"Open for Business: Jewish Food Entrepreneurship in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Iowa"

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I want to begin by sharing two different, yet interrelated stories about food in Des Moines and Sioux City, Iowa. These two cities housed the largest Jewish populations in Iowa by the first decade of the twentieth century.[1] In 1906, the owners of Bergstein Brothers Wholesale and Retail Bakery—a kosher bakery run by recent Lithuanian immigrants in Des Moines—contacted the Industrial Removal Office (IRO), a branch of the Jewish Agricultural Society created in February of 1901, to facilitate the relocation of Jews away from the crowded Lower East Side of New York.[2] In this letter, they implored the central office to send them "a baker who is competent to do the work," one who specifically was a "married man...one that came from the old country" that they could employ at their bakery.[3] A few weeks later, the IRO agreed to send "a suitable

[1] Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 70-73. Rader's work takes data from official U.S. Census records, archives of *The American Jewish Yearbook*, and *Statistics of the Jews of the United States*, a compilation published in 1880 by the Board of Delegates of American Israelites and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. It remains one of the better collected sets of population data for American Jews.

[2] For works on the IRO, see Peter Romanofsky, "'To Rid Ourselves of the Burden': New York Jewish Charities and the Origins of the Industrial Removal Office, 1890-1901," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 64, no. 4 (June, 1975): 331-343; John Livingston, "The Industrial Removal Office, the Galveston Project, and the Denver Jewish Community," *American Jewish History* 68, no. 4 (June 1979): 434-458; and Jack Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto: The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants across America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). All provide in-depth looks at the IRO and its activity, though they rarely treat food-related business agreements, instead focusing on higher volumes of movement and employment through manual labor and the garment industry.

[3] A. Bergstein and L. Bergstein to Industrial Removal Office, 26 April 1906; Records of the Industrial Removal Office; I-91; Box 74; Reel #47; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

baker" that would satisfy the need of supplying a local Jewish entrepreneur with help.[4] The local community could then feel comfortable knowing that they would be able to continue purchasing familiar, kosher food from an established, Jewish bakery.

A few years later, in 1913, local Sioux City Jew Ruth David Slotsky remembered fondly, "Harry [Holdowsky] arrived in this country from Russia in 1913. Coming directly to Sioux City, he worked first for Kroloff's Bakery and then for the K & S Cafe before opening his own business." She continued, "Harry's served good American food at reasonable prices but every Friday he featured a real Kosher-style dinner with all the trimmings. Harry cooked and prepared these dishes himself. His entire family was always seen on these occasions eating their evening meal."[5] What these two stories, though separated by two hundred miles and nearly a decade, underscore is the presence and power of Jewish food in Iowa's Jewish communities.

Jewish life outside of large urban areas has not often been the focus of historical scholarship. Though works by Linda Mack Schloff, Lee Shai Weissbach, and, most recently, Shari Rabin begin to change this trend through their geographical focus, they only look specifically at the traditional tenets of Jewish communal life, including the synagogue, local and national politics, and organizational life. They also largely ignore the topic of food, relegating its importance to the periphery, or arguing that it was nearly impossible to maintain a strict kosher diet.[6] Scholarship on Jewish life in Iowa likewise has been limited. Many works take the form of

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[4] Industrial Removal Office to A. Bergstein and L. Bergstein, 22 May 1906; Records of the Industrial Removal Office; I-91; Box 74; Reel #47; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

[5] *I Remember When...Personal Recollections and Vignettes of the Sioux City Jewish Community, 1869-1964*, Comp. Susan Marks Conner (Sioux City: Jewish Federation of Sioux City, 1985), 89.

