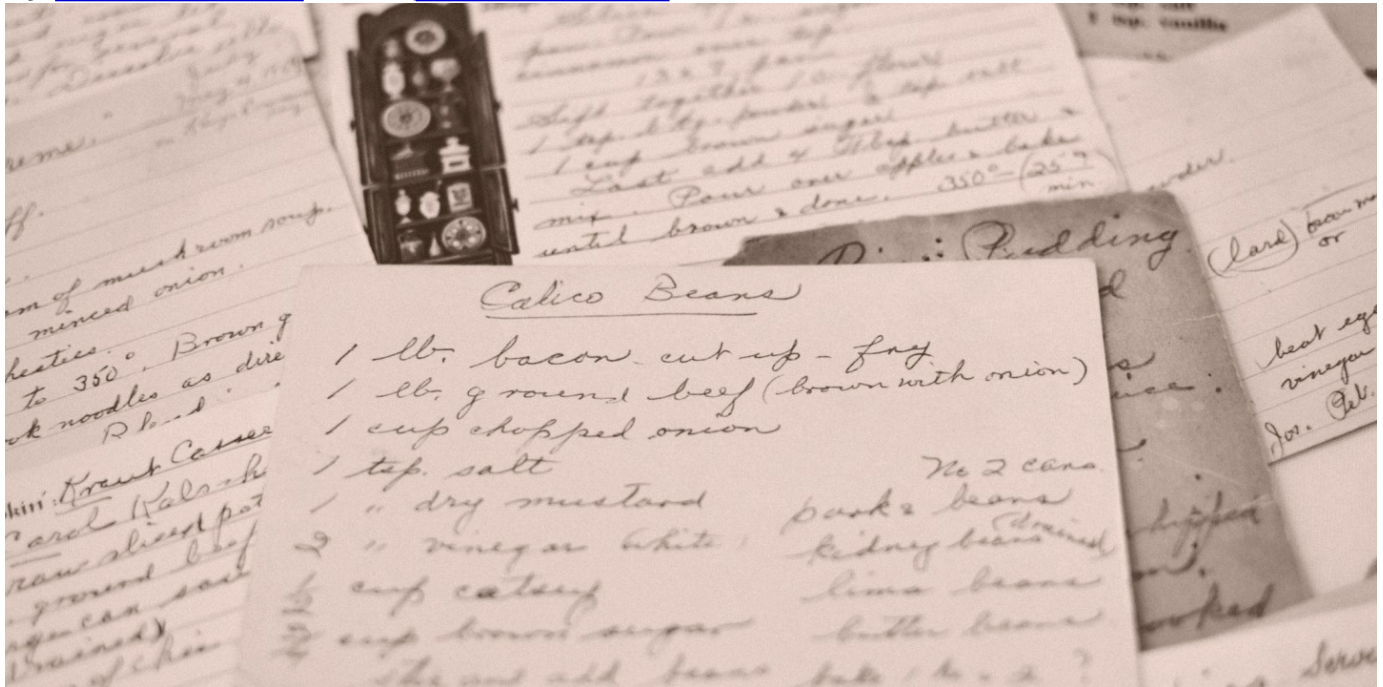


Recipes from long ago

Old handwritten recipes conjure up all kinds of memories.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 2, 2019](#) issue



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The floor under the bed in the master bedroom of my house is a repository for two things: dust bunnies and long-forgotten objects. I discovered the extent of both while preparing for new carpeting recently. One of the things I retrieved was a white plastic box of index cards. After wiping 22 years of dust off of the lid, the word “Recipes” came into view. When our mother died 37 years ago, I became heir of this stash—thanks either to a lucky draw among siblings or to selfish claiming rights on my part, I can’t remember which.

The dog-eared cards behind the “Cookies” tab provoked the most vivid memories. Fifty-year-old butter and corn syrup fingerprints blur the words penned in red ink. Mother taught us baking at an early age, which meant we spilled as many ingredients on the counter as ever landed in the bowl. If the tattered condition of the

oatmeal chocolate chip card is any indication, those were our favorite. The recipe in which Mother had already increased the measurements was titled “Double Recipe.” My brother once took those words as an instruction, doubling the already-doubled recipe. I’m pretty certain he had enough cookies to feed the entire school.

Bequeathing recipes to loved ones doesn’t normally merit the attention of estate planning lawyers. Yet sharing recipes that have personal meaning can create the sort of legacy that transcends all monetary or legal value.

A case in point is a slim paperback sitting on my office bookshelf. *In Memory’s Kitchen* contains 70 handwritten recipes by women imprisoned in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Created by the Nazis in 1941 in the town of Terezin, Czechoslovakia, this camp was a perverse piece of Nazi public relations. Advertised as a “model ghetto” for Jewish intellectuals, artists, musicians, and professors, it was, in reality, a disease- and vermin-infested stopping point on the way to Auschwitz.

Mina Pachter, an artist imprisoned in the camp, met regularly with other women in the camp and encouraged them to recall their recipes from memory. Their conversations were a pleasant distraction from the hunger, brutality, and hellish conditions. They’d huddle in the dark together on freezing cold nights, often with nothing but a piece of moldy bread or some watery soup in their stomachs, and quarrel over ingredients and techniques. Would butter or some other fat make for the best cake? How about the best strudel? Remembering the flavors, smells, and kitchen skills they knew so well, these women re-created recipes entirely from memory, scratching them out on scraps of Nazi propaganda.

Pachter died in the camp on Yom Kippur 1944. Her handwritten and hand-sewn cookbook was later carried out of Theresienstadt, eventually landing in her daughter’s hands a quarter century later. Pachter had insisted that her daughter receive the recipes as an inheritance. Today, the original pages rest in the archives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

More than a cookbook, this is an enduring symbol of hope. The women of Theresienstadt recorded their prized recipes as an act of defiance. It was their resistance to the daily dehumanization they faced. For them, it was life in the midst of death—something that really good recipes have a way of encouraging.

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