnamon, curry leaves, papaya and cardamom. Others recipes that did not make it into print called for such tropical produce as mangosteens, passion fruit, and tamarind.

Loyalty to the British Empire is seen in the number of recipes referring to royalty. The king appears as a savoury dish, King George Cutlets. The meat is not identified nor the number of the George, but George VI was reigning at the time. Other royals referred to in the book – all sweet puddings – were a queen and two princesses. Although not

individually named these do reflect the nucleus of the royal family at the time, Queen Elizabeth and her daughters Elizabeth and Margaret.⁵⁷ “Palace Chocolate Cake” and “Palace Biscuits” were additional reminders of royalty. Humbler homes and families are evoked by the traditional Irish “Colcannon.” Likely more than just the contributor would have known the nostalgic folksong associated with the potato-based dish. The chorus ends with the sentiment: “Oh, wasn’t it the happy days when troubles we had not, / And our mothers made Colcannon in the little skillet pot.”⁵⁸

Along with royal references and musically accompanied food memories, the cookbook included recipes named after well-loved fictional characters. As an example of Eisen’s notion of play as a counterbalance to reality, these recipe titles bring together in a make-believe world a complexity of desires for food, home, and the memories of childhood. “Oliver Twist Cake” carries the name of possibly the best-known orphan boy born in an English novel. Charles Dickens’ character, like the women cooking with their imaginations, was starving. But tiny Oliver is remembered for more than his hunger. He stands up to the daunting authority of Mr. Bumble, the Beadle, and ever-so politely insists, “Please, sir, I want some more.”⁵⁹ Although Oliver would have been happy enough to receive another bowl of gruel, a slice of his namesake cake would have sated anyone with a hungry sweet tooth or a desperate need for calories. This basic white cake recipe is transformed into a rich concoction with brown sugar, spices, and raisins, a full cup of black currant jam, topped with “Jelly Foam Frosting.”

Another fictional character with a part in this book is Peter Pan. The mischievous, undependable, but charming boy first appeared in J.M.

Barrie’s stage play *Peter Pan; or, The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* in 1904. Peter entices the children of the Darling family to fly away with him for adventures with pirates, fairies and lost boys in magical Neverland. The recipe for “Peter Pans,” seems well named after the troublemaker. Items are missing in the list of ingredients, as are the instructions for the fruit filling between the small cakes. The woman who contributed this recipe from memory may have just forgotten parts of it or she may have been unconsciously counting on the other women’s culinary expertise to fill in the blanks.

The last, and, under the circumstances, not the least interesting fictional reference was to the *Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera set in Japan. First produced in London in 1885, the opera was the writing team’s most popular. The story revolves around the emperor’s edict that flirting was a capital offence; “All who flirted, leered or winked/ (Unless connubially linked), / Should forthwith be beheaded.”⁶⁰ The prisoners would have enjoyed remembering the opera’s satirical jokes made at the expense of high-ranking officials. Although the opera was originally intended to ridicule British politics it did so by thoroughly denigrating the Japanese. The Changi POWs were not the only ones to make use of the *Mikado*’s cutting, and in these cases, subversive humour. Betty Jeffrey, an Australian nurse imprisoned in Sumatra during the war describes in her memoir a production of the opera put on by the women at her camp.⁶¹

The irony that the opera reflected the romantic situation at Changi would not have been lost on the prisoners. Male and female prisoners at Changi, even those “connubially linked,” were kept strictly apart forcing them, like the fictional characters, to invent creative, albeit risky, activities to circumvent the

restrictions they faced.⁶² Following the humorous musical theme, the “Mikado” recipe, for steamed pudding, is placed in the cookbook between “Melody” and “Encore” puddings.⁶³ The only other reference to Japan in the cookbook is in the candy recipe for Mint Humbugs. Brown sugar, butter, golden syrup and Oil of peppermint are called for. The last item, it was clearly noted, was to be “English not Japanese.”⁶⁴