[6] For "frontier Jews," see Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017). Rabin argues that the concept of "unfettered mobility" on the frontier allowed was the driving force behind small-town Jewish identity, which allowed them to quickly and easily adapt to changing circumstances away from urban areas; see also Linda Mack Schloff, *And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest Since 1855* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1996) and Lee Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

informal community or synagogue histories written by local rabbis and lay community leaders. Others, such as the more recent work of Michael J. Bell and Shari Rabin, are article-length general histories that cover the emergence of an active religious and political life in Iowa.[7] This paper, therefore, moves away both from urban Jewish scholarship and work on the synagogue, and begins to focus our attention on food entrepreneurship to locate a different, yet equally salient component of Jewish communal construction and upkeep in the midwestern state of Iowa.

This paper is drawn, in part, from a larger dissertation project that explores food in three separate, yet interrelated categories, taking the Midwest—not just Iowa—as its point of emphasis. The first category—and the topic of this paper—shows how Jewish food businesses became central pillars to the Jewish communities of Iowa. The next two sections investigate the private home and the intermingling of food, recipes, and traditions and how food was used in charitable and organizational events to bring the community together in times of need, both as donors and beneficiaries. This paper, therefore, explores how fellow Jews used food businesses to facilitate upward economic movement, as communal gathering spots for shopping, sustenance, and gossip, and, quite extraordinarily, how these places became spots for inter-ethnic communication and a shared economy. In this light, this paper seeks to answer two broad questions. First, in addition to the synagogue and fraternal organizations, how did food

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[7] Michael J. Bell, "True Israelites of America: The Story of the Jews of Iowa," *The Annals of Iowa* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1994: 85-127 and Shari Rabin, "A Nest to the Wandering Bird: Iowa and the Creation of American Judaism, 1855-1877," *The Annals of Iowa* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 101-127. For other works on Iowa Jewry, see Simon Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa: A Complete History and Accurate Account of Their Religious, Social, Economical and Educational Progress in the State; a History of the Jews of Europe, North and South America in Modern Times, and a Brief History of Iowa* (Des Moines: Koch Brothers Printing, 1904); Jack Seymour Wolfe, *A Century with Iowa Jewry* (Des Moines: Iowa Printing & Supply, 1941); Frank Rosenthal, *The Jews of Des Moines: The First Century* (Des Moines: Jewish Welfare Federation, 1957); Bernard Shuman, *A History of the Sioux City Jewish Community, 1869-1969* (Sioux City: Jewish Federation, 1969); and Oscar Fleishaker, "The Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community on the Banks of the Mississippi River," Ph.D. diss., Harry Fischel School for Higher Jewish Studies (Yeshiva University, 1971). All focus extensively on synagogue life, organizational experiences, political life, and/or the immigrant press.

entrepreneurial activity actively shape these midwestern Jewish communities? And second, what was unique and important about the presence of Jewish-owned food businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, delicatessens, and others?

In its most basic form, Jewish entrepreneurial activity rooted in food provided two basic services: employment and familiarity. Food entrepreneurship was a viable business option for Jews and Jewish immigrants to enter into and succeed in, especially in less-populated areas. It also made sense when we consider the experience that thousands of Jews had both in their Old World homelands and in the U.S. as peddlers, an occupation routinely seen as a stepping-stone towards entrepreneurship. Most recently explored by Hasia Diner, Jews commonly opened stores, including food businesses, after months or years of peddling.[8] As we have seen in the case of the Bergstein Brothers, employment in the food industry was available through the IRO, and newly settled immigrants took those jobs, making up nearly four percent of all IRO placements in the first part of the twentieth century.[9] While this may seem like a small percentage, the number of Jewish immigrants who found work in this manner numbered in the thousands. Beyond employment, the more food businesses that were available within these communities, the easier it became to build and maintain their cultural and ethnic identity while also fueling their bodies with familiar, comforting food. J.H. Siegel, a grocery store owner in Waterloo, Iowa, knew this point as well as anybody when he requested that the IRO send him a *shochet*, or ritual slaughterer to provide kosher meat to his local Jewish community.[10] When the IRO responded a few months later, agreeing to send a *shochet* to Waterloo, it helped fill a large void in the Jewish

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[8] Hasia R. Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)
[9] Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto,* 206.
[10] Mr. J.H. Siegel to Industrial Removal Office, 11 September 1913; Records of the Industrial Removal Office, I-91; Box 74; Reel #47; American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

community. Other than circuit-riding rabbis that visited smaller Jewish communities at irregular intervals, being able to employ people familiar with kosher slaughtering techniques was pivotal not only for staying in business, but for providing communities with a way to secure kosher meat for their families.

