

Cara De Silva, Food Historian Who Preserved Jewish Recipes, Dies at 83

She edited “In Memory’s Kitchen,” a collection compiled by prisoners in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. It was a surprise hit.

By [Clay Risen](#) for The New York Times

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Cara De Silva, a journalist and historian of food and culinary culture who in 1996 edited a groundbreaking collection of recipes amassed by prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp, which became a surprise hit, died on Dec. 7 in Manhattan. She was 83.

Her close friend and fellow food writer Fred Plotkin said that the death, at a hospital, came after a very brief illness, but that the exact cause had not been determined.

A lifelong Manhattanite who made her name as a reporter for Newsday and later as a freelance writer for publications like The New York Times and the food, wine and travel magazine Saveur, Ms. De Silva was less interested in hot trends and buzzy restaurants than in the culinary byways and subcultures that undergirded a community, and in the way a place’s history could be understood through its food.

“The venerable socca symbolized an older, perhaps less dazzling, but more romantic Nice — that of Queen Victoria, Matisse, the czars, the early days of the Promenade des Anglais, summering English aristocrats, the belle époque and the distinctive Niçois when they were still Italian speakers,” she wrote in [a 1998 Times article about a type of chickpea pancake](#).

In the early 1990s she wrote a column for Newsday called “Flavor of the Neighborhood,” in which she highlighted tiny delis, obscure salumerias and out-of-the-way pizza joints, long before it became fashionable to seek out such places.

She was especially fond of Italy’s culinary culture and its impact on American cooking, and with her name — a nom de plume — and her Mediterranean complexion, she was often taken for Italian. She was in fact the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia, and she was just as loyal to Yiddish and Central European foodways.

Ms. De Silva was, in other words, the perfect choice to edit [“In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy From the Women of Terezin.”](#) a slim volume of recipes that had been compiled by a Jewish prisoner in the concentration camp known as Terezin — Theresienstadt in German — during World War II. These were not the records of what they ate in the camp. Rather, they were the memories of what the women of the camp had made before the war, foods richly evocative of Jewish Mitteleuropa: stuffed eggs, stews and all manner of dumplings.

Mina Pachter, the prisoner who assembled the volume, died of starvation in 1944. Before her death she entrusted the 70 or so recipes to a friend, with orders to get them to her daughter Anny Pachter Stern, who had emigrated to Palestine before the war. But Ms. Stern had since moved to New York, and it took more than 20 years, and several intermediaries, to get them to her.

It took another two decades before a friend of Ms. Stern's urged her to get the recipes edited and published. Bianca Steiner Brown, a translator and herself a survivor of Theresienstadt, was hired to render them from German to English, and Ms. De Silva joined the effort as editor.

Ms. De Silva decided to leave the recipes largely as they were, even though many were incomplete. This was not a cookbook, she insisted, but a Holocaust document and a record of what she considered "psychological resistance."

Published by Jason Aronson, a small company specializing in Judaica, in 1996, the book became an unexpected hit (it has sold more than 100,000 copies to date) and sparked interest in European Jewish foodways. When it was published, Ms. De Silva and friends managed to recreate some of the recipes for a small party in honor of the women behind them.

"The feeling that I was tasting the food of their dreams was profoundly overwhelming and moving," she told New York Jewish Week in 2014, "because it was the materialization of something they could only dream and remember, and it was in my mouth and in the mouths of others. We were celebrating them by celebrating their food."

Carol Eileen Krawetz was born on March 3, 1939, in Manhattan. Her father, Mayer (sometimes spelled Meyer) Krawetz, had immigrated as a child from somewhere near the present-day Polish-Belarusian border. He worked as a manager for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and wrote plays and essays in Yiddish. Her mother, Rose, was a sculptor.

She grew up near the northern tip of Manhattan, along 204th Street, in what was then a heavily Jewish neighborhood. The family lived simply, and whatever extra money the parents had, they poured into Carol's cultural education. She was especially fond of trips to the Metropolitan Opera.

In her youth, Carol was active in Yiddish theater, including a lead role in a stage version of Abraham Cahan's 1917 novel, "The Rise of David Levinsky." Along the way she adopted a stage name, Cara De Silva, which she kept as a pen name after she became a writer.

Ms. De Silva graduated with a degree in English literature from Hunter College in Manhattan. She received a master's degree, also in English, from the City College of New York in 1966 and later pursued graduate work in medieval English literature at Rutgers University in New Jersey. She briefly lived in England while her husband, Robert Ackerman, did his own graduate work at Cambridge University.

Ms. De Silva and Mr. Ackerman later divorced. She leaves no immediate survivors.

After the publication of “In Memory’s Kitchen,” Ms. De Silva spent several years lecturing on Jewish foodways in the United States and Europe, as well as consulting for museums and historical projects.

During one lecture tour, in Israel, she came across a bookstore stocked with copies of “In Memory’s Kitchen,” its windows looking out over Jerusalem, an experience she recounted in [a 2014 interview with the Yiddish Book Center](#).

She was struck, she said, by “the thought of just having been a vehicle, that’s all I was, through which these women were saved from oblivion, and here they were, in a book, with their work, embodied in a — or embraced by — in book covers, looking out, over the sunshine pouring down over the hills of Jerusalem.”