

Szilvia Czingel

Recipes for Survival

Survival Strategies in the Lichtenwörth Concentration Camp

Abstract

In 2013, the Centropa Foundation published a special kind of cookbook. It was written in the Lichtenwörth camp by five friends, one of whom was Hédi Weisz. Why were these recipes never cooked? Why did these friends never meet again after the war? How could one survive the twentieth century? Can one kill with love? What is the hardest to live with: a Yiddish mom in early marriage, a concentration camp, communism, or the new republic of Hungary?

Layered savoy cabbage from Cluj, walnut rolls, potato doughnuts, hazelnut meringues, lungwurst, batter-dipped deep-fried cauliflower, veal roast, aspic, orange sticks, Gerbaud cake, false bone marrow with eggs, stuffed gooseneck – once well-known delicacies. Modern variations of these recipes are often presented by star chefs in various cooking shows, in cookbooks, and among the recipes of popular food bloggers. At first glance, the names suggest the world of kitchens of the bourgeoisie before the Second World War. However, they share something special and gruesome.

These recipes were written in the women's hut of the concentration camp in Lichtenwörth by five prisoners deported from Budapest, on the verge of death, suffering from typhus, fleas, and lice, starving, thin as skeletons. The recipes were discovered 62 years later by accident. The recipe book was saved for posterity by the only survivor.¹

In 2007, in a second-floor apartment of a building on Károly Boulevard in Budapest, someone was baking flodni² when small pieces of yellowed paper dropped to the floor from between the pages of a cookbook. The old pieces of paper were hiding the horrible legacy of the Holocaust. This is the first time that the history of these 149 recipes written from memory on blue notepaper with a pencil stub of only a couple of millimetres and later with a piece of coal has been made public.

Studying these recipes gives us a chance to look at the history of the twentieth century from a special perspective. They reveal everything from Hungarian gastronomy before the Second World War to the tragic events of the Holocaust while at the same time showing us how it is possible to set up survival strategies in irrational situations, as happened in Lichtenwörth. There were five women of different ages and

1 After 15 October 1944, the German occupation of Hungary, and the Arrow Cross takeover, even Jewish women were ordered to work on fortifications around Budapest. At the beginning of November, the Red Army launched another offensive against the capital. In this changed situation, the deportation plans "had to be sped up" and many transports were directed on foot towards Hegyeshalom at the Austrian border. These marches were terribly cruel and resulted in an unprecedentedly high death rate. Until the Soviet occupation of Budapest (beginning on 18 January 1945), about 98,000 of the capital's Jews lost their lives in further marches and in train transports, as well as at the hands of Arrow Cross extermination squads, from starvation and disease, and suicide. Some of the victims were simply shot and thrown into the Danube.

2 Traditional Hungarian Jewish cake. Flodni was originally a popular cake of Eastern European Jewish families.



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Hedvig Endrei and Szilvia Czingel.

situations: the wife of an upholsterer, a hat maker, an eiderdown maker, a housewife, and one of the beautiful models of Klara Rothschild's salon, Jewish women leaving on foot from the Óbuda brick factory towards Austria who later, suffering from hunger, would write the recipe book of "memories". Writing the recipes was a form of resistance, a chance for survival.

Hedvig Endrei was an engaging, talkative subject. Her makeup, perfume, and elegant costume were still an essential part of her life even at the age of 92. Her apartment on Károly Boulevard, where she has lived since 1941, is just as charming. On the table covered with a white tablecloth there are always porcelain cups, silver teaspoons, and biscuits; even the unexpected guest gets a treat. Family pictures hang on the wall; Hedvig was the last member of her family.³

From Salty Coffee to Meringues – How the Recipe Book was Born

There were about 2,500 prisoners, mainly women, who arrived at the camp at Lichtenwörth in December 1944. The camp was built on the grounds of a dilapidated brick factory and the prisoners spent the whole winter in unheated huts lying on straw full of lice or on the bare concrete.

