

11: From margarine to the Mediterranean: the emergence of modern kosher retail

This corner of Wide Gate Street and White Rose Court was for many years occupied by the matzah bakers, Levy Brothers, since 1710 in fact. 18 years before their nearest competitor, Ellis the Bookseller of Bond Street, for the title of the oldest shop in London. Along with a host of other Passover cake bakers, Levy Brothers advertised their wares as kosher in the Jewish Chronicle before Pesach in the 1910s and 20s. What they didn't advertise was their hashgacha, their kosher supervision. Nor did scores of boarding houses offering kosher dining or even orthodox dining, with no outside supervision evident. Did they not need supervision in the old days? What was going on?

One could fill tomes with the complicated story of the economics of imported kosher meat, the struggles of regional communities to provide shechita, kosher slaughter. The arguments over who is or isn't part of the London Board of Shechita, let alone the crusade of Chief Rabbi Hertz, the London Beth Din, the London Board of Shechita, and a number of men wearing sandwich boards to expose butchers selling unkosher meat as kosher. So, we won't discuss just meat.

We do have time though for a brief look at the development of rabbinic supervision of restaurants and retail products, the first of which, advertised in the JC, was, as one might have guessed, Tomor in 1908. Supervised by Dr B Wolfe of Cologne, the parev margarine subsequently came under London Beth Din supervision in 1933. Hyman Ostwind advertised supervision by the London Beth Din of Ostwind & Co.'s Model Passover Bakery in 1924.

One reason why a Heimish baker in Wentworth Street might have submitted to United Synagogue-affiliated supervision is that connections between landsmen, people who immigrated together from the same place, were fading, and London Jewry homogenising, and that in order to gain new customers, one needed the recommendation of a neutral, religiously trustworthy party, in this case, the Beth Din. The Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, or UOHC, an umbrella body for Charedi synagogues, was founded in 1926, and by 1930, A1 Sauce, which some may remember as it only came off British shelves in the 1970s, was being sold with supervision by Kedassia, the UOHC kashrut body. Supervision spread very slowly, no pun intended.

If Crane Horseradish Sauce, supervised by KLBD, was supposed to compete with A1 Sauce, its advertisement 20 years later in 1950 surely diminished the impact of that

competition. Kosher or non-kosher, factory-made food was comparatively rare in the 19th century, but kosher eateries were also few. The first mention of a kosher restaurant in the Jewish chronicle since its first printing in 1841 didn't come until Goldstein's of Finsbury, advertised in 1868.

Restaurants didn't hire mashgichim, kashrut supervisors, because there was a limited market for kosher restaurants. Limited for want until fairly recently, of enough Jews who would only eat out kosher and who had disposable income to spend on eating at restaurants. Consequently, kosher restaurants, when they did exist, were often reputedly poor-quality places. A letter in the JC in 1881 indicated that it was commonly understood that kosher restaurants involved discomforts and disadvantages, and the author didn't even mention the food.

It wasn't until after the Great War that enough Jews had sufficient money to spend on consumerist living that the scenery really began to shift, and the influence of the kashrut authorities to grow. In 1939, the French line of cruise ships, founded by the Jewish Pereire Brothers incidentally, advertised a special kosher service which has been approved by the Beth Din. On three ships, a Jewish staff served under a mashgiach in a separate kosher kitchen with pantry.

The kosher food was advertised, with emphasis on the last of these perhaps, as refined, varied and plentiful. Post-war, with returning prosperity, holidays increased, including on Yom Tovim. The Northumberland Hotel in Cliftonville, under Beth Din supervision, published Haggadahs in the 1950s, decorated with images of their modernist architecture, unimaginable even a few years prior.

A century before, in fact, the social chronicler Henry Mayhew published a short interview with a Jew boy wearing a corduroy suit, engaged in selling sponges in the street. Paraphrasing, the boy told Mayhew that, I believe I'm twelve. I've been to school, but it's long since, and my mother was very ill then, and I was forced to go out in the streets to have a chance. I can't read. I forgot all about it. Jerusalem? Yes, I've heard of it. Pork? Ah no, I never touched it. I'd as soon eat a cat. I don't know why it shouldn't be eaten, only that it's wrong to eat it. No, I never touched a ham sandwich, but other Jew boys have, and laughed at it, I know.

Levy Brothers' shop was here for a very long time, but while it would be pleasing to buy a matzah from Levy Brothers were they still in situ, we should not think for one minute that things were better, or even more kosher, in the Old East End.