

The Centrality of Potatoes in the Diet of the Shtetl

The poorest Jew made it his business to see it that he would have at least 35 poods¹ of potatoes. In order not to wind up running short of potatoes, however, a family of six or seven members (which a few decades ago was not considered a large family) required 75 to 100 poods for the winter. Every Jewish dwelling had a cellar, in which the potatoes were stored after they were harvested. With some 74 poods of potatoes in the cellar, even a poor man could face the oncoming winter and the possibility – God forbid – of not having any bread.

In many instances the poorer Jews would get through the winter on potatoes and sauerkraut; bread was a rare treat. Yet it must be said that the majority of Jews in Lithuania succeeded in preparing for winter by laying in potatoes, several poods of carrots, beets, turnips, onions, and other vegetables. That left only the necessity of earning a little money for bread. If one owned a goat about to kid or a cow about to calve, one could hope to have milk in Shevat or Tevet.² And if, “with the help of God,” the calf could be used for the family itself, then there would be some meat, too, which was certainly cause for rejoicing.

Because of their potato-based diet, there were some children with rickets, the “English disease,” but their number was not large. The excellent nutrition naturally available in two dietary staples, rye bread and sauerkraut, served to ward off many a disease.

The favorite accompaniment to baked or boiled potatoes was herring, which was also the preferred food to be eaten with bread. In Lithuania, herring was a national dish. A herring could be eaten uncooked, “straight from the barrel,” once the thin outer skin was pulled off; in some instances, only the scales were removed. Some people even dipped a potato into the pickling brine in the herring barrel and maintained that it was a true delicacy. Herring might also be baked, cooked in a sweet or sweet-and-sour sauce, fried, or chopped with onions, and so on. In many homes, potatoes, sour soup, black rye bread and herring were the only foods eaten on weekdays.

Excerpted from Hirsz Abramowicz, “Diet of Lithuanian Jews,” in *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II*, ed. Dina Abramowicz and Jeffrey Shandler, trans. Eva Zeitlin Dobkin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1999), 104.

¹ One pood equals 16.3807 kilograms.

² Jewish winter months usually corresponding to December-February.