

Out There

A Day in the Life of a Loxicologist

By Robby Berman

It is 3:30 in the morning. My father awakes, dresses, and slips out of the house trying – unsuccessfully – not to wake my mother. He's been doing this for 43 years.

Arnold Berman is a jobber. His mother was a jobber. His father was a jobber: a middleman who buys smoked fish wholesale from smokehouses and resells it. And although I've broken from family tradition, I occasionally help my old man out.

Every Yom Kippur, tens of thousands of American Jews skip synagogue to stand on line to buy lox and baked salmon in preparation to break a fast they never fasted. The week prior to that holy day, my father does eight times his normal business; so instead of waking early to say *shihot*, this year I wake up early to shlepp fish.

In the early morning darkness, I stumble into the passenger seat of my dad's refrigerated van, carrying a pillow and blanket. "Where are your comic books?" my dad clucks, reminding me of earlier days when I used to work with him. Boy! You bring a comic book to work – once –

and you're labeled for life.

The van bounces around New York's Long Island Expressway and Brooklyn-Queens Expressway for an hour, finally entering the bowels of the Williamsburg Industrial area: the Mecca of Jewish-owned smokehouses. "I buy mainly at Service and Banner smokehouses because of their superior product," he explains, as if he were talking about something other than fish.

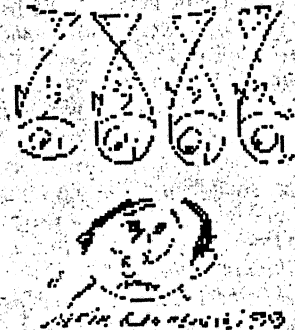
We step into the smokehouse and I'm overcome by the ubiquitous stench of smoke and fish: My head dizzies; my stomach churns. My father's olfactory sense, on the other hand, has long ago adjusted to the offensive odor – much like the tare button on an electronic scale; he smells the belly of a salt-brined, pink-fleshed fish: "Now this is fresh Novie," he gloats.

The Spanish-speaking workers, clad in yellow raincoats and green boots, slide around the slimy floor of the packing room, pulling racks of chubs and pushing tubs of brine, all the while trying to avoid whitefish that are hanging by hooks from the ceiling. My teeth chatter and my flesh goose-pimples from the whining fans and deafening compressors.

I'm overwhelmed: My eyes see thousands of fish in every direction; my nose is repulsed; my fingers are frozen; my ears are useless; and my father can't understand why I'm "not on the ball," taking weights and taping boxes. He's like Ahab on his boat, an old salt thriving in his element. "If you pack the fish head to tail, they fit in better," he tells me,

imparting tradition.

Unlike my father, I loathe touching the oily, cold, dead creatures. Dad checks for freshness by picking up a piece of sable plate and feeling it in a way that makes me blush: "This stuff is gold, *gold*," he says loudly, to no one in particular. He peers into the belly of a gold-colored fish that for some reason is called a whitefish: "It's green," he tells me, as if I know whether green is good or bad.



A Satmar Hassid, from neighboring Williamsburg, enters to turn on the oven (the halachically definitive act of cooking) to make the smoked fish kosher for his ilk.

"The *mashgiah* gets \$400 a week for pressing a button," says the Jewish, but apparently not Jewish enough, smokehouse owner. "Thank God we got the new oven. The old one needed two buttons pressed to get it going, and I'm not sure if this guy charges by the oven or by the button."

I GREW up on the legend that one

particular worker had a smoke-stained, gold-colored arm, from hanging the fish through a window into the smoking oven. "But he's long dead," says my pop, depriving me of verification.

The workers from South America take a coffee break and I ask Rodrigo, from Venezuela, if he too has heard the legend. "*Lo. Lo shamati davar kazeh* [No, I haven't heard any such thing]," he says, causing me to spill my coffee; Rodrigo spent the past nine months working illegally in a shoe factory in Tel Aviv.

Before the cups are empty of coffee, the whistle blows and the frenzied work begins anew, as if never interrupted. As Yom Kippur nears, the tension builds: Curses, ethnic epithets, and sometimes even fish, fly; Jose hitting Julio over the head with a large white.

My father and I load up and begin "the route," filling orders for bagel shops, restaurants, and appetizing stores throughout NY State. Work ends well after nightfall: 17 hours total. Exhausted, I take to the shower and Irish Spring, vigorously soaping and scrubbing my skin with a coarse sponge and igneous rock, removing hefty amounts of dermis.

I towel off and plop into bed. But something smells. I raise my arm to my nose: Smokefish. I try to live with it, or in this case sleep with it, knowing that I'll be touching the stuff again in just another few hours.

I fall asleep counting the days to Yom Kippur. A day of no work. A day of fasting. A day of no fish.

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