Joan Nathan Transcript

DR: Let's start with your childhood. Can you talk about what kind of Jewish home you grew up in, and what kind of observance there was?

JN: It was a reform Jewish home. My father was from Germany. He came over in 1929. He was from a family where—this is very typical of his generation--his grandparents were observant, they certainly had a kosher home, his parents were less observant, and he was very secular. Everybody went to his grandmother's for Friday night dinner. My mother came from an Eastern European background. She was born in America, and her family was probably more conservative, but I think she was reform. She was traditional, so we always, as far as I remember, had Friday night dinner and observed the holidays but that was it.

DR: Did you go to religious school?

JN: I went to Hebrew school. I was confirmed but not bat mitzvahed.

DR: Did you emerge from this background with a Jewish identity?

JN: Yes. I have a totally Jewish identity. When I was growing up sometimes I thought of myself as more WASP-y Jewish. I remember I used to wear kilts. I think that I emerged from high school with a much bigger awareness of Judaism. I always knew I was a Jew and I didn't go to Jewish camps. I guess it really wasn't until I went to Israel for a summer, and then for three years, that my Jewish identity just really emerged.

DR: How old were you at the time of your first trip to Israel?

JN: I guess maybe twenty-five. But I was always aware of being Jewish. I did Shabbat, but I was open to lot of other things until that just hit me. It had a big impact on my life.

DR: How?

JN: I had a wonderful job. I worked for Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, in his press office. I was his foreign press attaché. There were so many events going on in Jerusalem at that time that I couldn't help but be aware of who I was. I would always say that you don't have to live in Jerusalem but Jerusalem and Israel teach you how to live. I think that really made an impression on my life.

DR: What was the role food played in your family when you were growing up?

JN: Everybody in my family has always liked to eat, so the dinner table was important. We all had our places at the dinner table. You didn't wear jeans the way that you do today. You would never put a ketchup bottle on the table—it would be in a bowl. Or a juice bottle. Or get carry-out cream cheese. Meals were really important; they were beautiful.

DR: Everyday meals, or holiday meals?

JN: Everyday, and holidays. We had a cook when I was growing up.

DR: In New York City?

JN: Westchester, Larchmont. I grew up in Providence, then my father sold his business and became vice-president of a large company and so we went to live in Westchester. Then he lost a lot of money so we moved back to Rhode Island. The meal was always something you made beautiful. My mother always had pretty flower arrangements on the table. Meals were a time that you could get together, you could talk, and they were important. Sometimes my father might not be home for dinner during the week, but even so it was a beautifully set table.

DR: Did that carry over to you in your home?

JN: Yes, I think so. Now my kids are away and it's a little bit different, but yes, when they were growing up. Even today, Friday night dinner is still very, very important to me.

DR: Do you have a childhood memory of a special holiday meal?

JN: I have memories of being sent from the table at Passover because I would giggle when my father led the service, and he didn't like that. He always read the children's haggadah. You know those times when you're supposed to be serious and you can't? That's what I remember about Passover seder.

DR: And the food?

JN: My mother used to have gefilte fish in rounds that she got straight out of a Manischewitz jar. Sometimes even, as hors d'oeuvres, she had shrimp. Even though she never liked to think she was a good cook, she was a good cook.

DR: Foods that evoke a memory, with even a smell, have a sentimental value to many of us. Are there some foods that do that for you?

JN: Oh, definitely. I remember when we had seders, we always had something called a krimslach that was my father's favorite German dish. It was like a fritter, and then you ate it with stewed prunes. That evokes seder to me. My mother's—although I don't do it—she would make strawberries with a big meringue, scharmtorte. She would either do a roast chicken or a brisket. Rosh Hashanah was always brisket with farfel. I remember the smells, the food, the carrots in the brisket. For Rosh Hashanah she had her plum tart and I carry on those traditions myself with my kids. Of course, we think of comfort food, but they're really important. They are comfort food.

DR: Let's go back to Jerusalem. Your first book came out of your experience there, and it was called The Flavor of Jerusalem. It sold 25,000 copies, which is a lot of books. How do explain the interest in that book at that time, because my recollection of Israeli food in

the ‘70’s was a lot of cucumbers, tomatoes and hardboiled eggs?

JN: There was really good food, but you had to go to people’s homes to get it. It wasn’t necessarily at restaurants. I think the tourists to Israel bought that book a lot. Also, a lot of Hadassah groups must have bought it. There weren’t a lot of cookbooks like that out in those days. One of the emblems of my cookbooks has always been that I write stories, and I think people like the stories.

DR: Can you explain how a recipe tells a story?

JN: It’s not the recipe so much as the whole thing. A dish tells a story in many ways. It tells a story by what ingredients are in it. You can understand where the people were from or where they lived. If you know enough about food history you can see the tweak in a recipe that shows that they’ve traveled, they’ve wandered. What it’s for. How it tastes. There are just so many ways that recipes can evoke history, and evoke culture.

