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The Bagel Economy: What An Iconic Urban Food Can Teach Us About Immigrant Life in New York City, 1880-1910

Jamie S. Feigenbaum
urban5@fordham.edu

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THE BAGEL ECONOMY:
What An Iconic Urban Food Can Teach Us About Immigrant Life in New York City,
1880-1910

By

Jamie S. Feigenbaum
B.S., Cornell University, 2009
M.A., Fordham University, 2011

THESIS
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Preface

This project grew out of two of my interests: informal economies in the urban environment and breakfast foods. As an avid and discerning bagel consumer, I originally devised a study that would reveal, once and for all, if the water used to make New York bagels was really *the* distinct characteristic that made New York bagels different from other bagels. Having grown up in the watershed village of Croton-on-Hudson, New York, home of the Croton Reservoir, which provides drinking water to Manhattan, I was brought up with a bubbling sense of pride concerning my little town's role in hydrating the all-important city.

From an environmental history perspective, my hometown exists as a picturesque, lush and populated area *because* of its proximity to a major metropolis. Legally, the parks where I grew up are protected to keep the water supply safe. Families moved to the area because of its scenic environment and quick commute via the Metro-North commuter line. Following the water was also a thesis idea of mine early on: writing a history of the Bryant Park/New York Public Library block, since the current cite of the NYPL was originally the holding area for the Croton Reservoir water in the era before indoor plumbing was prevalent.

While researching the history of bagels in New York City, however, I was intrigued when I learned that bagel bakers had organized, and eventually unionized powerfully enough to monopolize the New York City handmade bagel market. Having always had a soft spot in my heart for the decades in history when immigration to the United States from Europe was highest—the heyday of Ellis Island—I decided to devote my efforts to gaining a better understanding of how bagels came to be produced in New York City by Eastern-European Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side of

Manhattan, and then where those workers found the strength and motivation to attempt to unionize.

I spent my last Master's Thesis studying the informal urban economy of the Crack Epidemic in New York City in the 1980s, and I quickly recognized that the baking and selling of bagels in the urban economy had elements of both the formal and informal economy. All I needed at that point was a way to link my interest in the unionization of bagel bakers to the informal urban bagel economy. Luckily, I was in a wonderful sociology class on Global Cities, taught at Fordham by Jessica Shimmin, a visiting professor from NYU, and one topic of the course focused on how marginalized groups in urban areas where social welfare is low or non-existent, turn to informal work to survive hard times.

There is was: a new way to look at the Lower East Side Jewish immigrant population between 1880-1910 as an impoverished subset of society in a busy urban center without governmental social supports, and still, unlike in globalizing cities today, the workers were unionizing. I had so many questions that I wanted to answer, but the main one is fills the following study: How did the urban environment of the Lower East Side of New York City between 1880-1910 lend itself to informal market economies, such as those revolving around the early baking and selling of bagels, and what elements of urban life allowed bagel production to evolve into a formalized, and eventually unionized, industry?

I am incredibly thankful to everyone who has supported me throughout my time at Fordham. I have been fortunate enough to have some wonderful teachers here, including my mentor, Dr. Mark Naison, and my second reader on this project, Dr. Annika

Hinze. Additionally, I am thankful to Kim Dana Kupperman, who taught Writing About Place in Fall 2012, as well as Dr. Jeffery Cohen, Dr. Steven Stoll, Dr. Christopher Rhomberg, Dr. Rosemary Wakeman, and Dean Nancy Busch. I have learned so many valuable lessons at Fordham, and made lasting, caring friendships. My experience in graduate school would not have been the same without the people who taught me, assisted me, learned with me, and supported me. As a result, I would like to thank Mary Loane for her edits to Chapter 2, and my boyfriend, Joshua Swidzinski, for his edits to Chapters 1 and 3. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family; without them, my time at Fordham would not have been possible. I'm so grateful.

Jamie Feigenbaum
December 2012

Introduction

Bagels in their modern form are ubiquitous across America today, having been popularized by their placement in grocery store freezers starting in the 1960s.¹ But they differ from the bagel that came to America in the late-1800s with Eastern-European immigrants, which was smaller, denser, less-sweet, and offered in only two flavors: plain and slated.² Bagels in those days came in simpler flavors than the ever-evolving flavors now available to consumers, but they were much more grueling to produce. As many scholars of Jewish baking practices have pointed out, the production process—involving forming a dense tube of dough into a circle and boiling it before toasting it in an oven—was performed under horrific working conditions, for extremely low wages, in festering basements of tenement apartment buildings on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.³

In fact, the history of the bagel is fraught with tales of struggle. In her broad history of the bagel, Maria Balinska, a BBC journalist, recounts speculation that the bagel first appeared in Poland after the Battle of Vienna in 1683, as a stirrup-shaped baked good presented by a baker to King Jan Sobieski to honor the defeat of the Ottomans by the king's cavalry.⁴ While this origin-story of the first bagel has not been verified, if true, it would mean that bagels and coffee, left by the Ottoman Turkish troops, would have appeared in Europe at the end of the same battle, a result almost too tasty to be true.

Regardless of whether the tale is correct, Balinska does present evidence suggesting that the bagel could have arisen in Poland. Noting Polish legislation that

¹ Maria Balinska, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 149-164.

² Matthew Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel" *Harvard Review* 28 (2005): 95.

³ Paul Brenner, "Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers' Union 1881-1914," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Studies* 18 (1983), 39-121; Balinska, *The Bagel*, 96-119; Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 92-93.

⁴ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 37-41.

forbade Jews from cooking bread by baking it, she hypothesizes that the boiling step in bagel production was introduced as an ingenious way to circumvent the ban—the dough was cooked by boiling and went into the oven only for crisping the outside.⁵ Thus, it seems feasible that the recipe for bagels might have originated in Poland, or at least become a popular food among Jews there as a result of the baking ban.

No matter where bagels originated, they made their way to the United States, either physically or in recipe form, with Eastern-European Jewish immigrants, at the end of the nineteenth century, and they became a source of income and, ultimately, an iconic New York City food.⁶ As a result, studying the history of bagel production and distribution in New York City is valuable because it can lead to an understanding of the dynamics between economics and immigrant lives in the early-twentieth century. Through the lens of bagel economics—early production, distribution, consumer demands, and eventual unionization of the industry—it will be possible to better understand the lives, goals, and efforts of a subset of Eastern-European Jewish immigrants in New York City. Through the use of archival materials, secondary sources, and literature, this project will answer the question: How did the urban environment of the Lower East Side of New York City between 1880-1910 lend itself to informal market economies, such as those revolving around the early baking and selling of bagels, and what elements of urban life allowed bagel production to evolve into a formalized, and eventually unionized, industry?

In order to answer these questions, this study will follow the model of Louis Wirth, an American sociologist and member of the Chicago School, who's influential contribution to the field of sociology was having studies of urbanism include three

⁵ Ibid., 17-43.

⁶ Ibid., 97; Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 92.

interrelated perspectives, which he defined as, “the physical structure, comprising a population base; a system of social organization, involving a characteristic social structure and related patterns of social relationships; and a set of attitudes and ideas of individuals or groups engaged in or operating under forms of collective behavior and/or social control.”⁷ For the purposes of this study, these elements will be referred to as the spatial, the political and industrial, and the social, and they will be the respective topics of the individual chapters. In these chapters, the bagel will be followed from its arrival in New York City with Eastern-European immigrants, through its position in the informal street economy of the Lower East Side where it was sold by poor and hungry Jews to poor and hungry Jews (and later to other ethnicities),⁸ then to its formal bakery production, where it was baked day and night in tenement basements by laborers, and finally into its early years of organized production, as bakery employees attempted unionization and strikes in concert with other bakers’ unions and the Lower East Side community. Eventually, although not until after the World War I, the bagel bakers got their own union, the International Bagel Bakers Union, and New York City bakers got their own local, Bagel Bakers Local No. 338, which held a monopoly on hand-made bagel production in New York City for a number of decades.⁹ But Bagel Bakers Local No. 338 would never have gotten its monopoly if not for the efforts of earlier generations of Jewish immigrants arriving in Manhattan, working grueling jobs to keep their loved ones surviving for one more day.

⁷ Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (July 1938), 18-19.

⁸ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 151.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 121-155; Goodman, “The Rise and Fall of the Bagel,” 91-93.

The following sections of this chapter are meant to provide useful information to help frame the rest of the project. First, it will introduce the world of New York City that Eastern-European Jewish immigrants moved in to when they arrived in the New World, including the spatial, political, industrial, social and economic environment that existed in their new neighborhood, the Tenth Ward, an area dictated by census collectors to denote the blocks bounded by Bowery, Rivington, Norfolk, and Division streets, respectively, to the north, east, south, and west.¹⁰ Following that, this introduction will attempt a working definition of the distinctions between employment in the informal sector of the economy and employment in the formal sector. Finally, it will end with an explanation of the theoretical framework for this investigation, including a discussion about its usefulness for explaining aspects of urban life today, as well as in the past. Part of this study will follow the production and distribution of the bagel in order to arrive at a better understanding of how informal economies arise and evolve in the urban environment when governmental social welfare programs are minimal or non-existent, as they were in the United States in the eras before the New Deal.¹¹

Jewish Life on the Lower East Side

¹⁰ “Johnson’s Map of New York City” (New York: Johnson and Ward Co., 1864), 29-30.