Hard physical forced labour, starvation, cold, beatings, and other forms of torture were worse in Lichtenwörth compared to other camps. Systematic starvation dominated as the main means of mass extermination. The prisoners were often denied food for two to three days in a row, once even for five days, which was equal to mass execution. Pneumonia, dysentery, diphtheria, typhus, and starvation raged through Lichtenwörth. The camp stank, it was cold and filthy, and teeming with mice, rats, and fleas.

Food in the concentration camps was usually very poor and prisoners were not given food at regular times. In the mornings, they got a cup of very weak coffee without milk and sugar which many of the prisoners called "salty" coffee because of its

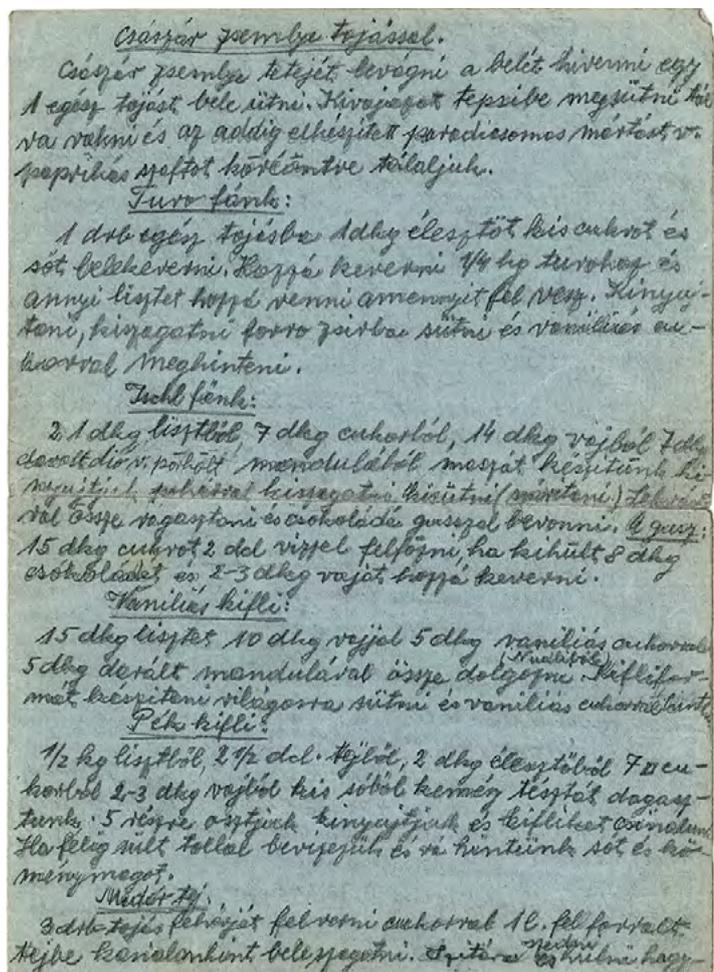
³ Interview with Hedvig (Weisz) Endrei by Szilvia Czingel, Budapest 2006 (if not stated otherwise all quotations are from this interview).

bitter taste; at noon they were usually given a bowl of soup made with potato peels or mangelwurz, and the same again for dinner. Food was not given at regular times and they often did not get anything for dinner except a soup-like liquid. When it was accompanied by a slice of dry black bread, it was considered a feast.

How the Story of the Recipe Book Began According to the Survivor

“The five of us wrote a cookbook in the camp. The cookbook was made because the five of us women, who became friends there, were all housewives and we regularly cooked. In Lichtenwörth, we were very hungry already, we always talked about food. I took letter-paper along and envelopes and pencil, thinking that I would write home. That is why I had this, what they had not taken away, and we wrote the recipes on this letter paper.

Every one of us dictated simple recipes that we had made at home, how much flour, how much of this, how much of that was called for. I did not know the proportions very well, because when I asked my mother she always told me a little bit of this, a little bit of that, she always told me so. These had all been tried, they were ‘tried’ recipes. We wrote all these by memory, we did not have a cookbook with us. We wrote this book daily. We wrote with very small letters, so that more would fit on the paper.”



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The recipes – excerpt.

