

# *Introduction*

THE PLACE WHERE EVERYONE  
KNOWS YOUR NAME

*I*s anything more emblematic of New York City than the overstuffed pastrami sandwich on rye? The pickled and smoked meats sold in storefront Jewish delicatessens starting in the late nineteenth century became part of the heritage of all New Yorkers. But they were, of course, especially important to Jews; the history of the delicatessen is the history of Jews eating themselves into Americans. The skyscraper sandwich became a hallmark of New York. But it also became a potent symbol of affluence, of success, and of the attainment of the American Dream. As the slogan for Reuben's, an iconic delicatessen in the theater district boasted, "From a sandwich to a national institution."

This book traces the rise and fall of the delicatessen in American Jewish culture. It traces the trajectory of an icon—a journey that originates in the ancient world and rockets through the Middle Ages to postrevolutionary France, lands briefly on the Lower East Side, gathers steam in the tenements of the outer boroughs, and is catapulted out to the cities and suburbs of America, with a one-time detour into outer space. Along the way, we learn what happens when food takes on an ethnic coloration and then gradually sheds that ethnic connection when it acculturates into America.

We learn how Jews retained the taste and scent of brine—that of the seas that they had crossed in order to get to America and of the oceans that so many settled along, first in New York and later in Miami Beach and L.A.—in the foods that they ate. Because of the utility of salt in seasoning and preserving food, it has played an enormous role in the history of Western civilization, as writer Mark Kurlansky has found.<sup>1</sup> It is little wonder, then, that it became essential to Jewish culture. Indeed, for a substantial part of the twentieth century, kosher sausage companies and delicatessens cured more than just meat and pickles—they sustained an essential part of Jewish culture, enabling it to survive and thrive in America.

Reinvented in the New World, including in ways that were in stark tension with Jewish religious Orthodoxy, the pastrami, corned beef, salami, bologna, and tongue that were sold in storefront New York delicatessens became, for a time, a mainstay of the American Jewish diet, taking on a primacy that they had never enjoyed in eastern European Jewish culture. Indeed, for the scholar Seth Wolitz, the deli was no less than the “epitome of the Jewish culinary experience in New York. It was the first (and most beloved) venue for Jewish food outside the home and a favorite neighborhood institution.”<sup>2</sup>

These Jewish eateries were known for the staggering amount and variety of food on display; the delicatessen, in the words of the food historian John Mariani, “represented American bounty in its most voluptuous and self-indulgent form.”<sup>3</sup> Smoked and pickled meats, from their roots in central and eastern Europe, held a special place even within Jewish “cuisine,” which extended from *kreplach* (dumplings) and *knishes* (savory pastries) to *kishke* (stuffed beef intestines, also known as stuffed derma) and *p’tcha* (calf’s-foot jelly, also called *studen* or *cholodetz*), of which the actor Zero Mostel quipped, “no matter what you call it, a pleasant gas stays with you all day.”<sup>4</sup>

The delicatessen, whether in its kosher or nonkosher variant, was a second home for many American Jews, especially those who were the children of immigrants, who had begun to define

their Jewish identity in a secular rather than religious fashion. Before the establishment of the State of Israel, before even the dispersion of Jews across the North American continent, the cramped, bustling delicatessen became a focal point of Jewish identity and remembrance—a capacious, well-trodden, metaphorical homeland for the Jewish soul. Given the identification of New York City with its large and prominent Jewish population, the delicatessen became an all-purpose symbol of Jewishness. As a delighted customer once exhaled upon entering the Second Avenue Deli, “Ah, I smell Judaism!”<sup>5</sup>