¹¹ The New Deal legislation, passed in 1933, were economic measures, introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to counteract the effects of the Great Depression. The Great Depression, which began in 1929 with the Stock Market Crash, was an era known for worldwide economic depression and mass unemployment which were causing devastating social circumstances. The New Deal is a changing point in American history, since it was the first time that the United States government developed social programming and offered welfare to citizens. The 2008 book, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, by Lizabeth Cohen, makes the argument that when the Depression hit, ethnic banks, ethnic-based mutual benefit societies, and religious charities were left with no way to help the staggering number of persons in need, and that it was trade unions that helped industrial workers in Chicago until the effects of the New Deal went into effect. Thus, immigrants, who were used to operating collectively, no longer needed ethnic ties to be as tight. Union membership and government aid provided alternatives to immigrant social networks.

Before it is possible to discuss the importance of bagel baking in the urban environment, it is essential to envision the experience of Jewish immigrants to New York City. One must try to imagine what motivated millions of Eastern-European Jews to leave their homes for a new place, sight unseen, and try to grasp for one's self how you might feel, and what you might do, if you were placed in their situation. While over a hundred years might stand between their lives and yours, their desires are not unlike your own.

For just a moment, close your eyes and try to imagine what the immigration experience for Eastern-European Jews was like at the end of the nineteenth century. Imagine you are one of them, and you are leaving your home in Russia (or modern-day Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Belarus, or almost any other area in Eastern-Europe) and fleeing in the night, sometimes with your family, and sometimes despite their wishes, for a new land, far away from the anti-Semitic pogroms that had recently increased in frequency and aggression. Imagine leaving behind your dead, buried in the land, or your farm animals not knowing who will look after them, while you take a boat for a fortnight, with only a finite amount of Kosher food to sustain you and your loved ones, traveling below the waterline in steerage, cramped with other travelers, before arriving in New York Harbor.¹² There, you might have been greeted by members of your community from back home—your *landsmanshaftn*—to whom you might have penned a letter ahead of time warning of your arrival.¹³ How comforting it must have felt to arrive on a different continent, in a city crowded beyond any you had ever seen before, where you did not speak the language, to be greeted by an old neighbor.

¹² Jane Ziegelman, *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2011), 133; Meredith Tax, *Rivington Street* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Abraham Cahan, "Yekl," in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (New York: Dover Books, 1970).

¹³ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 103; Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 22.

Maybe then you were taken to live in a tenement house, in slum conditions, without running water or heat, which you shared with people you might never have met before, on Essex Street, Orchard Street, Hester Street—any of the streets forming the Jewish ghetto of Manhattan in the years between 1880 and 1910, an area referred to now as the Lower East Side, but back then the Tenth Ward, the Jewish ghetto, or simply the Lower East.¹⁴ Try to imagine the smell of the streets, the dark shadows cast by the buildings, the pigs, geese and dogs which roamed free. In order to afford to live in this new land, you are forced to find a new form of employment (maybe, you were a Talmudic scholar back in Russia, but in America that is not considered a viable profession), so you look for work—any work—in order to keep your family fed, clothed, and sheltered in this foreign place.

Meredith Tax, in her fictional novel, *Rivington Street*, does exactly this—she imagines the immigration and assimilation experience of the Levy family, who fled Kishinev, Russia, in 1903, in response to the Easter Day pogrom that killed over fifty Jews over several days of horrific violence, including the rape and murder of the eldest - Levy daughter, Rosa. In the novel, which Tax wrote after many years of research in some of the same New York City-based archives consulted in this investigation, Mrs. Levy, like many immigrating Jews at that time, chose America for its promise as a Jewish safe harbor of political and religious freedom, as well as for its reputation for unbounded economic opportunities, including many professions that were barred to Jews in Russia.¹⁵ The family—mother, father, and the remaining two, younger daughters—settle originally in a tenement apartment on Bowery, without electricity or running water, but they work

¹⁴ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*; Cahan, “Yekl”; Tax, *Rivington Street*.

¹⁵ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 77; Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 133.

hard—the mother taking on piece-work garment jobs to do from the home, and the father, a former revolutionary, becoming a pushcart salesman—and soon they elevate themselves to a nicer apartment, still in the same neighborhood of the Lower East Side, but this time with water, electricity, and room they can rent to a boarder, on Rivington Street.¹⁶ The physical location where the family lives—in the Tenth Ward and on Rivington Street—greatly affects how they adapt to New York, dictates their social aspirations, job opportunities, and community ties.

According to government records on immigration, 1,028,588 Jews arrived in the United States just between the years 1900 and 1910. Of that number, the majority came from the *Pale of Jewish settlement*, a geographic designation, established in 1791, under the rule of Catherine the Great, in an effort to quarantine and isolate the Jews, and to keep them from traveling and working freely within the newly expanded Russian Empire. This resettlement called for an uprooting of millions of Jewish families who had been living both in rural and urban parts of the empire, and forced them to resettle on new lands, normally in urban ghettos outside nearby cities.

Jewish migration from Eastern-Europe to America, however, began in the 1880s in response to a wave of pogroms that targeted the Jewish population and labeled them as further outside of Christian culture than they had been perceived before that. In 1881, in present-day Ukraine, rioting mobs destroyed Jewish homes and property, killing dozens of Jews, and scaring the whole community. Small pogroms continued for the next twenty years, but it was not until the 1903, Easter Day pogrom in Kishinev, that families, like Meredith Tax's Levy family, finally saw a dire need to give up their homes, jobs,

¹⁶ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 73-145.

extended family, and community in Eastern-Europe and flee to a presumably safer, freer and richer life in America.¹⁷

Many ways of making money, both in the formal and informal economy, presented themselves to newly immigrated Jews to the Lower East Side. Much scholarship and fictional writing has been devoted to understanding the Jews' involvement within the formal garment industry of New York at that time, where women, young girls, and sometimes men, worked in factories under unhealthy and unfair conditions.¹⁸ Social organizing and publicity about their conditions led the garment workers to successfully organize, unionize, strike, and gain recognition of their unions from their employers during first decade and a half of the twentieth century, a time, it should be noted, before employers were legally bound to recognize unions as an entity within their shops.¹⁹ As a result, the story of the Jewish garment workers has dominated the industrial narrative of Jewish immigrant working experience, overshadowing other experiences of Jewish immigrants of the Lower East Side during this time period.

In fact, a staggering amount of scholarly work concerning Jewish immigration to America up to this point has covered the unionization of garment workers,²⁰ the revolutionary social communities of Eastern-Europeans in the United States,²¹ and the

¹⁷ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 133.

¹⁸ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 145-257; Cahan, "Yekl"; Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ The National Labor Relations Act, or the Wagner Act of 1935, was created by Congress to protect the right of workers to unionize. The National Labor Relations Board was created to enforce the act. The act guarantees employees the right to self-organize, choose their own representatives, and bargain collectively. The legislation requires employers to recognize unions.

²⁰ See: Tax, *Rivington Street*, 145-257; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*.

²¹ Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881-1905* (Albany: SUNY Series in American Labor History, 2000).

economic success of Jewish families in the time-span of just one generation,²² but relatively little has been published on the Jewish baking industry, including the bagel economy.

A reason for this oversight might be that the bagel bakers were exclusively men,²³ and unlike the garment workers—who were mostly young and female—the larger public was less aware and less sympathetic to the stories and concerns of immigrant men. Literary works of fiction, both written in the time period and later, often chose Jewish garment workers as their protagonists, exploring their social and home lives, sometimes focusing on their union involvement or work environment,²⁴ but no fictional works have featured bagel bakers in America, even though the bagel is an iconic Jewish food, and a symbol of modern New York City culinary delights.

The nonfiction realm is sparse as well, and when it does address Jewish bakers, it rarely focuses on bagel baking. Notable exceptions, however, include Maria Balinska's book, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread*, a short essay in the *Harvard Review* by Matthew Goodman and a documentary by director Joan Micklin Silver entitled, "The Bagel: An Immigrant's Story."²⁵ The history of Hebrew bakers as a whole, including their trade industries, and their occasional efforts in unionizing, was the topic of an article by scholar Paul Brenner in 1983. While, the *Jewish Bakers' Voice*, the journal of bakery owners, which ran from at least 1932 through the 1950s, addressed trade issues concerning Jewish bakers, not only in New York City but across the

²² See: Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

²³ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 130.

²⁴ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 145-257; Cahan, "Yekl," 1-92.

²⁵ Balinska, *The Bagel*; Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel."

country.²⁶ Other sources on Jewish baking, both published and archival, have been concerned with New York City bakers' unions in general, which included German bakers and German-Jewish bakers relatively early in their history, as early as the mid-1850s, but did not include Yiddish-speaking, Eastern-European Jews until decades later.²⁷ These archival materials—from the Center for Jewish History, which houses the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and from the New York University collection within the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives—provide a wealth of helpful information for understanding the history of the bakers unions in New York City, as well as the concerns of Jewish bakers, both as workers and as bakery owners.

