

Yiddish Literature

Understanding Jewish Foodways in Eastern Europe

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Abstract: The following research was conducted in order to better understand Jewish foodways in Eastern Europe in the late 19th Century. Questions from the original research proposal were as follows: where did Jews get their poultry? Did they raise the birds themselves, and if so, how? What were some of the foods created with poultry? How did poultry products (eg fat and feathers) get used by Jews? What place did poultry have in ceremonial practices, and in meals associated with specific holidays? What memories do Jews have of poultry usage associated with their childhood? How did economic change affect their use and access to poultry? How common was it for Jews to have poultry to eat? How were chickens, ducks, and geese differentiated by Jews as sources of food and for traditional purposes? To answer these questions, a total of nine books were examined. These books, written largely by authors Sholom Aleichem and I.L. Peretz, were chosen because of their ability to display ordinary life for Jewish people in European communities. Charts summarizing the data were recorded in order to show trends and repetition in the use of poultry, animal fat, and other Jewish food traditions.

Book 1: *Happy New Year! And Other Stories* by Sholom Aleichem

Overview: Collection of eleven short stories. Most notable is the first one, labeled “Geese”, about a woman who sells Geese.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 1-10	Geese (buying/raising /killing/ eating)	Info about buying and keeping geese; taking care of the geese. A lot of good info in this one short story-- all worth reading.	Woman buys and sells geese and kosher goose fat for Passover
Pg 21/ L. 6	Boiled eggs	“The Czar’s court knew that a pious Jew wouldn’t touch anything but boiled eggs”	A Jew is invited to the Czar’s palace, where servants serve a variety of food including boiled eggs.
Pg 25/ L. 34	Breaking fast/ Chicken	“...went home to break the fast...by eating a quarter of a chicken, a remnant of the previous day’s sacrificial fowls”	End of Yom Kippur that overlapped with a funeral; breaking the fast occurred at the end of the service and afterwards everyone regrouped for the funeral service.
Pg 55/ L. 26	Passover/ Tradition	““May the Devil take you! Standing with bread [with chicken fat] at the Passover door.”	A boy looks into the parlor which is being prepared for Passover. His mother gets very angry that he is eating at the door because it is “forbidden”.
Pg 60/ L. 35	Passover	“...we had bought our matzohs a long time ago... we had a basketful of eggs, a jar of Passover chicken fat, two ropes of onions on the wall, and many other delicacies...”	A family prepares for Passover celebrations.

Book 2: *Tevye the Dairyman* and *Motl the Cantor's Son* by Sholem Aleichem

Overview: Introduces the character of Tevye the dairyman and records some of his struggles making money and selling dairy. The second half of the story is about a boy Motl, who eventually travels to America after the death of his father and many hardships.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 10/ L. 28	Hunger	“I haven’t tasted or even laid eyes on coffee or a butter roll for a year”	Tevye encounters a rich family eating fine foods after helping two women find their way home.
Pg 14/ L. 13	Feast	“They carried out... rich, fatty soups, roasts, geese, along with the finest wines”	The rich man has invited Tevye to dine with them.
Pg 37 L. 31	Ritual Slaughter	“He had declared an ox that was the size of an oak to be unkosher, after finding a tiny scar on the animal’s lung the size of a pinhead”	A friend of Tevye’s is angry with the shochet, or ritual slaughterer.
Pg 187/ L. 1	Kvass	“Lemon peel, honey, and something they call cream of tartar... the more water, the more kvass”	Motl’s older brother begins making and selling kvass to make money.
Pg 222/L 15	Conflict over food	“Pinni spoils our meals...he can’t stand that the Gentiles are laughing at us for eating onions and garlic”	A family friend of Motl’s who is accompanying them to America gets offended by non-Jews who laugh at their food and starts a fight.
Pg 341/ L. 15	Kosher Sausage	“On every corner of the city, they have stores where people come to buy kosher sausages”	After arriving in America, Motl’s brother gets a job working for Hebrew National and notes how prevalent kosher sausage is in America.

