

The Pork on the Fork: A Nineteenth Century Anti-Jewish Ditty

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The most common anti-Jewish schoolchild ditty in the English speaking world of the nineteenth century is remarkable for what it *does not* include. Unlike most antisemitica, it contains none of the usual stereotypes: the Christ-killing Jew; the wandering Jew; the old-clothes Jew; the peddling Jew; the scheming Jew; the rich Jew; or the omnipotent Jew. It employs no snide comments about Jewish anatomical features, and no crude mimicry of Jewish accents.¹ Indeed, at first glance, the ditty seems hardly to criticize Jews at all:

I had a piece of pork, I put it on a fork,
And gave it to the curly-headed Jew.
Pork, Pork, Pork, Jew, Jew, Jew. (1864)²

Yet, tame as it may seem, the poem actually held tremendous power. Non-Jewish children loved to sing it. Jews hated to hear it. Angry playground confrontations took place all over the country. The above version comes from New York. The words differed only slightly in Baltimore:

Take a piece of pork; stick it on a fork;
And give it to the curly-headed Jew, Jew, Jew. (c. 1867)³

in Cincinnati:

I took a piece of pork and stuck it on a fork,
And gave it to the curly-headed Jew, Jew, Jew. (1886)⁴

and in Easton:

I had a piece of pork,
I stuck it on a fork
And I gave it to a
Curly-headed Jew, Jew, Jew. (n.d.)⁵

In London, a more distant variant earned publication in *English Folk Rhymes*:

I had a bit of pork
And stuck it on a fork,
And I gave it to the von, von, Jew. (1892)⁶

People even sang the rhyme in Hobart Town and Adelaide, Australia, where it was known as "that well known ditty":

If I had a piece of pork;
I'd stick it on a fork,
And give it to a Jew boy, Jew. (1846; 1848)⁷

Obviously, something about this poem held deep appeal. The nineteenth century literature preserves no English language anti-Jewish ditty of similar widespread popularity. This is not to say that every youthful jeerer understood either what he sang, or what brought about the angry reaction of his Jewish listeners. Those who exuberantly relate nursery rhymes do not necessarily understand their significance either. Meaning, however, often exists outside of consciousness. A poem or tune may be appealing or repulsive for reasons that a listener cannot explain. Happily, in the case of our ditty, an explanation can at least be suggested. If this reading is correct, the ditty decodes to reveal a stark ultimatum, one which antisemites liked to trumpet precisely because Jews received it with such understandable discomfort.

Three critical words stand out in our ditty: the predicate nouns "pork", "fork," and "Jew." Each of these words conjured up a world of meaning in the heads of nineteenth century people. Each was a form of poetic shorthand; the listener heard it, and rounded out a full picture in his mind's eye.

"Jew" can be understood comparatively easily. In the nineteenth century, the term was so connected with a full range of stereotypes and epithets that it never could be divorced fully from them in meaning, even when no adjective was present. People readily comprehended the negative connotations of "Jew" whether or not it was defined in context. In *The American Jew: An Exposé of His Career* (1888), the definition that many people held, but usually kept to themselves, was published: "The Jew is in all ages the same; grovelling, greedy grasping, in pursuit of gold; tyrannous and insolent in possession; conscious of the scorn with which he is regarded by a loftier race; craving to repay it with a bitter lust for vengeance; and striving with a patient persistence, worthy of a nobler cause, for the wealth which will enable him to demonstrate his superiority, by placing his foot upon the necks of the hated Aryan."⁸

As a general rule, the Jew thus was a medieval character, ill-suited to the company of those who were modern and cultured. Precisely for this reason, some Jews insisted that they really were "Hebrews," "Israelites," or citizens "of the Mosaic persuasion." They hoped that a change in name would bring about a change in attitude. It did not.⁹

"Pork," in a sense, represents the antithesis of "Jew." It is the symbolic essence of "unJewishness." For at least two thousand years, abstention from swine products signified Jews' "last taboo." It marked the basic Jewish identity symbol, the food prohibition that kept Jews and Christians apart long after ghetto walls had crumbled, and other dietary laws had fallen into disuse. Why pork assumed this importance remains uncertain. The Torah, after all, makes no distinction between a pig and other non-kosher animals. As early as Hasmonean times, however, the pig had become the symbol of Jewish dietary distinctiveness. It remained so down to modern times, and so continues even now in the United States.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, one not particularly observant American Jew claimed that "the very mention of pork, cooked or raw, makes my stomach heave at any time."¹¹ Even a family of converts to Christianity sadly admitted that pork was the "one single exception in the use of Christian food [that] still characterized us for a length of time."¹²

"Pork" thus symbolized that which kept the Jewish people together, preventing their complete assimilation into non-Jewish life. No matter how much Jews might outwardly conform in their manner of appearance and speech, they still distinguished

themselves by refusing to eat the food that most Christians ate with gusto. They insisted that pork was somehow unclean, and not fit for man. The implication, at least to Christian ears, was that Jews still considered themselves separate and superior.