DR: In your writing process, you examine both the story and the recipe. What comes first?

JN: The first thing I look for is a good story, but I also look for a good recipe. So if the recipe’s lousy then I sometimes don’t use the story. Or I might change the recipe slightly, but I really like to keep people’s recipes intact as much as I can. When you’re writing a cookbook it’s like you’re going fishing. You don’t know what you’re going to come up with. Either it’s going to be a good story, or it’s going to be a good recipe. If it’s a good recipe, you want to evoke a story from somebody.

DR: Do you find that people who might otherwise be unwilling to talk about themselves do it in a backdoor way by telling you where the recipe came from?

JN: Absolutely. I’ll tell you this story: I was doing interviews for Quiches, Kugels and Couscous, the book I just finished, and somebody heard me talking to an Alsatian

woman at a restaurant. She came up to me and she said, “I overheard you. My mother was a hidden child during the war, and never talks to us about what happened. And, she’s a great cook. If you came to our house, I know that she would open up.” And she did. So I know that her daughter was happy because now she’ll have this memory.

DR: If you were going to categorize yourself, would you say that you are a food writer, a Jewish food writer, an anthropologist, a cultural historian?

JN: Maybe a cultural historian and food writer. Even going to the Fancy Food Show in downtown Washington--there are something like 23,000 people there. They’re looking at new products like cheeses and oils, and promoting them. I learn so much every year when I go there. I think, “What does this represent? Each year, how have we changed?” That’s the way I look at it. I don’t look at just what’s there.

DR: So you track the culinary changes.

JN: Right, and it’s funny enough, there’s a book called Gluckel of Hamlin, you’ve probably heard of it. They always talk about the marketplace in that book. The marketplace is where you would meet people, where you would study. it’s the same thing here. This is a huge marketplace.

DR: I have heard Jewish scholars speak about the ‘Jewish bookshelf’, and they refer to the contributions to Jewish civilization that various writers and thinkers have made. I think your books tell a story, and history, and are so much involved in educating people. Are you aware when you write them of a larger purpose, to put them on this bookshelf?

JN: This is what I feel: I feel as if with each book that I’ve done, that I’ve taken a point in history and I’ve talked about it as honestly and as fairly as I can. I guess in my heart of hearts I know that these books are going to live on after me—if there are books. Most cookbooks that you see don’t go into exactly the time in history. That’s what I think is the most interesting.

DR: Culture is many things, and food is just one of them. Yet, food seems to be this universal language. Is there something special about food that's not present, say, in music, or dance, or costume, that lets people feel that they belong to a group?

JN: Yes, first of all there's the taste, the smell, there's sitting around the table, which is more important than anything else, I think. And that you are socializing, you're together, you're communing. I think that's one of the things we're losing in our civilization. Every year when we have our Passover seder, for example, there are about 40 people here. I always get the sense that nobody wants the seder to stop because it's connection.

DR: Many Jews who are very secular and identify as cultural Jews or culinary Jews, say that they feel Jewish when they are at a seder, or even eating a bagel, or walking in and having a pastrami sandwich in a deli. Have you thought about whether this is an easy access point for people to enter the religion, or to feel connected to it?

JN: Yes, except with the delis. I mean, delis are sort of coming back, but I don't think they are the centerpiece that they used to be. I think maybe the gym is, maybe a little bit the synagogue, but the synagogue more as a Jewish community center. A lot of Jewish clubs maybe are. But there isn't that center the way that there used to be. So food evokes memories for a lot of people.

DR: We have the stereotypes of the Jewish mother, and all the Jewish food jokes. Do Jews have a unique relationship with food?

JN: Not any more so than the Chinese and the Italians. I think that we've just had a lot more jokes about it. All three cultures are involved in food and what food means to the family, and talking over dishes.

Yesterday I gave a presentation at the Fancy Food Show, and one woman asked, "Why is it that if you're Christian, you won't eat matzoh balls, you won't make them for your family?" I think part of it, probably, is that matzoh ball soup, or chicken and matzoh ball

soup, haven't gone to a mainstream company. In other words, Campbell's or Lipton's doesn't make that. Also because you think of matzoh ball soup sometimes when you're sick, but you really think of it for holidays. And holidays are something that remain within a culture. Although challah has gone mainstream, and bagels have gone mainstream, and pastrami and corned beef, they all have gone mainstream.

DR: You can find sources in the texts: the laws of kashrut, rules about eating during Passover, both what to eat, and what not to eat, Abraham offering food to the angels, all these early things. And then, even the metaphors we speak about--the land of milk and honey for the Promised Land, and the Shulchan Aruch, the Prepared Table, the repository for the Halachik laws. Maybe there's something woven into the intellect as well as the sensory.