Interestingly, Jewish bakeries, as well as many elements of Jewish life on the Lower East Side in the 1890s, were run by German-speaking Jews, who arrived in the wave of immigration between 1850 and 1880, following the Revolution of 1848. These immigrants established themselves enough to build or buy their tenement apartments, saved money, assimilated and moved uptown, out of the slums, to places like Gramercy Park and Murray Hill, as soon as possible.²⁸ But when they moved uptown, many kept ownership of the tenement apartment buildings that they had built or bought, renting them out to the later-arriving Eastern-European Jews, and acting as landlords, owning the spaces where Yiddish-speaking Jews would rent in the late-1800s. Moreover, the German-speaking Jews also maintained their ownership and operating powers over the

²⁶ Brenner, "Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers' Union," 39-121; *Jewish Bakers' Voice* (YIVO 15/8699A); *Jewish Bakers' Voice* (YIVO 15/8699 1932).

²⁷ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 42-43; *Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers International Union, Local 3 Records* (WAG 135).

²⁸ Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown*.

neighborhood saloons where Eastern-European Jews would socialize or look for work, as well as the shops and bakeries that employed the newest waves of Jewish immigrants.²⁹

In order to understand what life was like for Eastern-European immigrants on the Lower East Side, it is important to understand the structure and functions of the tenement apartment houses. They were not simply used as homes for immigrants, they were also money-makers for landlords and offered commercial spaces for businesses. An example of their economic prowess can be seen in a quote by the Superintendent of Buildings, from 1862, when he provided a definition of tenements as buildings where, “the greatest amount of profit is sought to be realized from the least possible amount of space, with little or no regard for the health, comfort, or protection of the lives of the tenants.”³⁰ This grim definition of tenement living provides an accurate example of how space and economics came together in tenement building, with health being structurally sacrificed in order for money to be made, a tradeoff that would plague the bagel baking industry.

The tenement building that stands at 97 Orchard Street is now a national historic site, a preserved building, as well as the home of the Tenement Museum. Built in 1863, this five-story building with a raised basement area, stands in as a typical model for a tenement house on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which many Eastern-European immigrants would have lived in between 1880-1910 as a result of wanting to be near countrymen and work while simultaneously unable to afford to live in other areas of the city.³¹

²⁹ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 5.

³⁰ *Communications from the Superintendent of Buildings, Transmitting His Semi-Annual Report for the Half Year Ending December 31st, 1862*, 12.

³¹ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 2-12.

As a result of its preservation, much is known about 97 Orchard Street, its construction, and its tenets over the years. Five stories tall with a squat basement, which may have been used as a commercial space, 97 Orchard Street is a quintessential example of how tenement buildings were a hybrid of private life and consumer space. In its original form, the building had twenty, three-room apartments, with four apartments per floor, two apartments in the front of the building and two apartments to the rear. The entire square footage of an apartment totaled approximately three hundred and twenty-five square feet, and yet, some households contained seven or more people, some of whom might have been family, but others who might have just been boarders, living in the apartment to reduce the rent.³²

The finite resource of space in New York City's Tenth Ward, coupled with the increase in population as new immigrants arrived in a steady flow, to say nothing of the poverty of the masses, meant that living and working on the Lower East Side was almost always a competition, most certainly for money and jobs, but even for resources as simple as fresh air.

An additional burden placed on Eastern-European Jews living on the Lower East Side was the fact that not only did the German Jews serve as their landlords and employers, but they also held the purse strings in their mutual benefit societies and religious-based charities. This was because most German Jews maintained their connections to the synagogues and religious centers that they had originally founded upon their own arrival in America, and as a result, wealthier German Jews and poorer Eastern-European Jews were part of the same religious community. In fact, most new

³² "Citizens' Association of New York," *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizens' Association of New York Upon the Sanitary Conditions of the City* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1865).

immigrants used their *landsmanshaftn*, or Old World community groups, to find work, such that many bosses came from the same towns in the Old Country as their workers, but might have been in different stages of the assimilation process and in different economic brackets. This meant that when conflicts would arise over money or wages, it was countrymen versus countrymen, and tensions could form. As Balinska writes, “Landsmanshaftn were the mainstays of social life on the Lower East Side,” and loyalty to the Old Country trumped worker solidarity for many years even when working conditions were poor.³³

Moreover, in the years in question, there was no state-funded social welfare system in place in American. In fact, it was not until after the Great Depression that the federal government took any responsibility whatsoever of the social welfare of its citizenry. Therefore, each ethnic community was left to look out for its own, and social communities became incredibly important to the wellbeing of immigrant groups, including Eastern-European Jews. In hard times, a Jewish family might have turned to local, religious charities for supplemental food or funds, which might have been collected from the wealthier German Jews uptown. As a result of their funding, the German Jews controlled the synagogues and the mutual benefit societies.

As can be seen, on the one hand, the German-speaking Jews were supporting the Eastern-European Jews through religious funds and job opportunities; while on the other hand, they were the bosses and the landlords, paying low wages and then collecting the same money back. Thus, when tensions arouse between Jewish workers and Jewish

³³ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 103.

owners they often had effects in the social realm.³⁴ Unionization of workers in certain industries, such as bagel baking, came with a slew of social consequences and increased divisions within the Jewish community, which by 1905 was already fracturing from within, although it was viewed, for better or worse, by the outside world as homogeneous.

As discussed above, Yiddish-speaking, Eastern-European Jewish immigrants often came to America as a result of political oppression in the Old Country, and many brought with them a commitment to social activism, which emphasized social justice and communal support. More than just a religious affiliation kept the Eastern-European Jews community-minded, since many immigrants were not religiously conservative or particularly observant once they arrived in America. Instead, they were concerned with issues of justice, and took to social organizing in many industries.³⁵ Strikes and boycotts came to play an important role in early unionization efforts for Jewish bakers, and they probably would have failed without the support of the Jewish community behind the workers, or without individuals taking it upon themselves to pay a little more, or go without, so that justice could be won for others. Additionally, Eastern-European Jews were often notoriously resistant to the idea of accepting the charity available to them, associating it with social stigma, but saw it as the responsibility of the community to help those in need, a paradoxical state for a community of the extremely poor. Thus, many Jewish charities operated quietly, while many Jewish adults took whatever work was available to them in order to avoid having to ask for assistance, even if that work was dangerous, unhealthy, or outside of the formal sector.

³⁴ Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881-1905* (Albany: SUNY Series in American Labor History, 2000), 15-60.

³⁵ Tax, *Rivington Street*; Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition*, 1-10.

Formal vs. Informal Market

What is missing from both the historical and fictional narrative of Jewish life in America are the various ways outside of formal industry that Jewish immigrants made money after arriving in New York, including how those informal industries operated, and how those workers used their larger community to keep wages up and conditions livable.

Jobs such as pushcart salesman,³⁶ shop clerk, garment worker and baker were some of the ways that adult men earned money to feed their families. But many people also found other, informal ways of making money on the Lower East Side, such as women who farmed geese in the stairwells and ground floors of the tenement houses,³⁷ or families that did textile piece-work for the garment trade from home, turning their small living quarters into make-shift sweatshops,³⁸ as well as older widows and young boys who took to peddling items, such as bagels, in the street markets.³⁹ These informal jobs were sometimes illegal and punishable by hefty fines if workers got caught by the police. As a result, work in the informal sector is notoriously difficult to gather data on, which might explain why informal workers have not received a lot of academic focus, even though their roles in the economy and the money they brought in for their families might be the most important money that changed hands on the Lower East Side at that time, given that it was often going into the hands' of the neediest persons in the neighborhood. Hence, this paper will expand on the limited research that has been done on the Jewish baking industry, in part by looking at the production and distribution of Jewish bagels in

³⁶ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 143-149.

³⁷ "Unusual Methods of Livelihood, Queer Feminine Vocations," *Current Opinion*, August 1903, 202; Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 115-116.

³⁸ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 78.

³⁹ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 80-83.

New York City as one, inclusive bagel economy, part of which was formalized and part of which was informal in nature. This focus will help to clarify the economic and industrial aspects of how Jewish immigrants survived in their new country.

To study the bagel economy as a whole, and locate the transition from an informal bagel economy to formalized bagel economy, the distinction between “informal” and “formal” must be defined. This is not an easy task, since the definitions of these words, as well as the theories behind them, have changed over time within the field of sociology. According to a paper written by sociologist Keith Hart in the early-1970s, the distinction between formal and informal sectors lay in the type of employment a person held, such that someone was either a wage-earner (formal economy) or self-employed (informal economy).⁴⁰ However, this definition is overly simplistic.

Around the same time, a similar two-sector dichotomy between informal and formal work was published by the International Labor Organization (ILO), which chose to shift the focus of the distinction from the social life of the worker (i.e., where the money came from) to the form of production (i.e., the ways money was made). According to the classifications by the ILO, the informal sector referred to the ways of making money carried out by, “petty-traders, street hawkers, shoeshine boys and other groups ‘underemployed’ on the streets of the big towns, and includes a range of wage-earners and self-employed persons, male as well as female.”⁴¹ The report articulated why these activities are part of the informal economy, saying these roles are characterized by the ease of entry for a person obtaining that job, the small scale of operation, the

⁴⁰ Keith Hart, “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana,” *Modern African Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 1973), 68.