While the kosher delicatessen symbolized ethnic continuity, the nonkosher delicatessen symbolized the movement of Jews into the mainstream of American society. By the 1930s, the kosher delicatessen in particular became ubiquitous in the outer boroughs of New York, while the kosher-style delicatessen became synonymous with the showbiz culture of Manhattan. This book focuses on New York partly because it was where the majority of American Jews lived until the 1940s and partly because the Jewish delicatessen essentially began in New York and became emblematic of both New York and Jewish life. Gotham’s Jewish delis were “the emperors of all food that is hand-held in New York,” the screenwriter Richard Condon noted, the city that was “the capital of the greatest sandwich-consuming country of the world.”<sup>6</sup> New York may be dubbed “The Big Apple” (a term used in connection first with horse racing and later with other kinds of urban entertainment), but throughout most of the twentieth century, a pastrami sandwich was more likely than a piece of fruit to trigger thoughts of New York. Both, however, are about sex: the apple represents temptation in Western culture, and the pastrami sandwich, as we will see, became the ultimate symbol of carnal desire.

In part because of the prevalence of Jewish food in the city, everyone who lives in New York “is Jewish,” insisted the travel writer Daniel Stern in the 1960s, calling Jewishness a “pervading atmosphere, a zest, a style of life.” Even visitors, he averred, become Jewish for the time that they are in New York. If you

are already Jewish, he added, then “while you’re here, you’ll be *very* Jewish.”<sup>7</sup> This sentiment jibes with the experience of Hilton Als (a theater critic for the *New Yorker*), who confessed that, as an African American boy growing up in the 1960s in Brooklyn, he felt like an “anxious Yeshiva student” in the company of his father, whom he describes as a “brown-skinned, well-dressed, mustachioed rebbe.” Als fondly recalled his Sunday outings with his father; they would take a bus from their apartment to the Lower East Side, where they would shop for “briny sour pickles, pastrami, brisket, cheesecake, and celery soda: Jew food for the brain.”<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the delicatessen—what the food writer Joan Nathan calls “*the* Jewish eating experience in America.”<sup>9</sup> A delicatessen owner in Boston disclosed that elderly Jews come to her establishment for their last meal. “They’re practically on respirators,” she whispered, “but they want that last taste of deli before they die.”<sup>10</sup> As the essayist Jonathan Rosen writes in *The Talmud and the Internet*, the great German poet Goethe begged, on his deathbed, for “more light”—Rosen’s grandmother, by contrast, pleaded for pastrami.<sup>11</sup> Or, as the late comedian Soupy Sales (né Milton Supman) jested, if he had his life to live over, he would “live over a delicatessen.”<sup>12</sup>

Judaism has almost always revolved around meat. Two thousand years ago, eating meat was a religious activity for Hebrews, since they ate it only as part of the Temple offering that was sacrificed by the priests. This was called the *shelamim* (full) offering, and it was intended to bring joy to all who consumed it, since it represented the expiation of sin for the community. However, the freshly roasted flesh had to be consumed within two days for it to supply what the rabbis deemed to be the proper quotient of happiness.

The question arose: Could freshly roasted meat also be eaten on the somber evening before the Ninth of Av, the fast day that commemorates the double destruction of the Temple, first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans? The rabbis decided,

based on the two-day rule of the *shelamim*, that the meat would need to be cured for at least two days in order not to cause undue joy. They authorized the consumption of only pickled meat, along with new (unfermented) wine, thereby introducing corned beef into Jewish cuisine.<sup>13</sup> And is it merely coincidental that the priests were obliged to consume the tasty leftovers of the sacrificial offerings with mustard, foreshadowing the little mustard pot on the table of every Jewish delicatessen?<sup>14</sup> The ancient priests were, in a sense, forerunners of the New York delicatessen owners and countermen; by preparing meat, they presided over an activity that was central to the community's workings and self-definition.

Jews also have a long-standing connection with sandwiches; indeed, it was a rabbi who purportedly invented the first one, although he did not call it by that name. Hillel the Elder, who lived during the time of King Herod and the Roman emperor Augustus (and who gave his name to the national Jewish student organization), devised a creative way to fulfill the injunction in the Torah that the Israelites should eat matzoh and bitter herbs to commemorate their enslavement to the Egyptian pharaohs. He enclosed the herbs, along with a goodly portion of paschal lamb, inside the bread, making a lamb-herb wrap. Indeed, the unleavened bread that Hillel used to make that first sandwich was likely not the stiff, fragile, crumbly stuff that is matzoh but rather a thick, soft, chewy flatbread like Indian roti, Mediterranean pita, Mexican tortilla, or Middle Eastern lavash.