Book 3: *Holiday Tales... Stories of Chanukah, Passover, & Other Jewish Holidays* by Sholom Aleichem

Overview: A collection of stories revolving around holiday traditions and happenings.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 3/ L. 1	Sukkos	“During the fall festival of Sukkos, meals are eaten in a home-made shed or lean-to...”	The opening of a story involving a sukkah that is hastily made and falls down during the meal.
Pg 14/ L. 3	Sukkos Meal	“...dunking the soft bread in the hot fish broth... delicious holiday fish fit for a king”	The family eats a meal in the sukkah.
Pg 40/ L. 9	Potatoes; Chanukah candles; Goose fat	“I bowed my head over the scooped out potato halves... the wicks in the potatoes, our Chanukah candles... we’ll eat potatoes with goose fat”	A family with no money describes how they celebrate the holiday, including using potatoes as candles and “splurging” on a jar of goose fat.
Pg 109/ L. 1	House cleaning; Grain/yeast	“The weeks between Purim and Passover are spent cleaning the house... to make sure everything is free of grain and yeast products”	A boy watches his mother prepare the house for Passover.
Pg 130/ L. 4	Passover meal prep; Buying Turkey, Chicken, Fish	“They tossed all the chickens into one coop... the turkeys were allowed to roam free”/ “Only the fish, the meat, and the wine remained to be bought on the last day”/ “Koshering of dishes... was assigned to the boys”	The preparations for a Passover meal are described, including multiple families working together to get everything ready.

Book 4: *Selected Stories of Sholom Aleichem*

Overview: Another collection of stories about a large variety of topics.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 30/ L. 10	Fish/Meat for Sabbath	“Is it possible that there is a Jew who does not have fish for the Sabbath? If he has no fish, then he has meat. If he has no meat, then he has herring.”	Discussion about how to provide for the Sabbath and the lengths that people will go to to ensure there is a proper meal.
Pg 324/L. 1	Butcher; Fisherman	“If he tells you the meat was slaughtered yesterday, then it is so”	About 4 pages detailing stories about a butcher and a fisherman, including how they interact with their customers who are mainly women.

Book 5: *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*

Overview: Short stories, mostly repeats of previous works.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 283/ L.29	Meal etiquette	“Surely, the sage who advised that one should not speak during meals would pardon me for saying that he was ignorant of the exigencies of Jewish life...”	A boy complains about the custom of not speaking during meals preceding a conversation his father has with their dinner guest.

Book 6: *Tevye's Daughters* by Sholom Aleichem

Overview: Short stories revolving around Tevye and his family life, with a few stories about general everyday life.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 38/ L.9	Market; Food selling	“His [basket] filled with twisted white rolls, hard-boiled eggs, oranges, and bottles of seltzer water”	Gives an idea about how competitive sellers were to sell their goods/ what they sold.
Pg 73/ L. 5	Chicken; Butter	“If it wasn’t for that chicken cooked in butter, I wouldn’t find fault”	Discussing the food practices of a family; this man doesn’t agree with the family cooking their chicken in butter.
Pg 97/ L. 16	Hen; Slaughter	“We have an old custom... when a hen begins to crow like a rooster, we take her away to be slaughtered”	Tevye and his wife talk about customs and joke about when a hen should be killed.
Pg 113/ L. 22	Purim feast; Fish	“The big shiny Purim loaf covered with saffron and studded with raisins, and my wife serves the good strong spicy fish with horseradish and the rich soup with the long yellow noodle sin it”	Description of a Purim feast and the different foods on the table.
Pg 121/ L. 32	Chicken fat	“They stuffed him with pancakes and chicken fat until he got sick and almost died of overeating”	A little boy who always gets treats is fed chicken fat and potato pancakes as a treat.
Pg 123/ L. 1	Meat; Chicory	“...had a habit of pitting a pot of chicory on the hearth every morning...she would never shove her pot of chicory in among the pots in which meat was cooking”	Talking about how this woman likes to use the oven and that bread is ruined when a pot of chicory is in the oven at the same time.
Pg 173/ L. 7	Poor family eating	“A piece of bread smeared with garlic, sometimes a barley soup, once in a while a piece of dried bloater that burns your gullet...”	A father talks about the rations that he feeds his family and how difficult it is to eat when his children are hungry, which prompts him to fast often.
Pg 180/ L. 2	Poultrywoman; Chicken; Geese	“I sell eggs and chickens and geese and ducks...”	Yenta the Poultrywoman talks about her customers and how she interacts with them.