⁴¹ *Employment, Incomes and Equality: A Strategy for Increasing Productive Employment in Kenya* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1972), 5.

utilization of skills acquired outside of the formalized educational system, that the jobs occurred in unregulated, competitive markets and were characterized by personal or family ownership of the economic enterprise. The ILO applied this definition of informal workers mostly to immigrants and other marginalized persons attempting to survive in a city where they had recently migrated, where they might not speak the language, or where other, formalized occupations might not be open to them.

While the ILO's definition operated for many years, more recently, particularly in Latin American Studies, the internal structure and function of the informal sector has been scrutinized and debated by two camps. One camp has focused on informality as defined by "particular groups of individuals and/or specific types of enterprise," while the other camp has taken to studying the informal sector more generally.⁴² Ultimately, this split has led to two different theories about informal economies: one that considers informality to be a marginalized sector of the economy for persons who use the work to seek temporary survival in the urban setting, and another that considers informal work to be closely connected to the formal economy such that it is "an essential and permanent" stilt that works below the formal economy. In this latter view, workers might take part in the informal or the formal economy, or even both, at various times in life depending on his or her needs.⁴³

Within the context of this study, the informal economy will be viewed and discussed with this duality in mind: both as a survival technique for the urban poor, as

⁴² Sheldon Annis and Jeffery Franks, "The Idea, Ideology and Economics of the Informal Sector: The Case of Peru," *Grassroots Development* 13, no. 1 (1989), 10. As quoted in Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad, editors, *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia* (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), 11.

⁴³ Roy and AlSayyad, *Urban Informality*, 11.

well as an unyielding shadow of the formal sector, since these two ideas about the informal are not mutually exclusive. For example, a person can come from a marginalized, immigrant group, take occasional jobs within the formal economy if they exist, say seasonal garment work, but at other times, or even at the same time, raise and sell geese in their tenement house as part of the informal economy in order to make enough money to keep their family fed. The situation can be complicated.

For the purposes of this study, the transitional point between “informal” and “formal” work in the bagel economy is probably most-closely aligned with the ILO’s definition: informal work was done by bagel peddlers in the street markets; persons who earned money on a small scale daily; jobs that had no requirements except that the peddler collect the bagels in the morning and return money to the baker later that day; the price of the bagels was not set or standard in the market: and peddlers essentially worked for themselves. More formal work in the bagel economy was performed by the bagel bakers, since the job of baking was specialized work that required training under a boss as well as contracts concerning payment and lodgings. This distinction between informal and formal bagel work is in keeping with the ILO’s examples of informal workers being petty-traders in the street regardless of gender. Usually, in fact, informal bagel peddling seemed to be work done by young boys and older women, and rarely anyone in-between.⁴⁴

This division of labor based on age and gender is familiar in sociology, particularly in developing urban areas in Latin American, the Middle East, and South Asia in the twenty-first century. To gain a better understanding as to why it might have been seen on the streets on the Lower East Side over a century ago, this thesis turns to the

⁴⁴ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 80.

theoretical framework established by scholars of urban informality. While historical scholars⁴⁵ and culinary reporters⁴⁶ have discussed the formation of Jewish bakers' unions and the history of bagel production, the methodology that this investigation brings to this literature does a better job of assessing the spatial, political, and social contexts surrounding the informal and formal bagel economies in the urban setting, as well as targeting how formalization may have arisen for informal workers.

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned briefly above, the theoretical framework for this project was established by sociologists studying informal economies in cities of the *global south* today.⁴⁷ By applying a theoretical framework that has arisen out of sociological practices observed around the world in the present, and applying it to an historic time in the United States that had a similar social infrastructure (i.e., heavy migration into cities run by governments with almost non-existent social welfare systems), this project explores the circumstances that led to the growth of informal markets on the streets of New York City in a more ecological way than historians have. The topic of bagel baking has not been studied with a methodology like this before, and the benefit is that it will allow for an alternate examination of what led poor, Jewish men to take grueling bakery jobs, as well as to a better understanding of the sorts of social, political, industrial and economic conditions that led the bagel bakers to various attempts at unionization. Chapter 3 also

⁴⁵ Brenner, "Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers' Union."

⁴⁶ Balinska, *The Bagel*.

⁴⁷ Roy and Alsayyad, *Urban Informality*, 1.

presents an argument for how the bagel bakers went about gaining community support for their cause.

By combining literature, history, and sociology, this project breaks-down the limitations of specific disciplinary methodologies and makes it possible to see more fully the Jewish immigrant experience in New York City between the 1880 and 1910. Applying the lens of a modern sociological urban methodology reveals the dynamics that existed between the urban immigrant life on the Lower East Side and informal economies.

The methodological framework used here is the same one discussed by the urban sociologists Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad in the 2004 book they edited, entitled *Urban Informality*.⁴⁸ While their book focuses on developing cities in regions of the world in the twenty-first century, their framework of examining the spatial, political and industrial, and the social elements of urban life applies to the time and place being investigated here because some of the economic conditions in developing cities today are reminiscent of the slum-living of the Lower East Side around the turn of the ninetieth into the twentieth century. Roy and Alsayyad's edited collection presents a volume of essays by various urban sociologists around the world who all set out to test the theory that globalizing cities see a rise in informal urban customs and practices among the poor as a result of hard economic times.

The initial framework for the studies in their book grew out of phenomena that were observed among the poor in Latin American cities.⁴⁹ The scholars had blamed the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

difficult economic times experienced by the people on Latin America governments that provided little-to-no social welfare programming for the needy, but they decided to expand the scope of their work by examining informal economies in developing cities beyond Latin America, seeing if they held-up transnationally.⁵⁰ By including book chapters from developing cities in the Middle East and South Asia, they found that in every developing city included in the book there was evidence of informal worlds operating just below, and sometimes propping up, the formal order. They also found a stark line between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” with clear spatial divisions between wealthy communities and slum living. However the most striking transnational finding was that in these places the national governments provide almost no state support to the people, such that the people ended up fending for themselves within their own impoverished communities.

Based on these conclusions, the framework for their book applies to the Lower East Side of Manhattan between the years 1880-1910 for a number of reasons. That time period saw a wave of poor immigrants from all over Europe, including Jews from Eastern-Europe, Italians, and the Irish.⁵¹ These poor newcomers, by economic necessity were normally forced to set up homes in the slum conditions of the tenement houses on the Lower East Side. At that time New York City had a stark spatial divide between the wealthy and poor, with the wealthy living uptown, and America as a whole lacked a governmental system that took responsibility for social welfare.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹ Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Dennis Judd and Todd Swanstrom, *City Politics: The Political Economy of Urban America*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 46-70.

⁵² Judd and Swanstrom, *City Politics*, 46-98.

While none of the cities studied in *Urban Informality* were in developed nations, it is possible the same phenomenon surrounding the formation of informal economies that is happening today in developing cities happened in the United States, particularly in New York City, just in a previous era. While *Urban Informality* situates itself within the discussions of globalization occurring today, what cities like Istanbul and Johannesburg are actually facing is, in part, increased growth as a result of industrialization. The current global economic situation is one that leads to rapid industrialization in cities looking to increase the wealth of their city or nation in the global market. On the ground, however, industry is what is causing people looking for employment to migrate to areas of urban development. Socially, these migrant groups are often marginalized within the city society, or even come originally from groups of marginal standing in the nation, for geographic, economic, or cultural reasons. While migrant groups arrive in cities looking for industry jobs, they might find employment rates lower than they were hoping for. As a result, they turn to informal work. In this way, the industrialization of New York City in the 1800s fits well with the sociological frameworks for discussing urban globalization trends.

By applying the modern sociological framework for examining informal economies in urban areas on immigrant groups living during the time period between 1880-1910 in New York City, this thesis examines how poor immigrants, who were forced to rely on their social communities and neighbors for welfare, turned to jobs in the informal economy, or grueling jobs in the formal economy, to support their families in times of need.

The bagel economy is only one such example of a bifurcated informal and formal economy that arose in a poor, congested, slum area of New York City, the Lower East Side. Baking played an important role in the day-to-day survival of Jewish immigrants because poor people needed cheap food.⁵³ The baking industry of the Lower East Side evolved out of the demand for breads and the physical limitations of the tenement kitchens.⁵⁴ With no ovens, no space, and no water to spare for cooking, baking was one of the activities that was forced to move out of the home and into the urban market space.

Jewish bakers are a perfect test-case for this methodological framework because even if some form of governmental social support existed in New York City at that time, the Jews were the least likely to have engaged with it.⁵⁵ Thus, they are a population that would most closely resemble persons living in a city of the global south today, where little-to-no governmental assistance is offered.