JN: Yes, there's definitely that connection. I'm not sure that everybody's aware of it, but for example, Esau's pottage, lentils, I know there's this dish called mujaddara with lentils, onions, rice, but it used to be bulgur, hard bulgur, bigger size bulgur because that was sort of the first instant food. And of course the land of milk and honey is date honey and yogurt. You see the connection with the Bible.

The authors the Biblical texts knew how to connect people and using food was a great way to do it. Judaism is a table-centered culture. I mean, look at the seder. And look at Friday night, the Shabbat and all the meals that you're supposed to have. Joining together at the table, that's where communion goes within a culture.

DR: Turning now to modern day, food has become huge—the Food Channel, celebrity chefs and all of that. Jews are interested in this as well, things like saving the deli that we've mentioned, and sustainable farming. It's interesting that part of this "food movement" is the idea that you have to treat the animals that you're going to slaughter humanely, and the workers humanely. That it has to be not just kosher, but humane. Is this just one more example of the ways Jews have adapted to where they're living by

incorporating Jewish values into their lives?

JN: I think it's really very interesting that we can always go to the Bible to substantiate whatever customs are going around. Certainly, everybody's evoking the Bible right now. Take stewardship of the land. First of all, right-wing farmers, Christian farmers, and left-wing Jews are the same on this. The whole concept of stewardship--it's so fabulous, because you can always check the Bible for the right way to live your life. Don't you think it's amazing?

That's what makes it so interesting for me. I'm constantly going back to the Bible. Everything started back then, we've gone all over the world, and we're going back. First it was back to Israel, but now it's just back to connections. When I was younger and I was totally in love with Israel I thought, "Oh my God, it's all totally connected back to Israel." It was, but even so it's still going out. There's still Persian Jewish food, and Iraqi Jewish food, and German Jewish food. It's what makes each of us separate. It's all these strands within each of us. It's like your DNA—your food DNA. It's fascinating.

DR: I can be an Ashkenazi Jew and cook a Persian Jewish recipe and feel that I am creating a Jewish dish.

JN: Exactly. It's really amazing. I'm always in wonder at being Jewish.

DR: What do you mean?

JN: Even in France, which I just wrote about, so many Jews are involved in so many different aspects of life. As small a percentage as we are in the United States, it's the same in every area in France--Sonia Rykiel, Michel de Montaigne, Nostradamus, Yves Montand. It's just like in the United States, and it's like that all over the world. Jews just make a difference, bad and good. We've got some people that are doing some pretty awful things. Even in the food world there are so many Jewish restauranteurs, and now there are so many Jewish chefs where there weren't before.

DR: And Israeli cuisine has come a long way since The Flavor of Jerusalem.

JN: Oh, for sure. In those days, most of the food was like boiled chicken at hotels. There was the Israeli breakfast, but even the Israeli breakfast now has lots of Yemenite food, and Libyan food. They didn't have that then. And the restaurants are not just classic Italian for the tourists, they're for the Israelis. And it's like that all over the world. You go to South Africa, and cities. I remember when I went to Budapest for the first time it was just a few good Hungarian restaurants. But now, I'll bet anything, in Budapest—I haven't been back in a few years—there's every kind of restaurant, just as there is in Paris, and there is in Berlin. Everything is gone global.

DR: In your career as a food writer, women historically have had to fight for their place in the kitchen—except Monday through Sunday. Did you ever experience discrimination, or people not taking you seriously because either you're a woman writing this, or because you're writing about Jewish foods?

JN: I think sometimes I'm not taken as seriously because some people are sort of afraid that Jewish food isn't like French food or Italian food. I'm aware of that. There is definitely--even though there are loads of food writers--an old boys' network. There might be Julia Child, and Martha Stewart, but they're the exceptions. I can see at the Times the editors really push the male writers. It's something that I've noticed throughout the years. It's just the way it is.

DR: Do you see it changing?

JN: Not so much. Not at the newspapers so much. There are a lot of women food writers, but even then, the big positions are for the most part taken by men. That's what I've noticed.

DR: It's ironic, isn't it?

JN: Yes, it is ironic.

DR: Joan, everyone I know in Washington has a book or two of yours. First of all, did you ever anticipate the popularity of these books, or the success of your career?

JN: No, I did it because it was a lark to write my first cookbook. I wanted to go into sociology. I mean, I went to the Kennedy School. I said I wanted to write about sociology of ethnic groups in the Boston area for the Boston Globe Magazine, and the editor said, “Do ethnicity in food.” I had no idea. I’m always amazed, actually.

DR: Your mother is still living. What does she think of your career?

JN: She’s 97. I don’t know, you should ask her. She’s proud of me. I’m not sure she’s aware, maybe she is, I don’t know. She’s totally there. I think I’ll ask her tomorrow, I’m going to see her.

