**Season 1 Episode 1: Appetizing: An American New York Jewish Food Tradition**

**Jeremy Shere:** Welcome to Adventures in Jewish Studies, the podcast of the Association for Jewish Studies. In every episode, we take you on an entertaining and intellectual journey about Jewish life, history, and culture, with the help of some of the world's leading Jewish Studies scholars. I'm your host, Jeremy Shere.

The year is 1921. The streets of New York's Lower East Side are crammed with pushcarts and stalls and people, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who arrived in waves over the past several decades, hoping to leave behind the poverty and pogroms of the Old World to find a better life in America.

Amidst the throngs, housewives move from stall to pushcart to storefront, filling their baskets with fruits, vegetables, bread, eggs. And for the herring that will constitute that night's meal, maybe also a bit of salty lox. For that, it's a visit to the appetizing store.

**Mark Russ Federman:** So the stores were small. They were specializing in herring.

**Jeremy Shere:** This is Mark Russ Federman, the former third-generation owner of the appetizing store Russ & Daughters.

**Mark Russ Federman:** They would have counters. Generally the counter had space for one or two people behind it at a time. The stores were very narrow. And then various items would fill in the counters as they became available. Whitefish, chubs, butterfish.

**Jeremy Shere:** And the clientele, says Hasia Diner, a professor of American Jewish history at New York University, the little Jewish ladies with their headscarves and baskets — these were some fierce customers.

**Hasia Diner:** People are pushing up against each other, hordes, particularly of women, standing around a fishmonger. And the shoving, and the screaming and, like, "I want that fish!"

**Jeremy Shere:** But undergirding the noise and the surliness and the hectoring, there's also something familiar and familial. Here's Norma Joseph, a professor of religions and cultures at Concordia University in Montreal.

**Norma Joseph:** The visual is of an Eastern European world. The smells are the smells of mom's kitchen, and the foods you look at are very familiar to you, and there's somebody behind the counter who says, "This lox is better than that one. Here, I'll give you a taste."

**Jeremy Shere:** Now at this point, we have to pause for a minute, because, well, if you grew up in New York City and you're of a certain age, then you're probably familiar with what we're talking about. But if you're not from New York — or even if you are, and you're say, in your 30s or early 40s — then you may be wondering, "What's an appetizing store? And by the way, what in the world is 'appetizing'?"

**Mark Russ Federman:** There is no good definition of ‘appetizing’ as far as I know. In fact, every ten years or so, the New York Times gets ahold of me, that FYI column, and says, "What is appetizing? Can you define it?" And the answer is always the same: "No."

**Jeremy Shere:** Okay. So maybe there's no single definition of ‘appetizing,’ but at least we can describe it.

**Hasia Diner:** Okay. So first, it's important to note that appetizing is an American institution.

**Jeremy Shere:** This is Hasia Diner again.

**Hasia Diner:** Jewish immigrants who came to the United States from Lithuania or Ukraine or Belarus would have never heard of appetizing. And most of the foods that were sold in the appetizing, they would have never known. So this is very much an American product.

**Jeremy Shere:** In other words, appetizing stores sold foods that were mostly new to Jewish immigrants.

**Eve Jochnowitz:** Herring. Mackerel.

**Jeremy Shere:** This is Eve Jochnowitz . She's a culinary ethnographer based in New York.

**Eve Jochnowitz:** Ah... sturgeon. You know, I believe there was sturgeon, although after the Second World War, you will not find any rabbis certifying sturgeon as kosher.

**Jeremy Shere:** And, of course, gefilte fish.

**Hasia Diner:** The gefilte fish that is sold in the appetizing stores tended to be sweet. And as such, it was following the Polish tradition, even though so many of the customers would have been coming from Ukraine and Belarus, who didn't know sweet gefilte fish.

**Jeremy Shere:** Now, it's important to keep in mind, as Hasia Diner mentioned, that appetizing is a distinctly American, New York, Jewish thing. Jews were not eating lox with bagels and cream cheese in the cities and *shtetls* of Eastern Europe.