In most of the concentration camps, prisoners were deprived of everything including letter paper and pens. This makes it even more touching how they managed to hide a couple of these sheets, cover them with recipes, and bring them home in a rather roundabout way. The recipe writing had its precise ritual, built into the concentration camp's daily routines. Writing was usually preceded by washing in the unheated bath of the factory building, where eighty people had to wash themselves together, followed by a search for lice and the removal of fleas from their clothes. This is how circumstances were described:

“The situation was that we got up early in the morning so that we could wash. The factory had a shower for 80 persons, and there were 3000 of us. There was a long pipe and there were faucets on it at a certain distance from each other and a tub in front of it. We stood in line there at 6 in the morning in order to get in, one had to go on time, because they often turned off the water after a while. We washed our clothes there. We took the string out of our backpacks and we dried our clothes on it. Men, women, we bathed together, there was no time for us to look at each other, to be ashamed. We were happy that we got in.

When we had washed, we started searching for lice, there were many lice and fleas. Sometimes we did not wash for weeks, when there were bombings, because they always turned off the water at that time. Not everyone had a small-toothed comb, but I did, because my mother was a hairdresser. She somehow instinctively packed this for me. It was very useful there. After having washed, we usually went outside into the courtyard. We were only allowed to go next to the factory building and everyone combed her hair with it. There were body lice, too, of course, and we searched for those, too. This was a daily routine. Then we got dressed and laid a blanket on the ground and sat next to the wall, where we either wrote the recipes, or later we knit. This was also a routine.”

Studying the recipe book in detail, there are three striking things to note on the first reading. There are no soups or vegetable dishes like *főzelék* among the recipes, even though soups are very typical of Central and Eastern European cuisine. On the other hand, there are surprisingly many sweets and cakes. There is no reference to the basic regulations of kosher cooking, which forbids the use of lard or pork. This is not a coincidence. As I was told by Mrs Istvánné Endrei who saved the recipe book, the prisoners got nothing but soup in Lichtenwörth and they were so disgusted that it did not even cross their minds to include soups in the recipe book. Instead, there are several high-energy sweets and heavy, fatty meat dishes. Since the recipes were written under special circumstances, we must treat them with caution. Each recipe bears the influence of Hungarian or Central and Eastern European cuisine and there are typical Jewish dishes, too, such as stuffed gooseneck.

This is what our storyteller recalls about the writing and the afterlife of the recipes:

“I wrote the recipes, because the paper and the pencil were also mine. That is how I got to keep them. The entire recipe collection became mine. Someone else of the five dictated the recipe each time. I do not remember dictating, I only wrote, with very small letters so that the paper would last. It did not matter what kind of recipes we wrote down. Whatever came to mind. Recipes for making spices, sweet and salty cookies, meats, sauces, and such food. There are many dishes with potatoes and meat among them, and cookies. Not many soups, perhaps because we had had enough of them. If someone looks at the recipes, there are mainly filling and ‘fattening’ dishes in them. This was not conscious of course. There is no system in the recipes, we wrote them down as

they came to us. We wrote every day, 1-2 hours a day. We talked, too, in the meantime of course. This was also a way of having fun and time went by easier. I do not know whose idea this was. I kept all of it, we did not divide it among each other. I do not remember whether I cooked from it, probably not.”

The five prisoners writing the recipes were saved in the last minute, on 2 April 1945, when the Red Army liberated the camp. When the Russian soldiers arrived, they told everybody to leave the camp as fast as they could before the Nazis came back. They arrived with sidecar motorcycles, opened the gates of the camp with the tips of their bayonets, and then they moved on. The prisoners, all in a very bad state, started to come slowly out of the huts, at least those who were able to stand on their feet, and headed directly towards the food storage room. There was a lot of food in the storeroom, mainly long-lasting food such as margarine, sugar, and jam. The food was guarded by the so-called ‘Jupos’ (Jewish Police), Jews who had been appointed to perform certain surveillance and police tasks over their fellow prisoners in the Nazi labour camps. According to survivors, the storeroom was full of packed cheese, luncheon meats, and sausages, as well as the margarine, sugar, and jam. The liberated prisoners tried to get some food from this pantry. They were so hungry that some of them scraped the margarine with their hands. The ‘Jupos’ tried to protect the pantry, wanting to keep the food for themselves. They did not help the prisoners trying to enter the pantry, on the contrary. The prisoners hated the ‘Jupos’ just as much as they hated the Nazis, as they were almost as vicious as the Nazis. This is how the story continues:

“There was a rush and a fight, people tried to get hold of everything that was in the sacks. They ripped them and the sugar and flour was spilled everywhere. They tried to gather it in their boots and everywhere. There was a ‘Jupo’, the son of the owner of the Heidecker factory. They made fences and spring mattresses. They trampled on him, because he slipped on the sugar. He died there. There was an ad I remember, a man jumped from one bed to the other and the ad went like this: ‘Whether this way or that way, always to Heidecker.’ This was their advertisement. We, who could move, gathered a lot of food and took it to those who could not leave the camp. They died there, because they ate too much. And we left, all five of us, but three fell ill of typhus.”

After their long starvation, the prisoners could not digest the sudden, large amount of food and many died in the moment of their escape.

Those who were able left the camp to go home, as did the authors of the recipes. All five of them left the camp but three contracted typhus on the way. Two made it to Budapest. The journey lasted two weeks, with the protagonists of our story made it mainly on foot to the market hall on Várház Street. From there, they crawled on their knees, both weak and thin to the bone, until they finally arrived home in Károly Street and Pozsonyi Street. The recipe book was hidden in one of their pockets all the way. The recipes saved their lives: While writing them the women prisoners were thinking about their families, they were together with them in their imagination. Talking about the recipes recalled family stories and the hope of seeing their loved ones again kept them alive. The recipes gave strength and hope, hope for the families torn apart to be reunited again.

Recipe writing became a ‘trend’ in Lichtenwörth: There was another recipe collection written by deported Polish women.⁴

4 Silva de Cara (ed.), *In Memory’s Kitchen. A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*, Lanham 2006. Used by permission of the Jewish Museum of Prague; Joanne Caras, *Holocaust Survivor Cookbook. Collected From Around the World*, Port St. Lucie 2007.

Looking back at our historical heritage, if we recall the times and the places in Central Europe and in Hungary where our ancestors spent the most dreadful century in the history of humankind – the twentieth – we find barracks guarded by armed men, huts and battlefield bunkers, districts assigned for soldiers, war prisoners or civilians, shelter cellars, forced labour, and concentration camps.

The question arises: What kinds of regular activities could make the months or years spent under armed guard more tolerable? How could people make use of the tiny fragments of free choice they had left? Some people remember rare possibilities for sports, self-organised shows, or music events, but these occasional social events in camps or barracks were possible only under less rigorous circumstances. Among the individual activities one could do to overcome the aimlessness of everyday life in camps and prisons, relatively few had the possibility of reading regularly or writing a diary, conducting photography, or playing cards or chess – depending on their circumstances or rank. For common soldiers, doing crafts was more typical, when material and tools were available. This is how the various wood carvings, metal keepsakes, miniature ships built in bottles during long years of captivity, small but nevertheless grandiose match-stick buildings, liqueur glass sets decorated with goldsmith's work by soldiers during the war using the copper cartridge cases of 20-millimetre bullets, needlework made by soldiers in the 1950s, or rasped and polished aluminium souvenirs were made.⁵

Prisoners of the concentration camps, especially those deported because of their Jewish origin, had much more restricted possibilities. In their case, we are talking about younger and middle-aged men and women fit for work, since children, mothers with small children, and the elderly were usually sent to extermination camps, where they were killed. Survivors from the camps talk and write about activities they tried to pursue in stolen moments, minutes spent in hiding with something that made them feel worthy as before, something they could gather energy from in order to survive. Since they had almost no access to tools, it was mostly meaningful conversations that the prisoners could engage in to encourage each other. They could tell stories or anecdotes to each other in the evenings in smaller audiences or, if there were performers who volunteered, they could find occasions for thematic lectures or discussions in science or arts or acting and singing performances.⁶