Hillel dubbed his innovation the *korech*, basing it on the ancient Hebrew word *lekarech*, which means “to encircle or envelop”; the term was also used to refer to a book binding or a funeral shroud. The modern word *sandwich* first appeared in an English cookbook in 1773 after John Montagu, the Fourth Earl of Sandwich, asked his servant to bring him pieces of meat between two slices of toast so that he could keep playing cards without taking a break. In 1840, the British historian Edward Gibbon witnessed in London what he called a “sight truly English,” namely, “twenty or thirty perhaps, of the first men in the

kingdom, in point of fashion and fortune” at a café and gambling club called the Cocoa Tree. Gibbon described them as “supping at little tables covered with a napkin, in the middle of a coffee-room, upon a bit of cold meat, or a sandwich, and drinking a glass of punch.”<sup>15</sup>

A century later, in New York, the overstuffed delicatessen sandwich loomed large in Jewish Americans’ understanding of who they were both as Jews and as Americans. The food historian Bee Wilson has noted that the sandwich lends its structure to everything from sponges to aircraft design;<sup>16</sup> it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the delicatessen sandwich engineered a secular rather than religious way of being Jewish, one that helped to fuel the meteoric rise of Jews in our society.<sup>17</sup> Upwardly mobile Jews defined themselves in opposition to delicatessen fare, against its immigrant, low-class, plebeian connotations. By the concluding decades of the twentieth century, they had disavowed the delicatessen, disencumbering themselves from cured beef and pickled cucumbers in favor of a more gourmet, more international, and healthier cuisine.

The delicatessen was a victim of its own success. By flattering Jews’ social and economic aspirations, it helped to propel them into the middle class. A satirical oil painting that hangs in the basement of Ben’s Kosher Deli on West Thirty-Eighth Street depicts the restaurant as, incorrectly, located on the same street as some of the most iconic, four-star restaurants in Manhattan, including the 21 Club, Tavern on the Green, Sardi’s, and the Four Seasons. The whimsical image gestures to the ambivalence that Jews have about forsaking the deli to eat in more gourmet restaurants, trading their traditional “peasant” food for upward mobility—if only they could have their pastrami and eat it too, the painting seems to say.

But when did the delicatessen become an important institution in Jewish life? Although delicatessen meats (or meats of any kind) were not a major part of the eastern European Jewish diet, historians have suggested that the centrality of the delicatessen to the American Jewish experience began with the im-

migrant generation on the Lower East Side of New York. The historian Hasia Diner argues, for example, that it was Jewish immigrants who “learned to think of delicatessen food as traditional.”<sup>18</sup> But while Diner is correct about the retrospective elevation of delicatessen foods into a pivotal part of Jewish heritage, her timing is off. Smoked and pickled meats were too expensive for immigrants, and the immigrant Jewish mother was typically loath to bring in take-out food; it vitiated her role as the cook for the family. It was not the immigrants but their children who made the delicatessen their own. Even as second-generation Jews were still excluded from the upper echelons of American society, the deli made them feel like part of the “in crowd”—they had become more successful and developed a less religious Jewish identity.