But to really understand appetizing, to understand how and why it got started in America and what it means, we have to take a moment to travel back in time and space to look at what Jewish immigrants from Poland and Russia and Ukraine and other places in Eastern Europe, to look at what these Jews were used to eating before they came to America.

**Hasia Diner:** So what they ate was, for one thing, pretty limited. It was pretty monotonous. They were lucky to eat meat once a week on the Sabbath, or Friday night, Sabbath during the day. Herring was a staple. It was their kind of fish of choice, as it were. Or fish of no choice.

**Jeremy Shere:** Here's Jochnowitz again.

**Eve Jochnowitz:** You have to say herring is the fish of our people. Herring is a fish that is preserved. In inland communities. where you don't have access to seawater fish, herring might've been the only fish you got, and so you have the combination of affection and revulsion and familiarity and contempt for herring. We have sayings in Yiddish, like, "*Ven siz nisht da kein fish, iz men yotzim mit herring.”* If there is no fish, well then, you can have herring — meaning, herring is not even fish.

**Jeremy Shere:** So the Jews of Eastern Europe ate a lot of herring, but they ate more than just herring.

**Norma Joseph:** So garlic and onion were important. *Lokshen* pasta. So *lokshen* became the big thing, and that's how *lokshen kugels* predominate. *Kasha varnishkes* are big.

**Jeremy Shere:** And when potatoes made their way to Eastern Europe in the early 19th century, they became a main staple of poor people's diet, including poor Jews.

**Eve Jochnowitz:** Potatoes. You know the potato song, I have had many people from the old country telling me, “That is true, we really had potatoes every day.”

**Jeremy Shere:** The potato song that Eve Jochnowitz refers to is the Yiddish folk tune *Bulbes: “*Sunday potatoes, Monday potatoes, Tuesday and Wednesday potatoes, but on the Sabbath, something special: a potato *kugel*. And then on Sunday, back to regular potatoes.”

(*s*ong plays in background)

East European Jews ate a lot of *bulbes.* And so did pretty much everyone else in that part of the world. In fact, a main reason we're taking this detour from the story of the invention of the American Jewish food tradition of appetizing is to recognize that all Jewish food traditions, just like most foodways of all peoples, are invented and borrowed from other cultures. Even *gefilte* fish.

(song plays in background)

**Norma Joseph:** *Gefilte* fish was a German food in which a big fish was stuffed. That's what ‘gefilte’ means — stuffing the fish. Some minced fish. You mince the fish. You stuffed the big wonderful fish with this chopped fish. The poor Jews then just were able to use the minced fish.

**Jeremy Shere:** Challah isn't an originally Jewish food either, by the way. The origins are a little murky, but Jews may have borrowed it from the German tradition of braided breads. But they did make it their own, as Hasia Diner puts it. Jews adopted and adapted the food traditions they borrowed.

**Hasia Diner:** Jews ate what their non-Jewish neighbors ate, but they ate it in a kind of we could call it — I'm not sure it's really a word — “culturized" form. That is, their neighbors were eating soups that they called ‘borscht.’ Jews were eating borscht, but they didn't have pork in it, or they didn't combine meat and dairy.

**Jeremy Shere:** Okay. So to summarize, poor Jews in Eastern Europe ate herring, they ate noodle *kugels*. At a certain point, they ate a lot of potatoes. and most of the dishes they prepared were shared by and borrowed from non-Jews.

So what does any of this have to do with appetizing? Well, for one thing, knowing what Jews ate in Eastern Europe provides some context around what it must have been like for poor Jews to go from a world of herring and bland potatoes to a new world of amazing culinary abundance.

**Hasia Diner:** Look back to the life of these immigrant Jews on the Lower East Side. People who'd eaten a monotonous diet for the most part, day in, day out, with just the relief of the Sabbath. They're in America now, and however difficult the conditions of their lives, however oppressive their work conditions, sweatshop laborers, or working in some hideous garment factory — unsafe, dark, smelly, hot, crowded — they could afford to eat in a way they had never eaten before. And so the food places that some of them set up, like Russ & Daughters and so on and so on, became ways of celebrating having made the right decision to come to America.