To confirm that the mention of royals, fictional characters and a particular type of oil were indicative of more than just taste preferences, remembered dishes and desired food, we can compare the collection with the Changi quilts made by the women. Better known than the cookbook are three signature quilts made for the Japanese, British and Australian Red Cross with Mulvany’s help as Red Cross representative at the jail. Each woman who participated was given a six-inch square of cloth to stitch and told to “put something of herself” in the design.⁶⁵ While the Japanese quilt had flowers and traditional cultural motifs such as the rising sun, the other quilts, intended for the military hospital where some of the women’s husbands were, had surreptitious messages stitched into them. Writing about the communicative significance of the quilts, internee Helen Beck said, “To those who would learn a woman’s point of view of internment, I would recommend a close inspection of the embroidered patches of the hospital quilts made for the Red Cross...these reveal more clearly than any essay the secrets of the heart.”⁶⁶ Internee Sheila Allan stated that “the Japanese banned all patriotic gestures in the Camp” so symbols such as an Irish shamrock, a Canadian maple leaf or the heroism of St. George slaying the dragon that had been stitched into the quilts, “became as strong a display of nationalism and patriotism as we could express.”⁶⁷ By the same

token puddings named after royals and iconic fictional characters were clear statements of both loyalties and longings for home.

Ingredients and Method

Generally the ingredients in the recipes are dominated by northern European, British and American food basics: butter, flour, eggs, milk, sugar, fresh and dried fruits, beef, chicken, pork, lamb, and root vegetables. What is perhaps more intriguing is the number of brand name items. Although mainly British and American in origin these foodstuffs were widely available before the war. The list includes: Lea & Perrins sauce, Marmite, Tabasco sauce, Bisto Gravy Powder, Libby’s ketchup, Libby’s evaporated milk, Nestle’s powdered milk, Crisco, Quaker Oats, Cornflakes, Rice Bubbles (the Australian version of Kellogg’s Rice Krispies), Kraft Velveeta, Campbell’s Chicken Soup, Heinz spaghetti, and Lime Jell-O. Many of the women POWs would have grown up and learned their cooking skills as the prepared food industry was developing and so would have felt at home with these brands. Like the dependable cultural markers of Dickens, J.M. Barrie and Gilbert and Sullivan, these products could evoke the place and personalities of the home front. The raggedy waif-like Bisto twins in the gravy powder advertisements not only attained cult-like status on their own but also were reminiscent of *Oliver Twist*. In general we have a great preference for continuity in what we eat. As semiotician Leeds-Herwitz says, “We take it for granted that favourite foods will remain as we knew them in childhood, and a change in recipe surprises us, destroying memories, making us unhappy.”⁶⁸ But of course eating habits do change over time and under pressure. Factors such as economics,

convenience and availability would have affected the food consumed by the women POWs during their pre-war life in Malaya. Their culinary adaptation of British-style recipes to local ingredients is evident in some of the recipes. Leeds-Herwitz uses anthropologist Levi-Strauss’s term “bricoleur” to describe one who tries new ingredients in old recipes.⁶⁹ An example of an adapted recipe in the POW cookbook is “Gula Malacca Blanc Mange.” The traditional and ubiquitous sweet milk pudding is reconfigured by substituting palm sugar and coconut milk. Possibly Mulvany included a few such adaptations to gently remind her readers of the origins of the cookbook.

For each ingredient in a recipe an amount is usually given using traditional measurements such as cups, gills, and spoons and on occasion unusual ones such as an eggshell to measure sugar. One Changi recipe, not from the POW cookbook but included in Gladys Tompkins’ memoir of her internment, makes use of humorous measurements. The recipe entitled, “Changi Con-fec-tion, Con-glomeration or Con-centration” calls for

Flour – none/ Butter – none (except for invalids)/ Eggs – all bad (except for children)/ Sugar – none (except for hospital)/ Milk – none (except for babies and old ladies)/ Baking Powder – none/ Water to mix – none, unless it is boiled for twenty minutes and then it is all boiled away.

The recipe concludes with the jab: “Remember 1 pinch = 2 Nips.”⁷⁰

Beyond sharing knowledge of tangible tools the women shared a language of the culinary arts. Much like military jargon or soldiers’ slang, this language provided a group identity and a sense of belonging. Vocabulary items such as “knobs” and “pinches” have a

specific contextual meaning related to the kitchen. The women could use these terms confident that their listeners understood. Another aspect of this culinary language that has military overtones is the use of the imperative verb form. Cotter notes this is a distinctive feature in recipes.⁷¹ Like concise military commands, a recipe orders an action such as beat, sift, shred, or boil. The authority of the POW cooks issued from a domain the Japanese could not enter – their domestic memories and imaginations. In a world the POWs had no control over and where they never knew what to expect or when their ordeal would end, the ordered world of a recipe would have been a place from which to draw strength to make it through the next day.