Then again, as Diner emphasizes, eating out was itself an unfamiliar activity for Jews, who were not used to eating in restaurants, whether in eastern Europe or on the Lower East Side; they coined the word *oyesessen* at the turn of the twentieth century to designate this exciting new recreational activity.<sup>19</sup> The delicatessen enabled Jews to eat out in a Jewish way, by enjoying *in public* the foods that they associated with their heritage. Furthermore, unlike synagogues and fraternal organizations, many of which were organized on the basis of immigrants’ towns of origin, delicatessens enabled the descendants of Jews from different social classes and different Ashkenazic (eastern European Jewish) nationalities to forge a common American Jewish identity. In the kosher delicatessen, the free-thinker (atheist) and the *frum* (observant) Jew could literally break bread—typically rye with caraway seeds—together, as could the top-hatted capitalist and the leather-capped socialist. The delicatessen was, as the historian Jenna Weissman Joselit has observed, a “neutral Jewish place” that “signaled Jewishness in the public square, transcending traditional divisions between different types of Jews.”<sup>20</sup>

Every minority group had its own dedicated social space in America. The sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the influential

phrase “third place” to refer to casual gathering places such as coffee shops and pool halls that occupy an intermediate realm between home and office. These are spaces, he observed, that level social distinctions among patrons, foster civic engagement, and provide a platform for mutual emotional support. As the theme song for the 1970s television show *Cheers*—set in a bar in Boston—goes, it’s the place “where everyone knows your name.”<sup>21</sup>

Third spaces function like the eighteenth-century town commons; the historian Sharon Daloz Parks has noted that the grassy square around which villages in New England were built was where people gathered “for play and protest, memorial and celebration, and worked out how they would live together.” For Parks, the commons is indispensable to healthy communal life; she observes that “wherever there is consciousness of participation in a commons, there is an anchored sense of a shared life within a manageable frame.”<sup>22</sup>

The Irish imported to America the pub, a venue that was, in the words of the historian Sybil Taylor, a combination “grocery store, funeral parlor, concert hall, restaurant, bar, political forum, congenial meeting place, courting corner, and, most of all, a place for talk.”<sup>23</sup> The scholar Jennifer Nugent Duffy has underscored the role of the pub in promoting “vital economic, political, and social exchanges,” especially for overwhelmed Irish immigrants who dwelled in overcrowded tenement apartments and needed a place to let off steam.<sup>24</sup>

Italian immigrants formed “social clubs” in Little Italy, such as the Saint Fortunata Society, established in 1900, where they smoked, played the bowling game of boccie, and cooked together. In 1896, the *New York Times* reported on the plethora of Italian societies and clubs, which boasted a combined membership of tens of thousands of immigrants. Whether by providing an urban hangout or by sponsoring dances and picnics, they provided a way for Italians to reminisce about the Old Country and forge new American identities in a supportive and nurturing environment.<sup>25</sup>

Most of these immigrant gathering places were established by, and catered to, men. The delicatessen, although it began as a take-out store and not a restaurant, was no exception; the first delicatessens likely to a large extent served single, immigrant, Jewish men who could not cook for themselves.<sup>26</sup> In general, Jews tended to come to America as whole families, since their homelands had become too inhospitable to Jews to permit them to stay; men from other immigrant groups often returned to their countries of origin with the money that they had earned.

But because delicatessens are oriented around the consumption of red meat, the iconic Jewish eatery did take on a manly vibe, one that was exploited, as we shall see, by vaudeville routines, films, and TV shows about Jewish men using the delicatessen to shore up their precarious sense of masculinity. The food writer Arthur Schwartz has pointed out that, in Yiddish, the word for “overstuffed” is *ongeshstupped*; the meat is crammed between the bread in a crude, sensual way that recalls the act of copulation.<sup>27</sup> The delicatessen, after all, is a space of carnality, of the pleasures of the “flesh”—the word for meat in Yiddish is *fleysh*.

