

[A Genzil for the Holidays]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview 9

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Herman Spector

ADDRESS 4121 Third Avenue, NYC

DATE January 5, 1939

SUBJECT A GENZIL FOR THE HOLIDAYS

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview Chicken Market under Delancey Street bridge at Pitt Street
3. Name and address of informant Ralph Lifshitz
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. None
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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This is a sawdust-littered loft opening on dark street-island under the broad ramp of the Bridge. Butchers and shoikets in long white coats stained with blood walk about. Just-killed poultry and those just expiring can be seen on floor or fluttering madly in baskets. Coops full of live chickens and geese are stacked to ceiling-height against the walls. Feathers everywhere. An office, divided by wire partitioning, at the side. An air of activity is created by the constant cackling and casual moving of the restless fowl.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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“You caught one of them yawning, you say? Oh, that one, sticking his neck out of the coop? Probably bored with life; anxious to get it over with. A nice fat goose, isn't he? They've all been specially fattened for the holidays. No, I don't mind the smell anymore. After six years, you don't notice it. Friend of mine quit this business; studied medicine, opened up a practise. He came around to see me the other day; he said, 'You know, Ralph, I've been away so long I even begin to notice the smell of a market now.' He's lucky. But come inside; it's warmer, and we can talk without being interrupted.

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“Take your coat off, you don't want to catch cold. I hope you don't mind, it's a little filthy, I can hang it up for you. It's not exactly a business I would want to go into if I had the choice. Yes, it's an honest living, but I wanted something else. It wouldn't interest you...Well, journalism. Graduated N. Y. U., then waited around, nothing turned up, so here I am. This place was built by my 2 father twenty years ago. I never thought I'd end up here. I used to pass by on the other side of the street. So one day my father said, 'Drop in once, look around, if you don't like it you don't have to stay, nobody's holding you.' I didn't have anything to do, so I stepped in, and I never went out again. That's the way it happened.

“This street was once the fish and poultry center of the city. There was a city-owned fish market across the way, but it didn't make out. People moved uptown, the markets moved with them. We still get plenty of business here. Not the same kind of trade, of course. I would say it's more discriminating today. If you want to get an interesting picture of the change in tastes you should come here at about nine o'clock Thursday morning; that's our busiest time for the housewife trade. You should see how they pick up a chicken, blow on it from all sides, examine the color...Oh yes, you can tell that way. A yellowish color shows fattiness. Then, by feeling the breastbone, a housewife can usually detect whether a chicken is plump enough. Years ago almost anything went. Roosters over a year old - plain meat, but it was cheap, so they bought it. Nowadays they want something tasty; we couldn't sell a coop of roosters in a month's time.

“Most of our sales are to butchers; they're choosy too, but you'd be surprised, they don't know any more about what's good than the housewife. We have six shoikets (ritual slayers of fowl) working here, and they have plenty to do. They are unionized, you know. it's a skilled trade, and naturally they have a sort of monopoly on it. They have to go through a regular course of training until they get what amounts to a diploma. They must know all the religious laws of Schreeter (slaughtering) before they can touch a chicken. The knife they use is called a chalif: unless the point is perfectly smooth, it isn't considered kosher. When a chicken, for any reason, is wrongly out, it's called a Schmootoor; and it can't be used

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as kosher. They make a nice living, the shoikets; they are paid by the pound. Oh, yes, they always check on weights. When they kill they pronounce a prayer...wait a minute, I'll get it straight for you...It goes like this: 'Zeh chalifasy, zeh timurasy, Zeh caparasy, zeh hatarnigol; Yalaych I'misah, veyani ekanays, Veh aylach lechaim, Tovim aruchim ulshalom.'

"Translated roughly, it means: 'This is my redemption, this is my salvation, this is my substitution. This is the chicken that will go to its death, and I shall enter and go into a good and lasting and peaceful life.'

"We don't exactly have seasons here, but holidays are important. Before "Simkas-Torah" - that's the holiday of rejoicing in the giving of the Torah - they use ducks. During the Passover holidays the best of all poultry is used - all the luxury items; capons, turkeys, and the finest chickens. This past Thanksgiving - not a Jewish holiday, of course - but I believe more Jews bought turkeys than ever before. Why? In my opinion, it's due to particular world relations at this time, 4 to conditions of oppression abroad and the desire to give thanks for living in America. During Chanukah week they prepare fat for the Passover, so specially fattened geese are brought to the city then, like the ones you saw outside. With the devout housewife, not to be able to have a genzil (goose) for the holidays would be a tragedy of of the first order.

"Generally, we find that there has been a drop in the consumption of poultry. I don't think it's poverty alone that's responsible. For one thing, the family of today is smaller than that of twenty and twentyfive years ago. There were seven in my family, for instance, but you won't find so many among the younger generation. Then there has been a shift toward vegetables, toward a balanced diet. And the younger Jewish housewives, not being so religious, also tend to buy trafe (non-kosher) chickens, because the prices are cheaper. And many people like the taste of cold-storage chickens, you know. Still, quality is always a consideration, and we have customers coming from all over the city and Long Island for our chickens. Even Gentiles, who feel that Jewish poultry is healthier, shop in the East

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Side markets. You know, it's only the Jews and Italians who go in for fresh-killed meat. That is, to any extent.

“We work all hours; it's not as bad as in the old days, naturally; there's even a tendency to make it a six-day week in this industry, and maybe five days eventually. The routine is a little different each day, it depends on the Schreeter, which usually lasts till five o'clock.

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We're closed from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, naturally. Sometimes we may work from Saturday sundown to late Sunday night without stop. Thursday we do, I should say, sixty percent of our entire business. I guess I'm used to the hours, you know how it is, we have coffees on the job, hang around and schmooz when it's slow...when I get home usually I'm too tired to even think of reading a book. Funny, you know. I never could see myself in a business like this. You have to mix with all kinds; not my type. Outside the job, I try to mingle with more of my own element - doctors and lawyers you know; at least I think they're my element. You can't do what you want when you've got a family to think of. it's a living, that's all...Well, drop in some time again. Glad to see you anytime. Don't mention it...”