Conclusion

Michael Berenbaum, former director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Research Institute, wrote in the forward to *In Memory's Kitchen*, that "The fantasy" of writing recipes "must have been painful for the authors. Recalling recipes was an act of discipline that required them to suppress their current hunger and to think of the ordinary world before the camps – and perhaps to dare to dream of a world after the camps."⁷² Certainly it would have been an act of disciplined memory work to remember lists of ingredients, their quantities, and to bring to mind each ordered step of the method. But it was not the painful or perverse exercise one might have imagined given the terrible circumstances. It was the opposite. Rather than suppressing their hunger the women and men who wrote these wartime recipe books were acknowledging the magnetic attraction they had to food and giving voice to it.

Each imagined mouthful brought with it memories of family and friends with whom favourite foods

were once shared. From references to royalty, brand-named goods from home and much-loved fictional characters, the women of Changi made use of some remarkable tools – their memories and imaginations – to sustain themselves. The women did not want to be defined by absence – of food, of control, of family or home. Through recipes they could recapture all of these in their mind's eye. They then went a step further and wrote down their dreams, not just descriptions but instructions on how to transform ideas into eatable reality. These short, episodic pieces of domestic writing provided their authors with flights of fancy and give us a unique perspective on the lives of the women imprisoned in Changi jail.

Notes

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1. Ethel Mulvany, Interview with Sidney Katz done in preparation for article by Katz, "Miracle at Changi Prison: A study in survival," *Maclean's*, 12 August 1961; Interview #6. The original ledgers containing the recipes are held by the Mindemoya Pioneer Museum, Manitoulin Island, Ontario.
2. Ibid., and Ethel Mulvany, *The Burning of Singapore* (unpublished memoir, 196?), p.84. While the printed cookbook has no publisher or date, in the interview with Katz, Mulvany states the book was printed in 1947 but in her private copy she wrote "1946."
3. Jane Peek, Military Heraldry Section Australian War Memorial <<http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/quilt/history.asp>> (Accessed 13 April 2012).
4. Private correspondence with researcher Joyce Watson, 13 November 1995.
5. Lily Casey wrote *A Housewife's dictionary and suggestions* while imprisoned by the Japanese in Chufoo, China (held by Imperial War Museum, London). Helene Marcelle Chambon (née Garrigues) produced an untitled cookbook while imprisoned in Ravensbrück (held by Canadian War Museum, Ottawa).

Colonel Chick Fowler collected recipes from fellow POWs and wrote them on spread-out envelopes, later published as *Recipes Out of Bilibid* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1946). As well there is Edith Peer, *Ravensbrück 1945, Fantasy Cooking Behind Barbed Wire* (Sydney: Concord Printing, 1986). Cara de Silva lists manuscripts by Arnoška Klein and Jaroslav Budlovsky now in Beit Theresienstadt, Israel, and three in Yad Vashem, Israel. "Introduction," *In Memory's Kitchen*, p.xxix. Based on his POW experience, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a fictionalized account of American prisoners in Dresden sharing recipes in the story "Guns before Butter" in *Armageddon in Retrospect* (New York: Putnum, 2008).

