The "An-ski Expedition": Documenting an Endangered Culture

Handout: Potatoes and Bread

(From Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II by Hirsh Abramowicz [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999])

Potatoes

The potato was of greatest importance in the nutrition of the Lithuanian Jew. Sometimes potatoes would be eaten two or three times a day. So goes the Yiddish folk song, "Potatoes on Sunday, potatoes on Monday."

In Lithuania the potato was like manna, lending itself to various modes of preparation. It was used to create many dishes, often one "fit for a king," by the standards of the Lithuanian Jew. Baked bondes were extremely popular. Peeled potatoes were shredded on a metal grater. The grated mass was then placed in a cloth and the liquid squeezed out. Some rye or buckwheat flour was added, if there was any in the house. Next, the mixture was kneaded a little and was placed on green cabbage leaves or on oak leaves, the widest of all tree leaves in Lithuania. The bondes were then placed in a very hot oven, "almost hot enough to bake bread in." After an hour on the bottom of the oven, the bondes were ready. They were eaten either with milk or with sour soup (instead of bread). Small bondes were given to children between meals to ease their hunger. Children were also given bondes to take along to heder [school] for a snack. Most of the time, bondes were eaten cold. For a special snack, however, a gourmet—beware of the legendary Lithuanian gourmets!—preferred a hot bonde, especially with sour cream or a pat of butter (something only the more prosperous families could afford.)

The "king" of all potato dishes was the teygekhts. Grated potato was combined with a bit of flour, minced onion, and some butter. This was placed in a pan, which was put into the oven, sometimes when it was being used to bake bread. The grated potato batter was also used for making small dumplings, which were eaten with dairy soups. In the winter, large dumplings (sometimes called "bombs") were made out of potato batter. Often these dumplings were filled with whole oats, minced onion, and goose fat or chicken fat and were then cooked in a porridge of oats for

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1 This remark is intended to suggest sarcastically that what Lithuanian Jews considered "gourmet" food was still rather humble fare.
several hours. These dumplings certainly brought more pleasure than did real bombs. Poor families sometimes added grated potato to the batter when making rye bread. This reduced the nutritional value of the bread, but it did fill the stomachs of hungry children.

**Bread**

During the 1880s and 1890s, nearly every Jewish family baked its own bread. It was all one kind of bread: black rye, made from kernels that had been milled once. The entire kernel of grain was used, including the outer membrane, the starch and the germ. This was genuine whole-grain bread. Housewives who did not want the tops of the loaves to appear black would sift some rye flour through a fine-meshed sieve, which yielded a finer flour. This was mixed with water, and the resulting paste, which was paler than the whole-rye flour, would be spread over the tops of the loaves before they were set in the oven. This mixture, known as kharmushke, gave the bread a "Jewish" appearance, in contrast to the bread of non-Jews, which was "black as coal."

The sourdough from which black bread was made was called roshtshine. It was often used in baking pancakes, known as roshtshine latkes. Water was mixed with some of the risen dough, along with some rye or, preferably, some buckwheat flour, which reduced the sourness of the taste. The pancakes made with this batter had a pleasantly sourish taste and "fairly begged" to be eaten with sour cream or soft, salted butter. Eating pancakes was a special treat for the children, who scarcely ever ate sweets, rich cookies, or babka [a type of cake], except during the holiday of Shavu`ot.