

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Clockwise from left: Cover of the last issue of *The Jewish Bakers' Voice*, 6 June 1958; Buy Union Bread label, which was affixed to baked goods made in all union shops, circa 1935



from slavery in Egypt, the Jewish Bakers' Union won its first victory during Passover 1886, resulting in a 74-hour, six-day work week.

With the influx of Eastern European Jews to the city, the number of bakeries serving Jewish clientele increased. Alongside this, there was a rise in the number of unions representing Jewish workers, especially after the unions achieved a major victory that guaranteed bakers a 10-hour workday and a wage scale of \$16 to \$25 a week. By 1910, the six local Jewish bakers' unions boasted a combined membership of well over 3,000 bakers.

Some unions represented specialist interests, such as cake and bagel bakers, and several represented the matzah makers, who churned out millions of sheets of it from the matzah factories every year. In the 1930s, Manischewitz, Streit's, Meyer London, Goodman's and Horowitz Margareten collectively employed nearly 1,000 bakers during the months leading up to the seder season. In addition to handling contract negotiations, the unions helped maintain wage standards across the industry, preventing non-union factories from engaging in unfair and competitive practices.

Consumers also played a part in regulating the industry. In March 1934, just before Passover, the major matzah manufacturers and their wholesalers were accused of selling packages of matzah that were well under the advertised weight. It was discovered that each package weighed between seven and 10 ounces short of the 5lb packages that customers believed they were buying. This case was finally settled nearly three years later, with each of the manufacturers agreeing to officially adopt 5lb net packages as a standard weight. The agreement was estimated to have saved customers a total of over \$300,000 that year.

As New York's demographic changed, there was less need for unions composed specifically of Jewish bakers. Many unions merged with the Bakery and Confectionery Workers' International Union of the American Federation of Labor. In 1958, *The Jewish Bakers' Voice* became the *Speciality Bakers' Voice*. The editors noted that New York's "typical bakery of today bears little resemblance to the Jewish bakery of 25 years ago" and hoped that by changing the name "the journal may speak for a larger group". In 1960 the magazine suspended its section devoted to Jewish bakers and ceased publishing any content in Yiddish.

Not even the major matzah manufacturers were spared. In 2015, Streit's, the last matzah factory in New York, shuttered its doors. Its ageing machines and a decline in customers buying directly from its retail outlet had a hand in the decision – although these weren't the only concerns. Another factor was the perennial problem of labour costs: Israeli matzah companies were able to consistently undercut America's matzah manufacturers with cheap labour. ■

Stefanie Halpern is the director of YIVO's archives, which contain 24 million items that are gradually being digitised. See yivo.org for more info.

MATZAH BAKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

Up until the 1960s, New York boasted dozens of Jewish baking unions, who fought for better conditions for their workers. **Stefanie Halpern** spotlights the powerful matzah bakers' union

In 1927, *The Jewish Bakers' Voice*, a weekly magazine published in Yiddish and English, and the official organ of the Jewish baking industry in New York, issued a call to arms. "Organisation is the watchword of the industry," the magazine exclaimed. "Organisation is the bakers' sword..." The same year, Jewish bakers successfully won their fight for a seven-hour work day.

This campaign for workers' rights was part of a long history of the struggle by Jewish bakers in New York for a safer working environment and better conditions. Much of their success was dependent on the strength of the different baking unions.

New York's first Jewish baking union was granted a charter in the city in 1886, at a time when bakeries were largely unregulated, with many located in damp, unventilated and often unbearably hot tenement cellars crawling with rats and other vermin. Workers toiled 18 or more hours a day, six days a week, often sleeping in the cellars where they worked because of the long hours and low wages. Jewish bakers earned less than \$10 per week for 108 hours of back-breaking work. Perhaps inspired by the Israelites' freedom

"Bakers worked in damp, hot cellars crawling with rats"