6. Diane Tye, *Baking as Biography: A Life in Recipes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p.33.
7. Cara De Silva, "Introduction" in *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*, trans. Bianca Steiner Brown, ed. Cara De Silva (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp.xl-xli.
8. Myrna Goldenberg, "Food Talk: Gendered Responses to Hunger in the Concentration Camps," in Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, eds., *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (Detroit, 2003), pp.161-179, quotation on p.167.
9. De Silva is here referring to *Recipes Out of Bilibid* but she also mentions two other men, Arnoška Klein and Jaroslav Budlovsky, who wrote recipes while they were in concentration camps. De Silva, p.xxx.
10. Mulvany, *The Burning of Singapore*, p.84.
11. Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum, eds., *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.1-15, quotation on p.5.
12. Although there are few diaries written while the women were interned in Changi, there are some published and unpublished memoirs written after the war. The following diaries, memoirs and one biography have provided helpful background for this article: Sheila Allan, *Diary of a Girl In Changi* (Kangaroo Press, 1994); Freddy Bloom, *Dear Philip: A Diary of Captivity, Changi, 1942-45* (Bodley Head, 1980); Sally Craddock, *Retired Except on Demand: The Life of Dr. Cicely Williams* (Oxford: Green College, 1983); Mary Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun* (Maruzen Asia, 1983); Gladys Tompkins, *Three Wasted Years: Women in Changi Prison* (Hamilton, New Zealand: Felicity Tompkins, 1977); Mulvany, *The Burning of Singapore*; Dorothy Nixon's Changi Diary and lists regarding daily life made while she was Deputy Administrator at the camp include information on food and rations, see <<http://www.tighsolas.ca/page798.html>> (Accessed 21 March 2011).
13. The number of prisoners quoted here are from the panels in the Changi Museum, Singapore. See Joan Beaumont,