In this thesis, Jewish bakers—primarily bagel bakers—offer an opportunity to examine the economic and social lives of immigrants to New York City. Many other industries and nationalities existed in New York City at this time, but Jewish immigrants stand out as presenting both close-knit communities and operating outside the governmental order of Tammany Hall that helped Irish immigrants secure civil service jobs.⁵⁶ Many Jews came to America after facing persecution in their homelands, so they were wary of government officials and charitable hand-outs.⁵⁷ While various scholars have told their own versions of Jewish success in America through the development of

⁵³ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

⁵⁴ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, xiv.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁶ Judd and Swanstrom, *City Politics*, 45-99.

⁵⁷ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 154.

private business, strong social and religious networks,⁵⁸ revolutionary political beliefs,⁵⁹ or garment work,⁶⁰ little has been done on the formalization of the baking industry.⁶¹ Thus, the Jewish bagel economy from the turn of the twentieth-century deserves further investigation to see how the spatial, industrial, social and economic dynamics in the urban environment interacted with the informal and formal sectors of the larger urban economy, and how the unionization of Jewish bagel bakers arose, and to what consequence.

⁵⁸ Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*; Kessner, *The Golden Door*.

⁵⁹ Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition*.

⁶⁰ Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*.

⁶¹ Balinska, *The Bagel*; Brenner, "Formative Years"; Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel."

Chapter 1: Bagels in the Basement

*Suffolk Street is in the very thick of the battle for breath.
For it lies in the heart of that part of the East Side
which has within the last two or three decades
become the Ghetto of the American metropolis,
and, indeed, the metropolis of the Ghettos of the world.
It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth
—a seething human sea ... of immigration
flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe.
Hardly a block but shelters Jews from every nook and corner...
—all come in search of fortune.⁶²*

The quotation above comes from Abraham Cahan’s short story, “Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto,” which describes life on the Lower East Side. Originally published in 1896, the story might very well have captured the zeitgeist of the neighborhood. As the quotation indicates, the Jewish quarter of Manhattan, “a vast and compact city within a city,” was overpopulated by poor, Jewish immigrants looking to make money and ensure them and their family survival in America.⁶³ Money and space have always gone hand-in-hand in New York history.⁶⁴ One cannot explore the significance of the bagel industry without understanding the spatial culture of the Lower East Side. Simply as a result of Manhattan being an island, space is a finite resource, and wealth determined who could live where and what sorts of amenities would be available. When Eastern-European Jewish immigrant arrived in the 1880s, they entered a real-estate scene that had been set for them, and it greatly influenced the bagel economy.

With space being so hard to come by, the Lower East Side made everything a competition: from wages, to living spaces, and even fresh air to breath. Cities, in fact, are

⁶² Abraham Cahan, “Yekl,” in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (New York: Dover Books, 1970), 13-14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁴ Tom Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2008).

often just that—finite spaces that force people to compete for or share limited, coveted resources. What gets shared and what gets competed for is an expression of the values of the population, while how cooperation occurs can be fascinating for urban scholars to study. Commonly shared spaces, like apartment hallways, parks, markets and streets are often the most vibrant areas of city life, but also the places most likely to become commoditized, with new ways of making money, either formally or informally arising, and adding to their vibrancy.⁶⁵

This chapter will examine the relationship between the spatial environment of the Lower East Side and the bagel economy in the late-1800s and early-1900s. When bagels could not be baked in tenement kitchens as a result of lack of space and amenities, bagel baking was forced to move outside of the home, and grew into a commercialized industry. As a result of this move, bagel production shifted from being a female activity within the home, to a male occupation performed outside of the home. Who produced bagels, and who sold them changed as the bagel economy came into being in America. Women, no longer able to make bagels in their kitchens, shifted their role to bagel consumers in the markets. Other women, normally older women or widows, became bagel peddlers, selling the male-produced bagels from the formal sector of the economy, in the street markets in order to make a little extra money as part of the informal bagel economy.

Bagels must have been a marketable good with a profitable demand in the street markets of the Lower East Side in order for the baking industry to thrive as it did. By studying the spatial influences that turned bagel baking into an industry, as well as how

⁶⁵ See: Setha M. Low, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," (1903): 12-19.

bagels were sold in the area—to whom and by whom—this chapter will reveal something about the lives and values of Eastern-European Jewish immigrants in New York City. It will also explore the influence that the spatial environment of the Lower East Side had on the American food industry, since the foods that immigrants salivated for on the Lower East Side changed the landscape of the American diet and influenced American culinary culture.

This chapter will entertain a discussion of the spatial limitations and economic pressures of the Lower East Side that led to the use of tenement basement areas for the commercial purpose of bagel production. As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, tenement apartments served as hybrid-spaces on the Lower East Side: providing private apartments, as well as supporting profit-making functions in both the formal market, with basements serving as commercial spaces or industry spaces, as well as supporting informal occupations, which helped poor immigrants make extra money from home. The bagel industry brings into focus the urban socio-economic spatial relations that were occurring on the Lower East Side, and through the lens of the bagel economy, this chapter will lead to a better understanding of how spatial limitations and economics work together in the urban environment to generate new occupations that provided job opportunities for immigrant workers in both the formal and informal sector.

While Chapter 2 of this project will focus completely on the formal sector of the bagel economy, this chapter will investigate the role of the urban spatial environment in the development of both sectors of bagel economy: formal baking and informal distribution.

In order to comprehend why Eastern-European immigrants took jobs working in terrible conditions or for little profit, it is necessary to understand that with a high population of poor immigrants all clustered within the few blocks in the Tenth Ward, there were not enough jobs to go around.⁶⁶ So not only were the tenement houses on the Lower East Side impoverished structures; they were also inhabited by some of the poorest residents in New York City at the time, the recent Eastern-European Jewish immigrants, who were forced to compete with their neighbors for income opportunities in America. As a result, these immigrants took whatever jobs they could find within walking distance to their new homes, in the formal or informal sector of the economy. Often family members pooled incomes, with each member of working age contributing what they could, including sons and wives.⁶⁷ What these penurious immigrants were willing to spend money on is a huge indication of what they desired—and bagels were often in high-demand.

This might be because they were homesick, missing the culinary comforts of the Old World. In fact, many immigrants saw the culinary demand for comfort foods as an economic opportunity in and of itself, and they became entrepreneurs focused on getting their fellow immigrants the items that would make them feel satisfied in America. Trade networks were established with laborers, importers, merchants, peddlers, and restaurant owners all doing their part to keep the immigrant population satiated, both physically and emotionally. Many of the entrepreneurial culinary jobs that these immigrants came up

⁶⁶ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

⁶⁷ See: Meredith Tax, *Rivington Street* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

with not longer exist in the urban environment, and many of them were performed by informal laborers—boys and older women—looking to make a little extra. Jobs such as German *krauthobbler*, or “cabbage-shavers, itinerant young tradesman who went door to door slicing cabbage for homemade sauerkraut,” no longer exist, and have vanished from the urban landscape of New York City, not unlike the Italian dandelion pickers, “women who scoured New York’s vacant lots for wild salad greens,” or the urban goose-farmers, Eastern-European Jewish women who raised poultry in their tenement hallways and then used every part of the goose to make little extra money in the markets.⁶⁸

On the Lower East Side of New York City, between 1880 and 1910, the predominant comfort food that Eastern-European Jewish immigrants turned to, and wanted to spend their limited money on, were baked goods, including bagels.⁶⁹ Despite all of the economic troubles these migrants faced upon arrival, they, as a community of buyers, still managed to keep the demand for bagels high. Bagels were probably a valued product since they were cheap and filling, but scarce, being incredibly difficult to make at home in a tenement kitchen which most likely lacked an oven.

Additionally, the Jewish community was densely packed into the neighborhood. While economic limitations represent one reason that Jewish immigrants all lived in the same few-block radius, close proximity for religious reasons, including culinary religious reasons, namely keeping Kosher, were an additional reason that Jews lived in close communities. Jews wishing to maintain a Kosher diet were all but required to live near

⁶⁸ Jane Ziegelman, *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2011), xiii; “Unusual Methods of Livelihood, Queer Feminine Vocations,” *Current Opinion* (August 1903): 202-203.

⁶⁹ Maria Balinska, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

other Jews to easily obtain food prepared with religious supervision.⁷⁰ While Jewish breads products, like braided challah and matzo, are essential in certain Jewish religious traditions, bagels are a secular food. The secular nature of bagels may have had implications for their production conditions, but that will be discussed in Chapter 3. For now, what is important to understand is that the need for Jewish consumers to be located in close proximity to one another for religious reasons also made them a captive audience of bagel consumers on the Lower East Side.⁷¹ Thus, the spatial arrangements of the Jewish community located the demand and market for bagels in the Tenth Ward, so that is where Jewish bakeries arose.

But it was the physical restrictions of the tenement kitchens that were the limiting factor when it came to home bagel production, and, thus, it was because of the insufficient space within the tenement apartment that the bagel economy arose at all. In a combination of desire for bagels and an inability to make them independently, immigrants influenced the food and economic landscape of American cuisine.

Bagel baking requires ovens, vats of boiling water, space to lay out the dough and ventilation.⁷² A cursory tour of a tenement apartment's structure makes it evident that it would have been insufficient for bagel production on all of these points. Each individual tenement apartment was reached by an unlit, wooden staircase in the center of the building that was meant to provide a significant portion of the building's ventilation. Based on reports from the era, the stairwell, where children played and neighbors socialized, was smelly and possibly crowded with geese, so it is dubious that it provided

⁷⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁷¹ Ibid., 99; Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 95.