Beyond the gender and sexual politics of the delicatessen, it was not, by any means, the only “third place” in American Jewish life. The synagogue was called in Hebrew *bayt kneset*, or “house of assembly.” Settlement houses for the immigrant generation and Jewish Community Centers, YMHAs (Young Men’s Hebrew Associations), B’nai B’rith (a kind of Jewish equivalent to the Masons, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century), and other institutions offered classes and lectures, put on cultural events, and provided gyms and other recreational opportunities—including sponsoring athletic teams. The Yiddish theater brought together immigrant Jews on a frequent, sometimes nightly, basis. But Jews bonded with especially great intensity around food; as the historians Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer have pointed out, delicatessens “became such an iconic New York institution that their presence marked a Jewish neighborhood more clearly than even that of a synagogue.”<sup>28</sup>

Delicatessens were thus prime venues for both Jewish and non-Jewish candidates to campaign for political office. As J. J. Goldberg, the former editor in chief of the *Forward*, noted, “For most of the twentieth century, wooing the Jewish vote meant walking through Jewish neighborhoods, donning a skullcap, and being photographed while eating a kosher knish.”<sup>29</sup> After Henry Morgenthau Jr., a Jewish candidate, lost his 1962 bid to unseat Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a Baptist who frequently campaigned for the Jewish vote in kosher delicatessens, Morgenthau ran into the African American civil rights activist Bayard Rustin on a corner. Rustin was eating a knish. Morgenthau asked him what he was eating. Rustin replied, “I’m eating the reason that you’re not governor.”<sup>30</sup> And George McGovern became the butt of ridicule when, during the 1972 presidential campaign, he ordered a glass of milk to accompany his chopped-chicken-liver sandwich at a kosher delicatessen in New York’s garment district.<sup>31</sup>

The delicatessen enabled second-generation Jews to refuel themselves and reinvigorate their own tradition, at the same time as it facilitated their entrance into the mainstream of American society. The comedian Harpo Marx claimed that performing on Broadway was a special thrill because, while in New York, he had “two homes-away-from-home, Lindy’s or Reuben’s.” In these delicatessens, he exulted, “I was back with my own people, who spoke my language, with my accent.”<sup>32</sup> Even as the New York–style delicatessen spread out of New York and took root in other cities, it was known as a place of fellowship, friendship, and good cheer. “The deli is where you go to be Jewish,” the food writer Jonathan Gold reflected. “You live a secular life, but you show up at Junior’s [in Los Angeles] on a Sunday morning and suddenly all your Jewish stuff comes in.”<sup>33</sup>

A successful delicatessen, whether in or out of New York, was defined by what one deli owner in L.A. called its “hubub”—its casualness, conviviality, and sense of community.<sup>34</sup> “Owners traditionally were there to humor their customers,” reflected Bill Ladany, president of the Vienna Sausage Company in Chi-

cago. “It was as important to be friends as to make chicken noodle soup.”<sup>35</sup> Non-Jews immersed themselves in an environment in which Jewishness rubbed off on them as well. As the food writer Patric Kuh observed, “You might hear Spanish, Mandarin, Korean or Tagalog in an L.A. deli, but everyone is essentially talking Yiddish.”<sup>36</sup>

But by the mid-twentieth century, Jewish culture was itself in the process of changing, of becoming progressively more Americanized. The Jewish deli began to absorb more and more “American” foods, with many delis ultimately serving more turkey than either corned beef or pastrami. Indeed, by the 1960s, suburban Jewish delis offered entire take-out feasts for Thanksgiving, enabling Jews to carve out an American identity that relied on the consumption of take-out turkey sandwiches rather than a bird roasted at home. “Jewish New York,” the genealogist Ira Wolfman has found, “reveled, and was revealed, in its food. Like much of American Jewish culture, Jewish food was a hybrid—a mishmash of old-world cooking and customs, Jewish dietary laws, and an ongoing accommodation with American life.”<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, Jews ate “deli” at every stage of their American lives. Brises (circumcisions), bar mitzvahs, weddings, and shivas (gatherings after a funeral)—all were marked not just by carefully prescribed religious rites but by the consumption of corned beef, pastrami, rolled beef, tongue, and other deli meats catered by a local deli. Indeed, deli owners became expert at producing endless round platters of sandwiches—platters that were held together with frilly toothpicks and swathed by sheets of colorful, crinkly cellophane.