**Jeremy Shere:** For the first time, for many of these Jews, they have choices about what to eat.

**Hasia Diner:** And they can choose, they can go into an appetizing store and they can choose this kind of herring and not that kind, this kind of smoked fish and not that kind. So we like to think it's about political freedom and religious freedom. I think that first came the ability to eat whatever you wanted…

**Jeremy Shere:** …including many things these Eastern European Jews had never eaten or even known existed. Like, for example, lox.

**Hasia Diner:** So we can think of lox, which is so much at the heart of the appetizing store, the appetizing tradition, as a case where Jews from Eastern Europe, from Ukraine, from Belarus, from Moldova, who would have never seen a salmon had it met them on the street, become great connoisseurs of this German food.

**Norma Joseph:** Well, lox was here. And slowly Jews thought it went very well with bagels. And with cream cheese. And for Jews, this was becoming American.

**Jeremy Shere:** Okay. But actually we're getting ahead of ourselves a little bit, because the story of appetizing is, in so many ways, the story of the appetizing store. And the appetizing store, which really began with immigrant Jews selling fish out of barrels and pushcarts, begins not with lox, but with that old world mainstay...

**Mark Russ Federman:** And the beginning world of appetizing, it all came out of herring. And herring had represented the protein for the immigrant family.

**Jeremy Shere:** Now, to be clear, like most so-called "Jewish foods," herring was not particularly Jewish. Lots of immigrants ate herring.

**Hasia Diner:** Germans are eating herring. There are large numbers of Slavic immigrants who are coming to the United States. They're also living in New York. The Jewish community in New York, the Jewish population of New York, lives cheek by jowl with a Ukrainian, not Jewish population, and they're all eating herring.

**Jeremy Shere:** But herring was the central item on offer in the distinctly Jewish business of appetizing. And as some peddlers, like Mark Russ Federman's grandfather, Joel, saved a little money, they upgraded from a cart to a storefront.

**Mark Russ Federman:** You'll walk down a few steps, you've got a dark, dingy thing, and what they were selling in the early days was by and large herring from barrels. These big barrels would be put in the back of this little store. And so my grandfather had his family living in the back room with the herring barrels until he could afford to rent a walkup tenement apartment across the street.

**Jeremy Shere:** As appetizing businesses took root and grew throughout the Lower East Side, Jewish fishmongers poured their profits back into the stores, which were still pretty rudimentary.

**Mark Russ Federman:** And by the ‘30S, stores that were doing business could expand a little bit, and they would have sawdust on the floor, they would have fluorescent overhead lighting, probably would not have had much in the way of heat in the winter and no air conditioning in the summer. These were just one step above the pushcarts.

**Jeremy Shere:** Still, appetizing stores played an important role in bringing together Jewish foods from various parts of the world, introducing many of their customers to things they'd literally never heard of — like eggplant.

**Hasia Diner: S**o cold chopped eggplant salad — they didn't even know the word. It didn't exist other than perhaps, again, for wealthy merchants who might have encountered it in their various travels. But, the eggplant was something that Jews on the Lower East Side — again, most of them coming from Eastern Europe, from the Russian empire, from Galicia —would have encountered through an exchange with Jews from Romania, where eggplant was very much part of their cuisine, and the Romanian Jews living in the same neighborhood and also Jews from the Ottoman Empire.

**Jeremy Shere:** And of course, appetizing stores began selling salmon, a fish that most Jews from Eastern Europe had never encountered. And the stores began offering it because salmon was plentiful… and cheap.

**Mark Russ Federman:** And the late 1800s, mid to late 1800s, there was this huge amount of salmon in the Pacific, in the Northern Pacific, from Alaska on down through California, and that salmon was being shipped to the East Coast, particularly the port of New York, to be trans-shipped to Europe, where they also had salmon, but not a lot of it, and it was very cheap. The stuff that stayed in New York found its way to the Lower East Side. A salmon is a kosher fish, so it became a favorite, since it wasn't that expensive, of the denizens of the Lower East Side.