⁷² Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 92-93.

fresh air enough for baking.⁷³ Moreover, the largest room of each apartment, often referred to it as the *front room*, was only eleven by twelve-and-a-half feet, and it was the only one of the three rooms in the individual tenement apartments that was designed to receive direct light and ventilation.⁷⁴ Behind the front room was the kitchen, and then in the very back was the one, tiny bedroom.

Each kitchen had a coal- or wood-burning fireplace, and tenants had to purchase their own cooking stoves. The building at 97 Orchard Street had no running water of any sort until after, possibly, 1895, and even then it was probably only a soapstone tub-sink.⁷⁵ While running water was available in other parts of the city, the Orchard Street building, like many other tenement apartments on the Lower East Side, was not originally connected to pipes or a sewer. This meant that for cooking, water must be gathered from a public pump, carried home through the streets, and then up the tenement stairs, possibly up to the fifth or sixth floor. Water, as a result, was a precious commodity, used sparingly by tenement wives as they cleaned and prepared foods, and it is unlikely that one trip would have yielded enough water to make even a dozen bagels.⁷⁶

Since the tenement kitchen boasted only a stove and little else, families got creative with the small spaces that they had and the meals that they could cook. Most cooking was done in only one pot, and food was only meant to last for that day. Windowsills and fire escapes acted as makeshift cold storage in the winter, and most food would go bad quickly, so shopping and cooking had to be done in small quantities.⁷⁷ The

⁷³ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, xiii; “Unusual Methods of Livelihood, Queer Feminine Vocations,” *Current Opinion* (August 1903): 202-203.

⁷⁴ Cahan, “Yelk,” 39; Andrew Dolkart, “The Biography of a Lower East Side Tenement; 97 Orchard Street, Tenement Design, and Tenement Reform in New York City” (New York: Tenement Museum, 2001).

⁷⁵ Dolkart, “The Biography of a Lower East Side Tenement.”

⁷⁶ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv-8.

pushcart markets on Hester, Orchard, and Essex streets were the economic savior for the tenement housewife, who could not afford to buy large quantities of food which might spoil. The immigrant-run pushcarts offered a way for housewives to purchase not an ounce more food than they could afford—a single egg, half of a carrot, a handful of grain—each procured for that day’s cooking, with the pushcart serving as a pantry of fresh foods when no space for a pantry existed.⁷⁸ In this way, pushcarts served not only as places of commerce, but also as extensions of the immigrant kitchen.

Other ways that immigrant’s tried to gain the illusion of more space was by using the same rooms for multiple functions. As described in “Yekl,” “the little front room [of their apartment] served the quadruple purpose of kitchen, dining room, sitting room, and parlor,”⁷⁹ and many families used their apartment’s small rooms to fulfill many roles, both functional and financial, since beyond just cooking, “the kitchen was also used as a family workspace, a sweatshop, a laundry room, a place to wash one’s body, a nursery for the babies, and a bedroom for boarders.”⁸⁰ Thus, the tenement kitchen was a cramped place which forced immigrant cooks to be ingenious and creative when it came to the daily task of feeding their families. Moreover it was also a space used to operate informal business enterprises, such as extra needle point work or tailoring jobs that tenement wives and children took up.⁸¹ No matter how creative with space the tenement families got, however, there was never enough space for bagel making.

With tenement kitchens clearly unsuitable to bagel baking, bagel production was relocated out of the home. In order to meet the demand for bagels by the local population,

⁷⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁹ Cahan, “Yekl,” 39-42.

⁸⁰ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, xiv.

⁸¹ See: Tax, *Rivington Street*; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*; Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*.

space within a tenement building was procured for such an enterprise: the squat basement. In fact, “some kind of shop or business occupied the street level of most East Side buildings, turning the neighborhood into a single teeming marketplace.”⁸² These commercialized basement spaces, probably originally designed for storage or to prevent the flooding of the first floor apartments, were the homes of many different types of shops and business operations. These shops not only served immigrants, but they also employed them. In a few cases, new immigrants owned their own businesses there, but more commonly, they worked for more-established and wealthier immigrants, or rented the basement spaces from German-Jewish landlords, just as they did their apartments.⁸³

Lower East Side shops sold a vast array of goods, and offered all sorts of necessary services: “from rusted scrap metal and secondhand corsets to peacock feathers and beaver-skin coats,” as well as hat and clothing shops, shoe and shoe repair businesses, apothecaries who sold medicines, blacksmiths, tailors, and glazier window makers.⁸⁴ In “Yekl,” the main character visits a draft and package office located in a “dingy basement” on Essex Street, which seemed to offer the service of reporting travel prices and operating as a postal office for shipping items and letters to and from the Old Country to America. As the story tells it, “[Yekl] hardly ever left the [draft and package] office without ascertaining the price of a steerage voyage from Hamburg to New York,” so the shop must have operated from its basement location to connect immigrants to their homelands—either by mail or travel.⁸⁵

⁸² Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 2.

⁸³ Dolkart, “The Biography of a Lower East Side Tenement.”

⁸⁴ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 2.

⁸⁵ Cahan, “Yelk,” 24.

However, many of the commercialized tenement basement spaces were used for businesses related to food: offering markets, “slaughterhouses, brewers, bakers, saloon, and beer halls” located just below street-level to make the best use of space while simultaneously attempting to satiate the culinary needs of the immediate neighborhood.⁸⁶ Bagels were a major part of that hunger, and bagel bakeries opened on the Lower East Side in response to the increased numbers of immigrants in the area. As immigrants arrived, more bakery spaces opened, and by 1900, there were over seventy Jewish bakeries—bagel or otherwise—in the small area of the Tenth Ward.⁸⁷

Despite the fact that bagels could not be easily produced in a tenement kitchen, bakery spaces did not require a lot of space to operate, they simply needed to fit a vat for boiling water, a brick oven, workbenches, and a handful of laborers. Peddlers could hawk the bagels in street markets. Bagel production and distribution would be profit-making for a bakery owner. Moreover, as Maria Balinska points out, “Bakeries were relatively inexpensive businesses to start up in those days: all one needed was space and an oven, or at most \$200,”⁸⁸ to buy the necessary ingredients for bagel baking: “flour, water, yeast, salt, and malt syrup, made from ground corn or barley,” and a handful of laborers.⁸⁹ Hand-made bagels do not require machinery.

The quality of the working conditions was not of concern to anyone except the workers at that time, and they were desperate for employment. Part of their desperation stemmed from their inherent poverty—arriving in American without money—while the labor issue was exacerbated by the constant availability of new immigrant workers in the

⁸⁶ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 2.

⁸⁷ Rischin, *The Promised City*, 57; Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

⁸⁸ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

⁸⁹ Goodman, “The Rise and Fall of the Bagel,” 97.

same area, since new immigrants were arriving on the Lower East Side every day, undercutting the wages of the more-established workers. Not only that, workers who might have been unable to survive the hot, cramped, unlivable conditions could be quickly replaced with no loss in profits to the bakery boss.⁹⁰ So, for many years, workers had no leverage in negotiating a better work environment.

Hyam Plumka, a young immigrant who arrived to New York at the age of seventeen, worked as a bread carrier, one of the lowest jobs in a bagel bakery, in the 1890s, for a bakery operating out of a cellar under Hester Street. As a contestant in a 1942 YIVO essay contest about immigrant life in America, he wrote of his younger years, “Such slavery went on in all the bakeries...The workday was eighteen hours in a twenty-four hour period—from four in the morning until ten at night...On Thursday nights the bakers did not let me sleep at all.” Most disgustingly, however, is Plumka’s description of how bakeries cut corners to increase profits:

In every Jewish bakery the bakery bosses used ‘spoiled eggs’, that is, egg that were already very old and could not be sold. The bread carrier had to gather them and put them in a big cup. When I went to gather the eggs, it didn’t go well. For inside some of the broken eggs were ‘little animals’. Some of the eggs gave a little burst when I cracked them open. My hands became full of white worms. The worms were crawling all over the shells of the eggs...Every baker used the spoiled eggs...The same kind of cheating went on in all the Jewish bakeries.⁹¹

Thus, bakery owners not only endangered the lives of their workers, they also put the health of their customers at risk when they used cheap and rotten ingredients to make more money on their bagels, a phenomenon that will receive more attention in Chapter 3.

⁹⁰ Paul Brenner, “Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers’ Union 1881-1914,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Studies* 18 (1983), 39-121.

⁹¹ Quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 100-101. Balinska makes a note on page 201 of her book which reads: “Hyam Plumka was a contestant in a 1942 YIVO essay competition about life for immigrants in America. A selection of these translated essays appears in Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (eds), *My Future is America: Autobiographies of East European Jewish Immigrants* (New York 2005). Plumka’s essay was translated exclusively for the present book.”

Without much oversight to keep quality-levels for workers and consumers in place, bagel bakeries were hazardous to workers and consumers. Paul Brenner writes that a report issued in 1895 by New York State's factory inspectors, a Progressive Era attempt to understand working conditions, reported, "there appears to be no other industry, not even the making of clothes in sweat-shops, which is carried on amid so much dirt and filth,"⁹² and yet, bakery workers kept producing bagels in efforts to meet their demand.