Though Jewish food entrepreneurial ventures were important pillars of Iowa's communities, the roles that they fulfilled often went beyond employment and familiarity. Iowa's Jewish communities were home to a vibrant and geographically diverse array of Jews, including both Germans and Eastern Europeans. With such variety, there were understandably different religious stances, often mapping clearly and distinctly onto certain groups. For the most part, earlier-arrived Jews were German, assimilated quickly, spoke mostly English, and practiced Reform Judaism. Eastern European Jews, hailing from places such as Poland, Lithuania, and Russia's Pale of Settlement, clung to their religion and culture more fiercely, often conversing in Yiddish, observing the laws of *kashrut* under Orthodox Judaism, and altogether resisting assimilation in a much stronger fashion than their German counterparts. While Orthodox Jews definitely sought out these places much more frequently than those who followed Reform practice, Jews from all backgrounds found ways to introduce Jewish food into their lives as a marker of their ethnicity and cultural heritage. Though their clashing religious stance, economic position, and cultural ideology created a sizeable chasm in their daily lives, food businesses often served as the middle ground that united Jews, both in what they could provide and what they represented.

Joan Nathan's "A Social History of Jewish Food in America," which speaks about Eastern European Jewish immigrants and the role that food played in their lives, argues that

"because most of these new immigrants were so concerned with kashrut, the United States gave them great opportunities in the food business."[11] Reflecting on her grandparent's grocery store in Fort Dodge in the first decades of the twentieth century, Ann Cohen recalls that every Friday morning the store would come alive with "dozens" of community members seeking familiar foods and provisions for the upcoming Sabbath dinner, and, on occasion, for holiday gatherings. [12] For Jews who kept a modicum of their Jewishness by observing kosher practices, grocery stores and other food businesses that provided kosher meat and other products were integral to the lives of Jews and the communities they resided in. Though not an Orthodox Jew, third-generation Iowa City resident Jeffrey Braverman recounts growing up in the 1930s, stating that his family life revolved more around "social" life than the religious aspects of Judaism, which typically only occurred during special days. During these special occasions, his family would often visit Jewish-run grocery stores, bakeries, and butcher shops, with "the kosher butcher down the street" serving as their favorite.[13] Even when kosher dietary laws were not the rules governing a household for the entire year, Jewish families still did business at Jewish food establishments, making sure that they procured familiar ingredients and foodstuffs for their celebrations, whether they had been certified by a rabbinical authority or not. Oftentimes, Jews of different backgrounds came together, especially during holiday celebrations, over similar food and cuisine found at these food establishments.

Food businesses also served as popular gathering spots for the Jewish community. Because most Jewish businesses, especially those pertaining to food, concentrated in the larger

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[11] Joan Nathan, "A Social History of Jewish Food in America," in *Food and Judaism,* ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Gerald Shapiro (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2005), 6.
[12] Ann Badower Interview, 2 May 1991. Statewide Toldot Oral History Project, Int. Susan Hillman, ID 6.
[13] Jeffrey Alan Braverman Interview, 25 July 1991. Statewide Toldot Iowa Oral History Project, Int. Hilary Goldsmith, ID 20.