The answer to this Jewish claim was the “fork,” the last critical word in our ditty to require explication. The fork, like the handkerchief, is a traditional symbol of civilization, culture and refinement. Unlike other culinary implements, it has no value at all over the spoon and finger; it merely makes eating more esthetically pleasing.¹³ As such, the fork represents that society and civilization which Jews so desperately wanted to enter. The lure of the fork was the lure of the modern. Modern civilization, however, did not come without its discontents. In our poem, as in real life, “pork” and “fork” were united. Modern society refused to suffer any form of Jewish dietary distinctiveness, much less any Jewish claim to superiority.

With this in mind, the meaning of our ditty becomes clear. The poem describes a basic tension between “pork” and “Jew.” Modern society—“fork”—is in the middle, but at least in the speaker’s view, “fork” is not neutral. It rather unites with “pork” into a single package deal. The Jew either takes both together—giving up all thought of distinctive identity—or he must reject both at once, and remain a social outcast. The maddening choice, at least in one variant of the ditty, is repeated for emphasis: “Pork, Pork, Pork, Jew, Jew, Jew.”

The power of this schoolchild refrain lay precisely in the accuracy of its stark portrayal. Western society did demand complete conformity as the price of complete acceptance. The children were right: Jews would have to confront the pork taboo squarely on its face. Anti-Jewish stereotypes, had the poem employed them, would only have weakened this message. Jews would have focused on individual words, and ignored the ditty’s far more important underlying meaning. As it stood, however, the challenge was unanswerable: separatism or assimilation.

Jews of the day expressed shock, hurt, and anger at this choice, but they did not come up with any substantive rebuttal. Only one source preserves a form of Jewish counter-ditty, and it was less a response than an *ad hominem* attack:

I had a piece of beef, I put it on a leaf,
And gave it to the Irish Christian thief,
Beef, Beef, Beef, Thief, Thief, Thief. (1864)¹⁴

If no group response were possible, however, every Jew did have to make a personally wrenching decision of his own. Some accepted the proffered “fork”—“pork” and all. Assimilation and conversion often followed as a matter of course. Others rejected modern society in its entirety. They preferred to remain fully loyal to religious tradition. Most Jews, however, attempted some middle course. They sought partial assimilation, and still tried to hang on to at least part of their heritage. They accepted the “fork,” fondled it, and in some cases even placed it in their mouths. Still, hoping that nobody would notice, they did not quite swallow the hated morsel that was on its tip. They sought entry into modern society by feigning assimilation, and maintaining Judaism on the sly.

Later, Jews became more brazen. They questioned the “pork-fork” alliance, and sought instead to harmonize “fork” and “Jew.” They insisted that America accept those who continued to express aspects of their individual religious and ethnic personalities. In so doing, they undermined the very basis of the assimilationist ditty

they had heard as kids. In its place, they substituted a new ideology: cultural pluralism.

NOTES

1. Michael Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Image: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, Conn. 1979); Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature from Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (Philadelphia, Pa. 1974); Rose Klein, "Jewish Characters in Early American Fiction," *Jewish Book Annual*, 35 (1977-78), 108-18; Naomi W. Cohen, "Antisemitism in the Gilded Age: The Jewish View," *Jewish Social Studies*, 41 (1979), 187-210; John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York, 1975); Michael Selzer, *KIKE* (New York, 1972); Leonard Dinnerstein, ed., *Antisemitism in the United States* (New York, 1971); Oscar Handlin, "American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 40 (1951), 323-44.
2. *Israelite Indeed* (New York), 8 (July 1864), 22.
3. Irving Fineman, *Woman Of Valor: The Story of Henrietta Szold* (New York, 1961), p. 27.
4. *The Sabbath Visitor* (Cincinnati), 16 (1886), 346.
5. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Consider the Years* (Easton, Pa., 1944), p. 119.
6. G. F. Northall, *English Folk-Rhymes* (London, 1892), p. 307, quoted in Rudolf Glanz, *The Jew in the Old American Folklore* (New York, 1961), p. 202.
7. John S. Levi and George F. J. Bergman, *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers 1788-1850* (Adelaide, 1974), p. 192.
8. [Telemachus T. Timayenis], *The American Jew: An Exposé of His Career* (New York, 1888), p. 202; cf. Leonard A. Greenberg and Harold J. Jonas, "An American Anti-Semite in the Nineteenth Century," in Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo W. Baron* (New York, 1959), pp. 265-83.
9. Henry W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (New York, 1965), p. 242; Henry L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York, 1937), pp. 297-99; Cohen, "Antisemitism in the Gilded Age," p. 187.
10. "Pig," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), XIII, 506-508; Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (Boston, 1978), p. 272. Glanz, *Jew in American Folklore*, pp. 56-63.
11. Mordecai Noah quoted in *New York Evening Post* (13 August 1821), p. 2.
12. Charles Freshman, *The Autobiography of the Rev. Charles Freshman* (Toronto, 1868), p. 97.
13. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (New York, 1978); John M. Cudihy, *The Ordeal of Civility* (New York, 1974).
14. *Israelite Indeed*, 8 (July 1864), 22.