DR: On Rosh Hashanah, or Pesach, when you’re in your kitchen cooking something, do you ever think there are people all over the United States or especially in your community who may be cooking a Joan Nathan recipe, and how does that make you feel?

JN: It’s funny, because when I’m in my kitchen what I think is not about people cooking my recipes. I’ve never thought that. I have thought two things: that I have to give myself a lot of extra time because people call me with questions, and the other thing is I’m always wondrous that people all over the world are making Passover seder, for example, or Shabbat dinner. I don’t think of my part, maybe I should, but I don’t.

DR: Do you think of the people who gave you those recipes?

JN: Whenever I make those recipes. I’ve given a lot of nachas to some of the people. I remember one person in particular is Mickey Feinberg. She has this vegetable kugel, it’s the same recipe that’s in my Jewish Holiday Kitchen. I hear from people every year about

that recipe. And the recipes that are the favorites of people—the chocolate soufflé roll from the Jewish Bake Shop in Cincinnati. The granddaughter of the person whose recipe it was comes to my seder every year and she makes it at my house because she always forgets how to do it. It's kind of fun, it's become a tradition.

DR: It sounds like this is one very gratifying part of your work.

JN: For sure.

DR: Is it the most gratifying thing, to be able to share the recipes?

JN: I think what I really like to do is find these old recipes that are good. I mean, there are a lot of lousy Jewish recipes—I don't like taiglach very much, and I don't like honey cake very much. But certain others--last year I was doing an article for Tablet Mag for Passover and I found this woman who was Siberian. I got her recipe for--she called it a krimsel--but it was like a pancake stuffed with jam that you bake. It was delicious, it was just a breakfast dish for Passover. But to know that this woman came from Siberia, her parents were originally from Lithuania. This recipe had been around for hundreds of years. That's the beauty of the internet. When I wrote it I got emails from all over the world. "Krimsel! I remember!" One person said, "Oh, yeah, my family lived in Manchuria, that's where I had the recipe." And the woman who gave me the recipe said she couldn't believe it because her family went to Manchuria. It's more exciting writing for the internet with something like that.

DR: Now we have 20-somethings, the Trader Joe's/microwave generation. What would you tell them about cooking, and the art of cooking?

JN: I would say that for your children, if you have sushi carry-out all the time, or from Trader Joe's, what memories are you going to give to your children? Prepared meals don't do it for me. Having catered dinners don't do it for me. The process of cooking, I think, is a way to connect with your family, to talk with them. That's part of cooking in our

generation, and I think that's why now a lot of kids are doing these parties like a cookbook club. One of them had a dinner last Saturday night where the host made the main course and the dessert, and then she put out ingredients for a hot cherry dish, and a cold cherry dish. Two teams worked on them. They had fun, they worked on it, they talked, they did it together. You don't have to do that, but the point is people want to do more hands-on, and I think that's the extension of all this TV stuff. Now they want to do it themselves.

DR: My last question: Over the course of your career, you've had the opportunity to meet so many people from cultures across the globe and been invited into their kitchens, a really personal invitation. Are there lessons that you've learned about people or human nature from them and their stories?

JN: When you go to somebody's kitchen, the person who will invite you is a little bit nervous at first. But then she's proud. And you're right, it is a personal thing. If you show that you're interested in what they're doing, you get so much more than just a recipe from them because they'll open up their soul to you. Connections is what it's all about. As I've said, it is like going fishing. Very often I'll put down my pen or my computer, and then I'll get a real story. When you think you're finished, then so much more comes out.

I used to get that, too, with my in-laws. My mother-in-law had an amazing memory for what life was like in Poland before World War II. She never wanted to leave Poland. She loved Poland. I would get all these stories about food from her, and she felt really much better. She liked the fact that I asked her all these questions. I got a different view of what life was. My mother-in-law wasn't wealthy at all, nothing. She just liked being with family, and the taste of wild strawberries that the peasants would bring to market, or the bagels they would have in the afternoon--you didn't have them with cream cheese and lox, they were sold on a stick. And you'd have these white buns for breakfast. Or making gefilte fish with her mother. Those were things that she remembered. Who knows if that's what

it was like because with your memory it's always selective, the way you look at things. But she gave me a new appreciation for what life was like, and I think if we hadn't talked about food, I never would have gotten that from her, so I think that's what you learn.

DR: Is there anything you would like to add?

JN: The only thing I would say to young people is that food is memory, and memory comes from traditions, and repetitive traditions. If you don't have any repetitive traditions you're not going to have the memory of anything other than carry-out. Don't you think? And the other thing is get rid of your cell phones at meals. I was at a Shabbat dinner and somebody was there who was on her cell phone, glancing at it.

DR: Not exactly what your parents would have liked, with their putting ketchup in a little bowl.

JN: A little bit different, yes!

[END OF INTERVIEW]