shopping districts or main streets throughout the state, the role of food permeated many Jewish businesses, not just the ones that actually sold these products. Jewish residents would often congregate outside of Jewish places of business, mostly food-based, that were often part of "Jewish areas of town" or, as in Sioux City, "the Jewish Mile."[14] Two Jewish cousins who grew up in Des Moines in the 1920s and 1930s recall that their grandparents' boarding house and *mikvah*, or ritual bath, that they ran were popular gathering places for the Des Moines Jewish community. Though these places were not typical gathering spots themselves, they were located next door to a kosher butcher shop, where many of the town's Jews, especially those who practiced Orthodox Judaism, bought their weekly supplies of meat.[15] After purchasing, they would often stay and chat with neighbors, friends, and employees of the store about Sabbath and holiday preparations, local news, gossip, or often, a mixture of all three. The prominence of these food businesses created zones away from the private home, the synagogue, or fraternal organizations where Jews could interact with one another, largely over the purchase and consumption of food.

Because Jewish communities in Iowa were much smaller than their neighbors, who were largely non-Jewish Protestants, entrepreneurs could not afford to serve just a Jewish clientele. While Jewish food entrepreneurial activity largely existed in order to serve the needs of their fellow Jews, virtually every Jewish community outside of Des Moines or Sioux City catered to both Jews and non-Jews. To be sure, many businesses stocked traditional Jewish foods and products, both kosher and "kosher-style," which is a stylistic designation that refers to foods and products commonly associated with Jewish cuisine that are not actually certified kosher.

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[14] *I Remember When…,* 92.
[15] Helene Barricks and Judith Rosenberg Interview, 30 April 1991. Statewide Toldot Oral History Project, Int. J. Vacchiano, ID 9.

However, they also carried products and served food that catered to non-Jews. Harry Holdowsky's restaurant from the opening of this paper did exactly this, serving "American-style" food in addition to kosher meals on Friday nights. Other businesses, such as the Geifman grocery store in Davenport, stocked kosher items that were also familiar to their non-Jewish neighbors, such as Crisco shortening, Maxwell House instant coffee, Heinz vegetarian beans, and Coca-Cola.[16] What is important to note here is not that these products were available and routinely purchased, but that non-Jews participated in the success of Jewish food entrepreneurship. Not only were these places havens for Orthodox and occasionally Reform Jews, but they were also inter-ethnic contact zones that extended a friendly hand to their neighboring community while at the same time reaffirming and making visible their Jewishness.

Jews living in the state of Iowa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century understood the impact of food on both their own lives and those of their fellow community members. Some opened food establishments to move up the economic ladder or establish a local spot where fellow Jews could shop and purchase ingredients. Others aimed to create a visible Jewish section of the places they called home. Regardless of the ways that Jews used and engaged with these entrepreneurial ventures, it is clear that they were significant in the construction and upkeep of Iowa's Jewish communities. This paper, by focusing on food entrepreneurship, helps to recenter the narrative of U.S. Jewish history in two ways: by relocating the study of Jewish life away from the metropolis towards the little-studied region of Iowa, and by shifting the topic of Jewish communal construction towards food entrepreneurship and away from the traditional topics of historical scholarship, such as the synagogue or

[16] Sam Geifman Interview, 24 April 1993. Statewide Toldot Oral History Project, Int. Susan Hillman. ID 28.

organizational life. By planting the proverbial seed of food's importance to the study of American Jewish history in Iowa and the Midwest, I hope that we begin to understand that just as food serves as the fuel for our physical bodies, it also nourishes the study of new historical topics, particularly this one. It is perhaps no accident that Iowa's first settled Jew (and first naturalized Iowa citizen) Alexander Levi, the founder of "Iowa Jewry," created the foundations of an Iowa Jewish community as a grocery store owner.[17]

[17] Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa,* 158-160; Wolfe, *A Century with Iowa Jewry*, 16; Bell, "True Israelites of Iowa," 87; and Rabin, "A Nest to the Wandering Bird," 101. Though these are general accounts of Iowa's Jewish history, they all take special care to mention the importance of Levi as a founding Jew and as a food entrepreneur in the grocery business.