- "Contested Trans-national Heritage: The Demolition of Changi Prison, Singapore," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 15, no.4 (July 2009), p.313, note 6. Numbers do differ as seen in Nakahara Michiko, "The Civilian Women's Internment Camp in Singapore," in Akashi Yoji and Yoshimura Mako, eds., *New Perspectives on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, 1941-1945* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), p.215, notes 36, 37.
14. Beaumont notes that over time Changi barracks, which also held prisoners of war, has become confused with Changi jail. Beaumont, p.299.
 15. Bernice Archer, *A Patchwork of Internment: The Internment of Western Civilians under the Japanese 1941-1945*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), p.117.
 16. According to the terms of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (27 July 1929) POWs are members of an armed force <<http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/full/305?opendocument>> (Accessed 6 June 2011). Mulvany was not a member of the forces but she was enlisted in the Far East Unit of British and Australian Red Cross and as of 21 January 1942 held the rank of Superintendent in the Australian Red Cross. (Data as per her Red Cross certificate, held by her niece Marion King.)
 17. Tompkins gives a concise description of the camp organization in her memoir, *Three Wasted Years*, p.35.
 18. Archer, p.94.
 19. Report by Dr. R.A. Pallister as quoted in Joseph Kennedy, *British Civilians and the Japanese War in Malaya and Singapore, 1941-45* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p.89.
 20. For an overview of conditions in Changi see both Archer and Michiko.
 21. Fellow internee Mary Thomas notes in her memoir that a system of monthly weighings was instituted to see if some women showed alarming losses in which cases their diets would be augmented. In *The Shadow of the Rising Sun*, p.67. Transcripts from Mulvany's War Claims file give her normal weight as 145-148 pounds and at liberation in September 1945 as 105 pounds. Library and Archives Canada RG 117 542. The Minnesota Hunger Study started in 1944 by Dr. Ancel Keys shows that on a semi-starvation diet men can lose 25 percent of their body weight in six months. Mulvany had lost approximately this much when she began her cookbook. See A. Keys, J. Brozek, A. Henschel, O. Mickelsen, & H.L. Taylor, *The Biology of Human Starvation*, 2 vols., (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1950).
 22. Michiko, "The Civilian Women's Internment Camp," p.202. The petition was dated 25 August 1942 and Mulvany was interned at Changi on 1 March 1942.
 23. Mulvany Interview, #5.
 24. Mulvany Interview, #5. E.J.Pratt, *Many Moods* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1932).
 25. Mulvany Interview #5.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Mulvany, *The Burning of Singapore*, p.83. Redfearn, a close friend of Mulvany, died in captivity on 1 June 1944.
 28. Ibid.
 29. Mulvany Interview #10.
 30. Lucy Constance Macindoe wrote the untitled poem dated 18 November 1942 in fellow Changi internee Violet Klattig's autograph book. A scan of the book was at one time posted online. Personal communication with Dorothy Nixon, granddaughter of Changi internee, Dorothy Nixon (7 January 2011).
 31. Sidney Katz, "Miracle at Changi Prison: A study in survival," *Maclean's*, 12 August 1961, p.17.
 32. Mulvany, *The Burning of Singapore*, p.83 and Interview #6.
 33. De Silva, p.xxix.
 34. Ibid., p.xxviii.
 35. George Eisen, *On Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games among the shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p.82.
 36. Ibid., p.82.
 37. Ibid. Eisen briefly addresses the controversy among historians over what constitutes "resistance" during the Holocaust, see also note 2, p.134.
 38. Ibid., p.72.
 39. Ibid., pp.73, 91.
 40. Goldenberg, p.163.
 41. Mulvany, Interview #6.
 42. Ibid.
 43. Katz, "Miracle," p.17.
 44. Sharman Apt Russell, *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p.17.
 45. Goldenberg, p.174.
 46. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Semiotics and Communication: Signs, Codes, Cultures* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), p.94 quoting D. Rogov "The daily portion," *Israel Scene*, February/March 1991, p.18.
 47. Ibid.
 48. It is worth noting that *Recipes out of Bilibid*, the collection made by men, has proportionately fewer dessert recipes than the collections made by women. Possibly there is a different balance of needs between the genders in terms of play and pragmatism, calories and food value and the focus on presentation.
 49. Frances Osborne, *Lilla's Feast: A True Story of Love, War and a Passion for Food* (London: Doubleday, 2004), p.262. Osborne's biography of her great grandmother is centred on *The housewife's dictionary and suggestions* (China, 194?), Imperial War Museum, London.
 50. Edith Peer, *Ravensbrück 1945, Fantasy Cooking Behind Barbed Wire* (Sydney: Concord Printing, 1986), Foreword. n.p.
 51. Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), p.117.
 52. Mimi Sheraton, *The Bialy Eaters. The story of a bread and a lost world* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), p.6.
 53. Mulvany, Interview #6.
 54. Mulvany, Interview #6. Mulvany states that she paid \$800 to have the book mimeographed in Toronto, a considerable amount of money for her to have raised at the time. By excluding the contributors' names she was able to fit more recipes in the 100 pages.
 55. Colleen Cotter, "Claiming a Piece of the Pie: How the Language of Recipes Defines Community" in Anne Bower, ed., *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* (Amherst, MA, 1997), pp.51-71, quotation on p.69.
 56. Mulvany, *Cook Book*, p.50.
 57. Davidson theorizes that the queen of the Queen of Pudding dessert is Queen Victoria. Alan Davidson *The Penguin Companion to Food* (New York: Penguin, 2002), p.772.
 58. Colcannon Lyrics <http://www.tsrocks.com/m/mary_black_texts/colcannon.html> (Accessed 6 May 2011).
 59. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist or The Parish Boy's Progress* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/730/730-h/730-h.htm>> (Accessed 7 June 2011).
 60. W.S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*, Act 1, <<http://www.archive.org/details/mikadolibrettoof00sulluoft>> Accessed 4 July 2011).
 61. A portion of the play is depicted in the 1955 radio series made of her book *White Coolies* <<http://otrarchive.blogspot.com/2010/06/white-coolies-au.html>> (Accessed 28 February 2012).
 62. One such activity Mulvany referred to was the "D.T.s," the drain talkers. Sewage drains joined the men and women's sides of the camp. Meetings between spouses and sweethearts would be pre-arranged so that they could speak to each other while being suspended by their feet in the drain. Mulvany, *The Burning of Singapore*, p.71. Archer briefly mentions this along with reference to the men and women exchanging messages as they passed each other's garbage pails. Archer, p.147.
 63. Mulvany, *Cook Book*, p.49. Mulvany adjusted the order from the original Book II putting Encore Pudding after the Mikado!
 64. Ibid., p.98.
 65. Allan, Sheila. *Diary of a Girl In Changi*, p.176.
 66. As quoted in Allan, p.177.
 67. Allan, p.177.
 68. Leeds-Hurwitz, p.98.
 69. Ibid.
 70. Tompkins, *Three Wasted Years*, pp.66-67.
 71. Cotter, p.56.
 72. Michael Berenbaum, *In Memory's Kitchen*, "Forward," p.xvi.

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