

The Meyer and Herschlag Wholesome Sunlight Bakery – Our Family Business

by Jack Herschlag

Origins

The Herschlag family of bakers in Dembitz, Poland went back in that area to the middle of the 1800's. The family name, Herschlag, is common in the Alsace (also known as the Alsace-Lorraine), the strip of land between France and Germany.

The bakery that our immediate relatives left behind in Dembitz continued to be run by other family members. In doing internet research I came across a story about Dembitz that took place in 1941 during the Nazi occupation. The story told of the Jews being forced to move into one section of the town, a kind of forced ghetto. Later they were ordered to line up on a certain street, between two points identified by house locations. One of the houses was that of "Abraham Herschlag, the baker".

The first Herschlag-owned bakery in the U.S. that I know about was in Long Branch, NJ. The second bakery was located on Rockaway Road in South Jamaica, around the corner from Uncle Bennie's house on Shore Road.

The name of the bakery was the Meyer and Herschlag Wholesome Sunlight Bakery. Meyer was a cousin whom we called Uncle Cohen. He put up some money for the bakery. The name "Wholesome Sunlight" probably was the name of the bakery when they bought it.

I don't know the years that the family had the bakery, but I remember my father working there in my earliest memories (I was born in 1931), and I think they closed or sold it when I was about 17, in 1948.

Their ownership included all of the World War II years, and it should be noted that during that time, when the bakery had access to strictly rationed products, such as sugar and cooking oil, my father never brought any home and I never heard of any being sold to the black market. All of us considered the U.S. as the Home Front, and including my mother's side of my family, I had eleven first cousins in uniform. I was just a little too young to go.

The back of the bakery and its truck yard opened onto a street called Ginsberg Place. There was a gang headquartered there that called itself the Ginsberg Gang (not Jewish) that controlled the area. The bakery, like all the businesses, had to pay "protection." In case you're not familiar with the term, protection means you pay them and they provide protection...from themselves. If you didn't pay you have your windows, or something, broken.

Staff

The non-Herschlag partner, Uncle Meyer Cohen, never worked at the bakery. His wife did work behind the counter at times. The Herschlag partners were Uncle Bennie (Bernard) and Uncle Sender (Alexander). My father, Sam (Shulim) Herschlag, was not a partner because he used his savings to help my mother's family (Ida Green) buy a farm in New Jersey. My father worked for his family in the bakery, and of necessity became a member of Local 3, Bakery and Confectionary Workers of America. This was a bit awkward when the union went on strike and my father had to picket his brothers. Actually my recollection is that the union allowed him to picket another bakery in the Bronx.

The Bakery Smell

I am asked about the smell of the bakery. There is a characteristic seductive aroma which I think comes mainly from the rye bread, which can be detected out in the street. Since the baking was done at night, it is imprinted on my memory, and I'm sure on the memory of many others, that the Jewish bakery smell was a magical part of my night time experiences.

Some of the talk about how great things were in the good old days is just baloney, but some of it isn't. Such as, you can't get pumpernickel as good as the kind we grew up with. There is a reason: in those days the bakers took the leftover day-old rye bread and added it to the pumpernickel dough, giving it a magnificent flavor and texture. At one point, the health laws forbid this practice, and the good old pumpernickel days ended.

I believe that the bread baked in Europe also was better than the bread made here, because the ovens there were fueled with wood, not coal, and the next day's wood was put in the oven at the end of the night's work, so that the still-hot oven would dry it out. Can you imagine how that added to the bread?

Minding the Business

In addition to the three brothers (Bennie, Sender and Shulim) in the bakery, there were various second-generation family members working part-time in the bakery and the store. Uncle Bennie's children worked in the bakery from time to time, mainly Joe and Moish, according to my memory, and I recall seeing Fannie behind the counter sometimes. Uncle Sender's children did not work in the bakery, and my brothers and I also didn't. In fact, my mother insisted that we never learn baking, as she didn't want our wives to sleep alone the way she had to. In those days they didn't use preservatives, so all the baking was done at night for morning sales and delivery.

In addition, there were the two truck drivers, Fritz and Speedy (who always got tickets), and usually one or two hired bakers. One of them was a Mr. Irving, who was friendly with my father, Shulim, who told funny stories about him. One was that he took naps on the flour bags and was forever covered with white flour dust. Another was about the time he brought a whole cooked chicken to work for his lunch, when his usual lunch was a meager sandwich. My father asked Mr. Irving why the change. He answered that his wife had cooked the chicken for their children, but there seemed to be something wrong with it, so she gave it to him.

There was one other employee that I remember. She was a little black lady who cleaned up after each shift. Her job required her to come to work about three or four in the morning, meaning that she walked through a very dangerous neighborhood in the dark. However, she was quite safe, because she kept about ten dogs, mostly big ones, and they came to work with her and waited in the truck yard behind the bakery until she left.

There were other Jewish bakeries in Jamaica. One was the Eagle Bakery, about two blocks from ours, and Bloom's bakery, not much further away. The owner, Mr. Bloom, lived on our block (South Road), and was a very pleasant man who always seemed to be dressed just coming from work. The Eagle Bakery and Bloom's were smaller than ours, and our bakery seemed to have a lock on the wholesale business, including the leading Jewish restaurant in town, Bandler's, on Sutphin Boulevard. Sometime Sender drove one of the trucks.

I don't know about the year-round business in Long Branch, but the summer was a busy season since Long Branch is on the ocean, and those days was a kind of upscale resort. One of their customers was Jack Dempsey, the heavyweight champion, and they sold bread to the hotels. My dad (Shulim) said he saved the money he earned there to help bring the family of his wife-to-be to America. He said he made \$100 a week then...at a dollar an hour. This was about 1920.

The Mavens

When the three Herschlag baker brothers attended a wedding, they were always seated together, and the first thing they would do is sample the bread, and usually one would pronounce, "A gut shtickel broit." (A good piece of bread).

Products

I am told that Arthur Becker recalls the bakery selling donuts on Saturday night. I'm sure he's correct, but my father never brought any donuts home, so I have no memory of that. The products of the bakery were rye bread (including long loaves of sandwich rye), pumpernickel, challah, seeded rolls, onion rolls, onion sheets (tsibilleh pletzlach), crumb buns and raisin buns.

It should be noted that the Herschlag bakery did not make bagels in this country, as they had in Poland, since bagels were a very small specialty in those days. It's hard to believe that, when today it's a universal staple, but ethnic food was not part of the national menu until after World War II (except, perhaps for Chinese restaurant food).

Jewish Tradition

In Jewish communities in Europe the bakery was an important institution. As it was forbidden to cook on the Sabbath, every Friday families would cook a stew of meat, potatoes and other vegetables (called tshulent), and deliver it in a big kettle to the bakery, where it was kept in a warm oven until it was picked up late Saturday so the family could have a hot post-Sabbath dinner. Tshulent also became a favorite dish on its own.

There was a little room in the bakery where they kept the "starter." The room was just a big closet with concrete walls and no light, and the starter was yeast, which was stuck to the wall and allowed to grow, so that from time to time a handful could be scooped out for a new batch of bread. Starter has to come from somewhere, and it usually was brought to America in a wooden box by a baker who wanted to go into business in America. It was like a rabbi bringing a Torah. If another baker needed starter to open his business, any baker who had starter was obliged by tradition to give him some. I personally believe that the special taste of real Jewish rye bread owes itself to the starter. I don't think it can be duplicated.