Pg 187/ L. 4	Chicken soup	“And now along comes with clever doctor and asks me if I can manage to make soup out of a quarter of a chicken...”	The poultrywoman has a request to make chicken soup out of a quarter of a chicken and she does it weekly.
Pg 188/ L. 23	Selling chicken/geese/ducks	“...with a basketful of eggs and chickens and geese and ducks, and the customers always on my neck...”	The poultrywoman talking about selling her meat and how customers fight over who gets to buy from her first.
Pg 279/ L. 27	Passover; Fish	“...the servant girl... brought to the table, first the hot, spicy fish, then the soup with dumplings, then the pancakes and other holiday dishes”	Description of a Passover meal.

Book 7: *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* by Sholom Aleichem

Overview: Mainly repeated stories of Tevye, with new additions known as the “Railroad Stories”, which detail the viewpoints of various rail travelers and their experiences on the road.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg 250/ L. 38	Pork	“If you have to eat pork, you may as well eat it till you burst”	A man shares this saying while discussing why he should take out the maximum amount of insurance for his store.
Pg 283/ L. 9	Sharing food	“Vodka, cake, a hard-boiled egg, a drumstick, a piece of fish... perhaps you have an apple, an orange, a piece of strudel?”	The narrator explains that other train passengers will help you if you’ve forgotten something- but be ready to share whatever food you have in your bag.

Book 8: *The Seven Good Years and Other Stories* by I.L. Peretz

Overview: A short collection of stories by Peretz, focusing on subjects like prophecies, love, and ordinary experiences.

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg. 59/ L. 24	Potatoes	“He had no home waiting for him where he could eat potatoes. Not even potatoes without butter!”	A man sees a poor orphan boy and reflects on the lack of food he must experience.
Pg. 82/ L. 8	Feeding a guest	“The farmer’s wife rushed over to the cupboard and took out a manner of good things to eat and drink-- cakes and biscuits, jam and sweet brandy.”	This is a description of some foods that one may have offered to a guest in the home.

Book 9: *Classic Yiddish Stories of S.Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz*

Overview: A collection of stories by these three authors, with unique stories not found in previous books.

S.Y. Abramovitsh

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg. 41/L. 47	Wedding Feast	“They prepared a fine feast with brandy, baked rolls, fish and roast chicken, as Jews are wont to do, and that costs all kinds of money.”	A description of the food prepared for the wedding, as well as noting its expense, which is relevant because the groom didn't show and they didn't want the food to go to waste.
Pg. 51/ L. 15	Bris celebration	“After the circumcision, they gave me a healthy swig of brandy, a whole kiddush cup, a large slice of cake, a little rose-shaped roll, and on top of that a few pennies.”	This man describes finding a house where a bris was taking place and then taking food from it to bring home to his wife.

Sholom Aleichem

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg. 91/ L. 23	Sabbath; fish and meat	"...come Sabbath and holidays, there's challah loafs with fish...he will give up his fish and meat both, if only you let him have his holiday dainty."	Discussion about holiday feasting, feast days, and rules.
Pg. 109/ L. 30	Restaurant; Women's roles	"Keeps a restaurant... does all the cooking on the premises herself. Daughter serves."	Description of a kosher restaurant that is run by a widow and her daughter.

I.L. Peretz

Page/Line	Keyword	Summary	Context
Pg. 140/ L. 5	Potatoes	"With bread and potatoes, bread without potatoes, and often only with potatoes and no bread."	A man is talking about what he works for and what makes life worth living-- until he gets tired of potatoes.
Pg. 140/ L. 34	Oxen; Kosher	"When my shtrayml states that four oxen are not kosher, one after the other-- the butcher is cleaned out... the whole shtetl goes without meat for a week, a company of Cossacks gets cheap beef, and that's the end of it.	Explanation of what happens when just a few animals are declared non-kosher, many people have to go without meat.
Pg. 143/ L. 22	Food related sayings	"Slaughter ten oxen and cook only half of one"; 'You can go hungry, but be sure to have all sorts of dishes and only eat spleen off the left side of your plate'"	Some sayings about food, note footnote on page 143 saying that Peretz is making fun of ultra-orthodox food practices.