**Jeremy Shere:** And that's how Jews came to be so big into lox. Now, appetizing stores sold things besides fish. Many offered a range of canned goods and some had a section for dried fruit, nuts, and candy.

**Eve Jochnowitz:** Absolutely. Well, for me, the window displays with the rows and rows of different dried fruits and nuts, are what I remember most clearly. I loved to look at the displays because all those sweets and all of the pretty colors of the apricots and peaches and different colors of raisins and different shapes of nuts and all different beautiful candies and chocolates. It was just, well, like a candy store. It just - it was enchanting,

**Jeremy Shere:** But again, the appetizing store really revolved around fish, and the owners spent most of their time and effort on the procuring and selling of fish. In the old days, buying smoked fish at the smokehouse was a pretty rough business.

**Mark Russ Federman:** It was these almost daily trips to the smokehouses. So you'd make the rounds from one smokehouse to another, all of this early in the morning, picking in the fishy water and putting it in a truck. And take it with you. It was not a friendly business relationship. It was adversarial from the moment that the retailer like us would walk in the door. You know, they, the smokers, were assuming that we wanted something for nothing, and we assumed they were trying to give us nothing for something.

And that's the way the relationship started. So it was a lot of screaming and cursing and cigar-smoking. It was very akin to a street brawl. Except at the end of this, you know, when the transaction was made — okay, I'm taking these a hundred pieces of fish — then you know, they would shake hands and slap each other on the back and schmooze and tell stories, and then we would go onto the next smokehouse and do the same kind of thing.

**Jeremy Shere:** Selling the fish was no picnic either. The store's owner and his wife and often children were on their feet from early in the morning to late in the evening, sweating in the summer and freezing in the winter.

**Mark Russ Federman:** It was a hard slog, daily grind, of getting the product, the fish, into the store, and then lining up every piece of fish with an appropriate customer encounterment and doing that hundreds — or in the holiday period, thousands — of times a day.

**Jeremy Shere:** All the while dealing with some of the city's toughest customers.

**Mark Russ Federman:** You know, this type of customer viewed shopping for food as a cross between making love and an act of war. And they approached it, whenever they walked in, they just assumed that the store owner or the counterman was somehow going to take advantage of, you know, a piece of fish that wasn't super fresh. They make you go in the back to get a fresh one. These were tough people, and they had to be. Life had never given them anything. And so if they were going to spend their few pennies in your store, you were going to earn it. You had to do what they wanted. You couldn't give them a piece of fish or a herring off the top of the barrel. That was unacceptable to a Jewish customer, particularly these little Jewish ladies. You had to go fishing for it. You had to turn over that barrel ten different times before you pulled out the one herring they approved of.

**Jeremy Shere:** Still, the appetizing business worked as the stores grew. They provided a living for the Jewish immigrant families that ran them, and they filled a niche for Jewish customers who, even though many no longer kept kosher, wouldn't feel comfortable buying cheese and herring and cream sauce and other dairy products at the delicatessen alongside the meat. Plus, appetizing stores made life easier.

**Norma Joseph:** People who are working hard love the ability to go quickly to an appetizing store and buy whatever they need and not have pickling jars in their kitchens and not have to make it all themselves. It's too time-consuming. When you're already working — not nine to five, but eight to seven, eight to eight — appetizing was too much. You didn't have to go make your own appetizing. Nonsense. You weren't going to make herring at home. The house would smell of fish. That was too much. Lox and herring and pickles? Nonsense. You were not going to do that in the basement or the kitchen. The house would smell. That would violate the aesthetics of the American Home Beautiful.

**Jeremy Shere:** The appetizing business began to peak during the end of the 1950s. On the Lower East Side, appetizing stores were as common as delis. As Jews began to move to other areas of Manhattan, into Brooklyn and the Bronx, some appetizing stores followed. By the late ’50s, there were around 500 appetizing stores throughout New York City, in the boroughs. The popular R&B group The Charioteers even included a song about bagels and lox in their greatest hits album, released in 1957.