Demand for bagels at that time did not expand beyond the Jewish neighborhood of the Tenth Ward, so all of the bagel bakeries were clustered there.⁹³ Demand might have dropped if customers in the area ever saw the conditions in which their bagels were produced, but they did not. Bagel bakeries, like many bakeries at that time, were solely for production; distribution of bagels occurred in other locations, namely groceries and taverns, or peddled on the streets, as they had been in the Old World. In fact, it was not until the 1960s, when baking was moved out of the cellars and up to street level that owners opened storefronts and sold bagels to customers directly.⁹⁴ As a result, the bagel bakers who worked between the years 1880-1910 were faceless to bagel consumers. These young journeymen, sometimes with families and sometimes without, were partaking in a formal sector of the economy, yet, they were all but enslaved to their employer, and their neighborhood community did not know their plight.⁹⁵

Bagel customers would buy their bagels from pushcarts or peddlers in the market, or from grocery shops on or below street level. Since bagels at that time were baked fresh

⁹² Brenner, "Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers' Union," 39-40.

⁹³ Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 93.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Joseph Solarchik, "A History of the Formation of the Bakers Union in New York City," April 1983. *Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers International Union, Local 3 Records (WAG 135. Box 21. Folder 8b), The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York.*

without preservatives, they did not last long, and would go stale within a few hours. As a combined result of both the product and the clustered community of Jewish consumers, bagels had to be sold quickly and in the immediate area near the bakeries.⁹⁶

Bagel peddling was not a new occupation. Immigrants to America did not invent it like they did the bagel production in basement bakeries. Bagel peddlers—usually young boys and older women—existed in markets in Eastern-Europe, as they did in New York, with bagels conveniently carried with either a poll or a loop of rope through their hole. Easy to carry, easy to afford, and easy to eat, bagels were often written about in market day scenes from the Old World, but contrary to who they were sold to in America, in Europe the customers, would have, probably been non-Jews, since Jews would have baked their own bagels at home.⁹⁷ With that no longer an option as a result of the limited tenement space, young boys and older women bagel peddlers on the Lower East Side would have been selling Jewish-baked bagels to other Jews.⁹⁸ Other than that difference, however, informal bagel peddling in America was probably extremely similar to the informal selling of bagels in areas of Eastern Europe, such as Poland.

While outside of the timeframe and locational scope of this thesis, a 1934 study concerning the Warsaw's Bagel Sellers' Union reveals a number of interesting ideas that should be considered when discussing informal bagel peddling in New York City at the end of nineteenth- and the beginning of the twentieth-century. Balinska, being Polish herself, focuses much of her book, *The Bagel*, on the bagels' origin and history in Poland, and she reports the following:

⁹⁶ Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 95.

⁹⁷ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 55.

⁹⁸ Goodman, "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," 93.

Rafal Mahler, a historian and Marxist, was commissioned by *Economic Life*, one of the many new Yiddish-language scholarly journals being published in Poland, to investigate the bagel peddlers of Warsaw... his detailed study, based on questionnaires handed out to 129 members of Warsaw's Bagel Sellers' Union, provides an intimate glimpse into the lives of these itinerant sellers. They were mostly men but were also some women, who tended to be older, often widows, since young girls would not be out on the streets 'for obvious reasons'. Of the estimated six hundred bagel sellers in Warsaw, only thirty were Christian. Over a third of the men were young boys, although the ranks of the adult male pedlars were growing as unemployment in other crafts increased. Most these men had once been tailors or shoemakers; some had been bakers. Two thirds of the pedlars interviewed had come into the business only since the economic crisis of 1929. The fact that these men had turned to bagel peddling was, observes Mahler, a concrete indication of a society breaking down."⁹⁹

Without any sociological models in mind in the 1930s, Mahler's study stumbles across the same findings that so many sociologists of urban informality find all around the developing world: in hard economic times, people take whatever jobs they can find, even if they are in the informal sector, sometimes even if they illegal.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, these sorts of informal street peddling jobs are normally performed by young men and older women, usually widows, like the tenement hallway geese raisers discussed above. Informal work, whether in Argentina today, Poland in 1934, and probably New York City in the later-1800s, was carried out by young boys and older women looking to make money to support their families during economic hard times.¹⁰¹ When times get really tough, non-marginalized men of vibrant industrial age can be seen to move from the formal sector to the informal sector for work, but as Mahler mentions, it is a sign of a truly struggling economy.

As discussed earlier in the Introduction to this thesis, the informal economy is difficult to get reports on since it is often composed of disorganized, self-employed

⁹⁹ Rafal Mahler, "A Survey of the Jewish Bagel Pedlars of Warsaw" (in Yiddish), *Economic Life* 1-2 (1935) as quoted on page 80 of Maria Balinska's *The Bagel*.

¹⁰⁰ Balinsak, *The Bagel*, 82.

¹⁰¹ See: Roy and Alsayyad, *Urban Informality*.

individuals. Mahler's study, however, did an excellent job of gathering information about informal bagel peddling practices in Warsaw. The way Polish bagel peddling seemed to work was that peddlers would arrive at local bakeries and procure bagels on commission. They would be given a basket by the bakery, and would then vend their (notoriously stale) bagels to people in public spaces, like parks and markets.¹⁰² While it is unknown what the bagel peddling practices were in the Tenth Ward, it is likely that they were similar.

How much money a peddler could make in a day is also unknown, but according to Polish records translated by Balinska, "On average, peddlars had to sell to at least forty-three customers before making 1 zloty profit. They rarely made more than 2 zlotys a day, the equivalent of what the average factory worker then made in two hours."¹⁰³ Thus, bagel peddling was not a profitable racket, but those few extra zlotys must have been worth something to the peddlers or they would not have continued. Moreover, this lack of profit compared to the income of a factory workers demonstrates that these informal workers might have been from marginalized groups of society, and as a result, unable to get factory jobs, possibly because of gender, age, or ethnicity. To these bagel peddlers, money coming in, was money coming in, and it must have served some useful purpose.

In America, however, bagels were even cheaper than they were in Europe. A guidebook advertising life in America to Jewish families in Russia, in 1891, boasts to those "who aspire to bread and pickles in America," it was possible, thanks to American incomes, that a person, "could earn 50 cents a day, spend 10 cents for coffee and bagels

¹⁰² Balinsak, *The Bagel*, 81-82.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

and save 40 cents,” since bagels were not costly enough to hurt one’s pocketbook.¹⁰⁴ Of course, the price of affordable bagels came at the cost of the bagel workers, both the formal slaves of bakery and the informal street peddlers, neither of whom saw profits from price-cutting shop-owners. What sorts of costs were suffered by the workers in the bagel economy —economically and physically— will be a major topic in the following chapters.

As for understanding the dynamic interplay between economics and the spatial environment of the Lower East Side through the bagel economy, it is clear that the limiting factor of space within the tenement apartment kitchen is what led to bagel baking becoming a formal practice outside of the home. Demand for bagels on the Lower East Side came from the dense population of poor Eastern-European Jewish immigrants who settled there and craved the rolls with a hole that they had eaten in the Old World. Familiar foods provided comfort in such an unfamiliar environment as Manhattan. With so many Jews in one place, demand for bagels in that neighborhood remained high enough over the years to make investment in bagel production worthwhile for entrepreneurs who opened basement bakeries in the Tenth Ward.

Basement bagel bakeries offered employment to young men of industry age, but only young men; not women. Women, who would have been the ones baking bagels in their homes if their apartments provided ovens, space, water and ventilation had their roles in bagel consumption altered. No longer able to be the bagel producers, some women become purchasers of bagels, while others joined young boys from the area as bagel peddlers in the street markets, engaging in the informal distribution aspects of the

¹⁰⁴ As quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

bagel economy, and trying to make extra money to support themselves and their families'. These gender divides between the formal and the informal sector of the economy are common in other industries, but what is interesting about the bagel economy is that they arose as a result of spatial limitations in the urban environment. From this vantage, who produced bagels and where they were baked and sold is a direct effect of the urban condition, which connects space and money, creating the environment of cramped immigrant tenement living, while at the same time leading to profits from the result of that crowding, which led to a new culinary industry.

While the Jewish community's desire for bagels kept their demand high over the years, making bagel bakeries profitable businesses for bosses, cutting corners on ingredients and keeping wages low increased profit margins and helped bosses stay in business. While bakery owners can be viewed as job-creating visionaries, and were able to offer job opportunities to otherwise underemployed male workers, their corner-cutting and worker exploitation took a serious toll on bakery workers. How and why workers in the formal bagel economy suffered, and what they did about it will be seen in the following two chapters.