A typical Brooklyn wedding or bar mitzvah reception in the 1950s was a far cry from many of the lavish, ostentatious affairs of today. The party was held at home; kosher delicatessen platters were set out in the backyard, and the bathtub was filled with ice, soda, and beer.<sup>38</sup> “We would have family parties in the [photography] studio downstairs and all the relatives would come and Uncle Louie would cook,” one Jewish New Yorker recalled, noting that her uncle’s corned beef was the main dish at her wed-

ding reception. “He would have a clothes boiler and put whole corn beefs [*sic*], pastrami, and spices in them and cook them all day. The relatives and me would gorge themselves on meat, pickles, and soda water. Nothing since could ever compare.”<sup>39</sup>

Seven decades after the historian Arthur Schlesinger’s seminal investigation into the previously unacknowledged but pivotal role of food in American history (from the Boston Tea Party and the Whiskey Rebellion to the Lend Lease program during the Second World War),<sup>40</sup> food studies has become its own branch of the academy. Scholars in this field, led by Warren Belasco, Carole Counihan, and Darra Goldstein, view food as a nexus of history, sociology, ethnicity, and culture.<sup>41</sup> “Food,” as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously put it, “is good to think.”<sup>42</sup> One might add that food is especially “good to think” about in terms of ethnic identity; for the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, food is a “marvelously plastic kind of collective representation.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the pastrami sandwich was a kind of palimpsest—a blank screen onto which succeeding generations of Jews projected different images of themselves and their group as they became progressively more acculturated into American society.

Scholars tend to focus not just on the food itself but on “foodways”—the *social context* in which food is prepared, served, and consumed—as well as the historical and sociological meaning with which food is endowed. Thus, at a time when Jews were stereotyped as uncouth and uncivilized, it is significant that they created an unusual type of eatery, one that in some ways fulfilled the very ideas that other Americans had of them. The deli was a place where they could eat with their hands, talk with their mouths full, fill their bellies, and enjoy the pleasure of each other’s company in a raucous and convivial setting.<sup>44</sup> The historian Barry Kessler sums this up in the title of his article on the tumultuous delicatessens of Baltimore: “Bedlam with Corned Beef on the Side.”<sup>45</sup>

The most significant recent academic works about Jewish food include the historian Hasia Diner’s chapters on

eastern European and immigrant Jewish food in her exemplary, cross-cultural study *Hungering for America* and David Kraemer's wide-ranging survey *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages*. But there has been no full-length study of the Jewish delicatessen. Historians have given the towering deli sandwich—and the place in which it was consumed—surprisingly short shrift. As the historian Michael Alexander declared, “It’s about time historiography took serious notice of deli life.”<sup>46</sup>

The deli has fared far better in popular writings. Nick Zukin and Michael Zusman's *The Artisan Jewish Deli at Home* (based on Kenny and Zuke's Deli in Portland, Oregon) and Noah and Rae Bernamoff's *Mile End Cookbook* (based on the Mile End Deli in Brooklyn and Manhattan) have joined earlier, anecdote-filled recipe books from the Second Avenue Deli and Junior's. Also worthy of note are Sheryll Bellman's lavishly illustrated coffee-table book on classic American delis, Arthur Schwartz's tantalizing guide to eastern European Jewish dishes, the journalist Maria Balinska's well-rounded history of the bagel, Laura Silver's foursquare history of the knish, Jane Ziegelman's enticing “edible history” of immigrant life in one New York tenement building on the Lower East Side, and the travel writer David Sax's edgy elegy *Save the Deli*.<sup>47</sup>

The publication of these volumes, along with popular food columns in Jewish newspapers such as the *Forward* and the *Jewish Week* and cover articles on Jewish food in *Moment* magazine, the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, and other Jewish publications, testify to the continuing interest in Jewish gastronomy and a growing sense that Jewish food connects Jews—and also appeals to non-Jews—in a way that few aspects of Judaism continue to do.<sup>48</sup>

Social scientists have adopted three main approaches to the study of food and foodways. The first is a functional approach, which looks, in part, at the role of food preparation and consumption in the formation and maintenance of group identity. The second is a structuralist approach, which treats food as a

signifying system, as a “language” of its own and which, especially in the work of Roland Barthes, also theorizes a semiotics of media images of food and food advertising.<sup>49</sup> (The structuralist approach also emphasizes the fact that foods are arranged hierarchically within a culture, with particular foods eaten to mark special occasions.) The third is a developmental approach, which investigates how certain foods became part of the diet of specific peoples (and how other foods were shunned), examining the history of each group and the evolutionary and environmental processes that helped to determine its diet.