Because of the poor meals and continuous starvation, a great part of people's dreams and conversations centred on eating. This was the case even for the soldiers, who were not starving but who were given monotonous, poor-quality food, and especially prisoners of war, for whom daydreaming and picturing specific dishes in their imagination could happen more often and more openly than thinking of a missing partner, children, or relatives. Encouraging or at times provoking their companions in distress by recalling their favourite goose thigh, stuffed cabbage, poppy-seed and honey pastry, and other delicacies before going to sleep was an everyday activity. However, Hedvig Weisz and her fellow prisoners were exemplary with the virtually creative gastronomic activity of dictating and writing down the recipes and cooking methods of homemade dishes based on precise memories and their imagination.

5 Museum of Military History of Budapest. Permanent exhibitions: From the Piave to the Don, from the Don to the Danube. Hungary's Military History 1918–1948 and Deported – Far from Home. Hungarian Soldiers in Soviet Captivity 1941–1955.

6 Zsolt K. Horváth, Zum Foto eines Arbeitsdienstlers, in: S.I.M.O.N.: Nur eine Quelle ... Im Gedenken an den ungarischen Holocaust, 2014/1, 230–234, <https://simon-previous-issues.vwi.ac.at/index.php/13-issues/2014/89-2014-1-events-eine-quelle>; István Balogh (ed.), Tevan Rezső katonatiszt első világháborús naplója [Rezső Tevan's Diary from the First World War], Budapest 2014; Ernő Hermann, Hadifogolynapló 1914–1918 [Prisoner's Diary from the First World War], Budapest 2015; László Bartók, Egy hadfi naplója [Soldier's Diary from the First World War], Budapest 2015.

Virág Németh & András Borgula

Recipes for Survival

Based on a Book by Szilvia Czingel

Heidi: Add as much flour as it needs. Right, but how much is that exactly?

Eva: I just told you. As much as it needs.

Heidi: But how much is that for a pound of potatoes? Ten ounces? Two pounds?

Eva: I cannot give you an exact measurement, just write 'as much as it needs'.

Judge it by the eye ... that is ... if you ever cook again ...

(Lichtenwörth camp, December 1944)

In 2013, the Centropa Foundation published a special kind of cookbook. It was written in the Lichtenwörth camp by five friends, one of whom was Hédi Weisz. Why were these recipes never cooked? Why did these friends never meet again after the war? How could one survive the twentieth century? Can one kill with love? What is the hardest to live with: a Yiddish mom in early marriage, a concentration camp, communism, or the new republic of Hungary?

This is the story of Hédi Weisz, a young Hungarian Jewish woman, born in 1920 in Budapest who lived until the age of 90. Szilvia Czingel, who works as a researcher at Centropa, conducted a life history interview with her. During one of their meetings, a couple of old pieces of paper fell out of a cookbook. It turned out that these were “recipes for survival”.

When Ms. Czingel published her book, András Borgula, the art director of Golem Theater (the only Jewish theatre company in Hungary), immediately fell in love with the story. He and his permanent collaborator, Virág Németh, decided to write a play



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based on Hédi's story. However, they did not want to write a "simple Holocaust tale", so they tried to use every significant episode of her life, from childhood to old age. A wonderful Hungarian actress, Mari Nagy, played Hédi in all ages, which made the performance very special.

The writers met with other survivors and their families. These meetings were so inspirational that they made the story a little different from reality – especially the episodes in the concentration camp. They wanted a story about life and not about death, so they added a man to the story. You can fall in love under any circumstances, you can be jealous, you can be excited, you can be enamoured, you can even be bored in a camp. Especially in a camp.

The play is a reminiscence, the old Hédi recalling her memories. She holds a dinner party, where she begins to telling stories. This is why the creators "cooked up" something special: For every period of her life, she serves a meal to the audience. In



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her monologues, she tells her story, but her version is often different from reality. She is old, her memory is not the best anymore – or is she lying, because she is ashamed of the past? The scenes between the monologues show the truth – a truth about a twentieth-century woman, who survived through the decades, and had a memorable and meaningful life.

Lectures in the [theatre performance](#) at the Volkstheater Vienna, 11 November 2018, Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI).

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