(song plays in background)

**Jeremy Shere:** Catchy, right? I've got that song stuck in my head now. Anyway, as the ’50s became the ’60s, and second-generation American Jews — the offspring of those immigrant parents who founded the appetizing stores — as they came of age, the appetizing stores began to slowly disappear.

**Hasia Diner:** The college-educated American, multiple generations of American offspring of the founders of these stores, you know, wants to go into high-tech and they want to go into filmmaking or they want to go become doctors or college professors or whatever. And last thing they want to do is stand behind the counter in an apron, listening to impatient customers screaming at them.

**Jeremy Shere:** And the hardworking founders of appetizing stores didn't want their kids to follow in their footsteps, either.

**Mark Russ Federman:** What do they want? They wanted their kids to get an education. Most of them didn't have even high school. And to go to college and get a job in an office, where they can put on a suit and tie and go to work eight hours a day in an office, and come home basically looking and smelling like the way they went to work…

**Jeremy Shere:** Plus, as larger grocery stores and supermarkets began to appear and offer herring and lox and smoked fish and cheese and everything else, the appetizing store, like many mom-and-pop specialty stores, just couldn't compete. So by the mid to late 1970s, Jews, and increasingly, non-Jews, still very much enjoyed lox and cream cheese on a bagel — they just didn't need appetizing stores to get appetizing foods. Like the second- and third- generation American Jews who had, for the most part, successfully integrated into American society, appetizing had become Americanized. Even the humble bagel, once an almost exclusively Jewish bread, was widely available in grocery stores, thanks largely to the marketing prowess of the Lender family, of Lender’s Bagels fame.

Today, a handful of appetizing stores remain in New York. Russ & Daughters is still thriving on the Lower East Side. It's been in business for more than a century. Murray's Sturgeon Shop, established in 1946 in midtown Manhattan, still delights New York palates as a gourmet specialty store. And Shelsky's, the first new appetizing store to open in quite a while when it was founded in Brooklyn in 2011, carries on the tradition with a modern twist, offering not only herring and lox and smoked and chopped fish, but also pastrami and corned beef and other deli favorites. And much more broadly, appetizing carries on in the proliferation of bagel stores around the world, which have elevated the bagel to a position of prominence above the fish and cream cheese that have been relegated to the status of toppings.

But that's a story for another podcast. Given how prominently appetizing and appetizing stores once figured in New York Jewish life, it seems a little strange — and maybe a little sad — that the business and the Jewish food tradition it supported, have been mostly forgotten and overlooked. Because appetizing matters as a way to better understand how Jews on the Lower East Side lived and ate and changed.

**Hasia Diner:** I think that that is really one of the exciting parts of thinking about appetizing, appetizing stores, as hallmarks of historic change, an important way to think about how this population evolved over time.

**Norma Joseph:** Appetizing helps us look at how Jews began to shift from a do-it-yourself kitchen economy to a retail consumption economy, where you went out and you bought prepared food.

**Eve Jochnowitz:** I think what food can do is it can fill in the spaces, drape the garment over the armature, give you an idea of the texture of everyday life. I think if you look just at the food, you can see the whole culture. Because the food will tell you: How did they get it? How did they shop for it? What could they afford? What couldn't they afford? What was available? What wasn't available? You can see a whole lot more than just the food.

**Jeremy Shere:** That does it for this episode of Adventures in Jewish Studies. The executive producer of the podcast is Warren Hoffman. The Association for Jewish Studies is the world's largest Jewish Studies membership organization, and features an annual conference, publications, fellowships, and much more for our members, as well as public programming. Visit associationforjewishstudies.org for more information on what we do, to learn about joining if you're a Jewish studies scholar, or to find out how to bring a Jewish Studies scholar to your community. Until next time, I'm Jeremy Shere,

(song plays in background)