The approach in this book is eclectic; it borrows from each of these perspectives in analyzing the changing place of the delicatessen in American Jewish culture. In line with the functional approach, I view the deli as playing a crucial role in American Jewish life, one that helped to facilitate Jews’ joining the American mainstream. *Vis-à-vis* the structuralist approach, I see the foods and foodways associated with Jewish delicacies as helping to organize the reality of Jewish life, both through the actual consumption of deli meats and also through the—often comedic and heavily eroticized—images and representations of the deli in popular culture. Finally, with regard to the developmental approach, I view the passionate embrace of the deli as tempered over time as other social and economic factors led Jews away from the deli and toward other, more exotic-seeming, “gourmet” and healthier kinds of food. In each case, I see many layers of cultural and social meaning crammed into the overstuffed deli sandwich.

The research for this project took place over more than a decade, and it took many forms. I began by doing dozens of interviews with current and retired deli owners both in New York and along the Jewish retirement corridor in southeast Florida, between West Palm Beach in the north and Miami Beach in the south. While continuing to conduct interviews, both in person and on the telephone, I then did archival research in both corporate and public archives, ranging from the Hebrew National Company’s files at its headquarters in Jericho, New York, to the

Dorot Division of the New York Public Library, the Center for Jewish History, the New York City Municipal Archives, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the Yeshiva University Archives. I made extensive use of both Yiddish- and English-language newspapers, trade journals (especially the *Mogen Dovid Delicatessen Magazine*), and books. I found a plethora of photographs of delis in the collections of the Bronx Historical Society, the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Brooklyn Public Library, and the New York State Archives.

The final stage of the research involved finding cartoons, film clips, television episodes, and other examples of the reflection of the Jewish deli in pop culture. I found material at the Paley Center for Media (formerly the Museum of Broadcasting), the Jewish Museum in New York, the Billy Rose Collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the George Eastman House (Rochester, New York), and the Academy for Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (Los Angeles). I also found copious references to delicatessens in memoirs, novels, short stories, plays, and poetry—these helped immensely to round out the role of the delicatessen in American Jewish culture.

Throughout the research process, I collected hundreds of items of memorabilia relating to every aspect of deli culture throughout the United States—including neon signs and clocks, seltzer and soda bottles, menus, photos, placards, postcards, matchbooks, and even a scale and a slicing machine. Part of my collection was featured in “Chosen Food,” an exhibition, funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, on Jewish food that began at the Jewish Museum of Maryland and transferred to the Jewish Museum of Atlanta.

Will the deli survive for even one more generation? On a visit to my hometown, I took my five-year-old daughter to Kensington Kosher Deli on Middle Neck Road (Squire’s, alas, is long gone), where I ordered a brisket sandwich for us to share. She barely nibbled at it. When I asked her if she didn’t think it was the best food she had ever tasted, she patiently explained that her favorite food is Indian, followed by Chinese, followed by a

dinner that her mother recently made that she “fell in love with and wanted to marry.”

While I share her enthusiasm for her mother’s cooking, I realized with a sharp pang of regret that she and her two sisters will almost inevitably grow up without having the same fondness for deli food that I did. Her metaphor of “marrying” food stuck with me, though. Will Jews ever again feel the same deep connection to deli food that they did throughout so much of the twentieth century, or have they found new gastronomic spouses and partners? Then again, as Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro has put it, “Jews keep fishing in the same ethnic waters. Perhaps some day they’ll pull up gefilte fish again.”<sup>50</sup>