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JEWISH ENTERPRISE

Remembrance of Things Repast

You can almost smell the sour pickles that once floated in the crocks by the lunch counter. And it's easy to imagine the taste of pastrami on the fresh rye advertised in the "You Don't Have to be Jewish to Love Levy's" poster.

Located in a small room designed to look like a deli in one corner, a kitchen in another, is *Forshpeis!* (Yiddish for appetizer), a gem of an exhibit at Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History. It explores the role that Jewish food played in immigrant life, recounting how the mouthwatering delicacies, like the Jewish families who enjoyed them, entered mainstream American culture.

Forshpeis! itself is an appetizer, a foretaste of the roughly 10,000 artifacts in the Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana, housed in a low red brick building in Philadelphia's historic district.

Schweitzer, a tall, fit 55-year-old with a gray-speckled beard, exudes a boyish quality as he wanders among Vita herring cans and vintage blue, green and amber seltzer bottles that gleam on pedestals like crown jewels. "For some," he says, "the delicatessen was a more sacred space than the synagogue, a central location that commanded almost reverence. That's where Jewish life took place." His appreciation for Jewish secular life is not surprising, given that Schweitzer—who lives in Manhattan with his wife and children—is a Humanistic rabbi.

He leads me into a dimly lit room where museum staff members are quietly cataloguing items that Schweitzer has amassed over 25 years, covering not just food but ordinary Jewish American life.

As a child in Scarsdale, New York, he joined his parents as they frequented antique shows. When he became a rabbi, says Schweitzer, "it was logical that my collecting would include Judaica. Then I discovered early Jewish postcards, and a whole new world opened up."

The workroom is a veritable mise-en-scene. The memorabilia overflow from tables, cartons and rows of tall bookshelves, while tinny strains of the Yiddish ditty "Hot Dogs and Knishes" evoke the 1920s. Figurines of bearded zaydes hugging prayer books mingle on a shelf with hunched-over bubbes hugging their purses, as if on their morning rounds: zaydes to shul, bubbes to market. Dozens of hundred-year-old photographs of real grandparents cover an entire wall.

"It's sad," says Schweitzer of these stern faces peering out from oval and rectangular frames. "When I allow myself to get philosophical, I regard the stray pieces I have discovered as symbolic of the scattered Jewish people." To him, these objects represent "neighborhoods that have changed or disappeared, businesses that closed, families that dispersed."



There seems to be no end to the newer stuff. Stuffed toys comprise their own category, featuring a dog named “Oy,” a squeezable matzoh and a fuzzy bagel—a red bow in its “hair”—advertising Lender’s Bagels. I imagine children plucking these characters from Hanukkah stockings like the blue-and-white one Schweitzer holds up, patterned with stars of David and the word “Shalom” woven into its cuff.

Memories and kitsch tell only part of the story. I see a bumper sticker that reads “Russia is not Healthy for Jews and other Living Things,” a photograph of the Rosenbergs in their caskets and a cartoon from Puck—a turn-of-the-century satirical magazine—that depicts Jews isolated on a floating hotel while people on shore admonish, “Look out for the Jew.”

Schweitzer compares the gathering of anti-Semitic to collecting African-American memorabilia, the offensive kind: “It’s distasteful stuff—Mammy dolls, black lawn jockeys—artifacts that have to be preserved to educate the next generation, to build barriers against this kind of intolerance.”

He donated the collection to the museum in 2005. Keeping only objects that relate to his own family history. From his maternal grandfather, philanthropist Jacob Billikopf, a friend of Albert Einstein, he has the manuscript of a speech with editing marks that the renowned scientist delivered at the 1939 World’s Fair. From his maternal great-grandfather, constitutional lawyer Louis Marshall, Schweitzer has autographed pictures of Jewish Supreme Court Justices Brandeis, Cardozo and Frankfurter. In contrast to his mother’s *Our Crowd* legacy, his father was a Holocaust refugee, and Schweitzer has letters his grandparents wrote before they escaped from Nazi Germany.

Yet Schweitzer seems most fascinated by the countless unidentified Jews who formed the fabric of the Jewish American experience. “Some historians study the rich and famous,” he says. “Here, we don’t know who these people are. This captures the real history.”

The collection’s nostalgia pours as thick as “Schapiro’s, the real kosher wine you can almost ‘cut with a knife,’” to borrow a slogan from a poster in the exhibit. But Schweitzer cautions against too much wallowing. “[We] tend to forget how things weren’t as wonderful as [we] remember them,” he says. “The goal is not to turn back time, but to learn from it and preserve the evidence. Everything is part of the whole. Without a synagogue postcard from Gaston, Alabama, you wouldn’t know Jews were there.”—*Susan Fishman Orlins*

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