Chapter 2: Bagel Bakers and Policy Makers

*In America, all words meant one thing: money.
Familiar words like freedom and democracy
turned out to have dollar signs beside them.
Even votes were for sale—votes, for which they were
fighting a revolution in Russia.
To see his own countrymen sell their votes like goyim,¹⁰⁵
take the two Tammany dollars offered by the
local gangsters outside the polls, seemed the final assault.¹⁰⁶*

Meredith Tax's novel, *Rivington Street*, speaks to the corruption of the political system in New York City as the Eastern-European immigrants encountered it when they arrived during the second great wave of immigration in the late-1800s. The quote above appears as an inner thought of Moyshe Levy, a Bundist revolutionary from Kishinev, Russia, who becomes an American pushcart salesman on the Lower East Side. Moyshe's thoughts address his preoccupation with political inequality, deceit, and a lack of government accountability as he met them in both Russia and America. While a notably different form of political corruption existed in Russia, Moyshe recognizes that even in America, a land that promised freedom and democracy, the structure and practice of that democracy continued to undermine those ideals.¹⁰⁷ As the quote reflects, money was a noticeable and driving force in American politics, and Moyshe saw it as corroding the efforts of revolutionaries, like himself. Most importantly, however, this quote touches on the main component of the political system in New York City in the 1800s—the machine politics of Tammany Hall.

The political and industrial establishments that Eastern-European Jewish immigrants encountered when they arrived in New York City had significant bearing on

¹⁰⁵ Yiddish term for “non-Jew.”

¹⁰⁶ Meredith Tax, *Rivington Street* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 79.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-145.

the sorts of employment that they took-up—such as bagel baking—and, as a result, their subsequent livelihood. By viewing the formal sector of the bagel baking economy through the lens of urban politics and urban industrial organization, the social and economic dynamics of immigrant work-lives can be better understood. Since the bagel bakers eventually organized unions to protect their rights’ as workers, it is important to address the political and industrial climate that made unionization seem like a viable and worthwhile enterprise for Eastern-European immigrants in New York City.

This chapter will examine the relationship between the top-down organizations of New York City machine politics and the structure of private industry that allowed the formal bagel economy to arise, grow, and operate in Manhattan. By studying the baking industry, in the context of the urban political system and industrial organization in New York City between 1880 and 1910, it will be possible to see how a lack of political representation negatively impacted the livelihood of Eastern-European immigrants. Being unable to take jobs in industries outside of city government, Jewish immigrants were left to engage in private industry jobs, which lacked governmental oversight to keep workers safe. While the Chapter 3 of this study will discuss unionization and community organizations as a response to a lack of governmental oversight in industry and social welfare, this chapter aims to paint a clear picture of the political climate and industrial culture that met Eastern-European Jewish immigrants when they arrived in New York City as it relates to the bagel economy.

In order to do that, however, it is important to unpack the scene of vote-buying in the epigraph to this chapter. Moyshe’s outrage, as it is depicted in *Rivington Street*, concerning Jewish immigrants selling their votes to “local gangsters” outside of the

voting polls in exchange for “two Tammany dollars” speaks to the political landscape that met Eastern-Europeans when they settled into the Tenth Ward of New York City’s Lower East Side. Tammany dollars were bribes put forth by Tammany Hall, the infamous political machine that dominated New York City politics throughout the nineteenth century. Buying votes was a way to entice immigrants to support certain policies or politicians in elections. While patronage and bribes are common facets of machine politics, immigrant votes played a particularly interesting role in the power of Tammany Hall. Founded in 1789, as the Tammany Society of New York, the club arose to serve only “pure Americans,” with the name “Tammany” arising from the name Tamanend, the Native American leader of the Lenape tribe that occupied the island of Mannahata before Henry Hudson arrived in New York Harbor in 1609.¹⁰⁸ Thus, it is ironic that over the next century, Tammany Hall would power its political machine by capturing the immigrant vote through whatever means necessary—coercion, small acts of charity, patronage, gimmicks, job placements, bribes, etcetera. In fact, the lengths that politicians went to while trying to secure the votes of Irish immigrants in the mid-1800s seemed to know no bounds.

The impetus for the Society’s change of heart towards immigrants is rooted in the events of the 1830s, when a group known as the Loco-Focos, an anti-monopoly and pro-labor faction of the Democratic Party, rose as the main opposition to Tammany’s machinations, and appealed to the workers of the city. As an act of opposition, Tammany Hall politicians decided to expand their political control by appealing to the City’s ever-expanding immigrant population, at the time, predominately Irish immigrants—most of

¹⁰⁸ “Schems & Sinners: An Informal History of Tammany Hall,” *Time*, August 1955; Eric Sanderson, *Manahatta: A Natural History of New York City* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 15.

whom were laborers or aspired to become laborers.¹⁰⁹ Tammany believed that by earning their loyalty, measured in votes, it could expand its base of power in New York City. Immigrants became an increasingly coveted population in New York City politics between the 1830s and 1850s.

Tammany Hall appealed to voters through low-level officials, often as low as the corner tavern owners—in each neighborhood who served as the local vote-gatherers. The ward bosses and police chiefs provided patronage to poor immigrant families—sometimes food, coal, a job—in exchange for the promise of votes towards a certain assemblyman or alderman.¹¹⁰ As a result of the Great Potato Famine, several hundred-thousand Irish immigrants arrived in New York City between 1830 and 1850, and by capturing their votes, Tammany Hall saw its power in New York rise immensely. Appealing to immigrants had its payoffs.

In fact, in pre-New Deal America, the services that urban political machines provided could be seen as a rudimentary public welfare system. With so many immigrants living in extreme poverty, and with no formal systems for government assistance, the government—local, city, state, federal—was not conventionally viewed as responsible for the welfare issues of individuals. By providing the poor with items such as food, coal, extra rent money, and job opportunities, Tammany handouts were helpful in the short term to poor immigrants living in an unfamiliar place.

As a result, some scholars have argued that the political machines aided the upward mobility of immigrants—a theory based on the notion that “machines had to work tirelessly to incorporate new groups of voters into their coalitions by offering them

¹⁰⁹ Gustavus Myers, *The History of Tammany Hall* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1917), 94-100.

¹¹⁰ Dennis Judd and Todd Swanstrom, *City Politics: The Political Economy of Urban America*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 46-51.

jobs and other favors.”¹¹¹ However, this argument falls flat for Eastern-European Jewish immigrants, such as those who became the bagel bakers. While such a theory might have found support if only applied to earlier eras of immigration to New York City—i.e., Irish immigrants—by the time Jewish immigrants were arriving en masse, politicians had already built their “winning coalition” in certain wards, and as a result, were free to grow complacent. By the 1880s, politicians did not have to work as hard to win the loyalty and support of newer groups; offering a few dollars in bribes at the polls was often enough to get a city alderman or assemblyman reelected, and to keep the power in the hands of the men maintaining the status quo.¹¹²

Understanding it this way, it is not surprising that Eastern-European immigrants, like the ones Moyshe Levy resents, were willing to sell their votes: the machine leaders had, “turned their backs on later-arriving immigrants,” and as a result, “later-arriving immigrants to American cities found themselves shut out of the benefits of machine rule.”¹¹³ New arrivals to New York City encountered Tammany Hall as a machine run by and for the Irish, with no reason to reach out to the Jews. Even as late as the 1920s, when Jewish and Italian immigrants represented forty-three percent of New York’s population, only fifteen percent of the city’s aldermen and assemblymen were Jewish, and only three percent were Italian. New York City politicians in the late-1880s and early-1900s did not

¹¹¹ Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 130; Judd and Swanstrom, *City Politics*, 57.

¹¹² Judd and Swanstrom, *City Politics*, 57.

¹¹³ Steven Erie, *Rainbow's End: Irish-Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 69; Judd and Swanstrom, *City Politics*, 58.

need to provide patronage to Jewish immigrants; it was simpler to buy votes outside the polls for more money than an opponent.¹¹⁴

As a result of the Tammany Hall political culture during this era, Eastern-European Jewish immigrants were less likely to get government jobs through their Tammany-connected local tavern or pub keeper, as the Irish had when they arrived, and were more likely to take jobs in private industry, even if the job still came through their local saloon. In fact, for most immigrant groups, “private industry rather than patronage provided the best opportunities for upward mobility.”¹¹⁵ For even though “the Irish laid claim to a disproportionate share of the jobs in city government, it took a long time for them to catch up to other ethnic groups in the broader economy.” Groups such as the Scandinavians, Germans, and Jews, for example, all participated relatively little in machine politics, and all assimilated and prospered in America after only one generation.¹¹⁶

Urban industrialization, combined with the exclusion of Eastern-European immigrants from municipal jobs, led to Jewish immigrants dominating private sector industries in New York City, both as workers and as entrepreneurial bosses. Modern inventions, such as the sewing machine and the development of “section work,” meant that unskilled immigrant workers could be hired to make clothing in factories. In fact, in 1880, almost thirty percent of New York City’s workforce was employed in clothing

¹¹⁴ Martin Shedter, “Political Incorporation and the Extrusion of the Left: Party Politics and Social Forces in New York City,” in *Studies in American Political Development*, vol. 1, ed. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 55.

¹¹⁵ Judd and Swanstrom, *City Politics*, 57.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

manufacturing, and that number increased to forty-six percent by 1910.¹¹⁷ According to labor historian Joshua Freeman, in 1945, New York City's post-World War II's manufacturing sector, "looked more like its manufacturing sector of 1845," than might have been expected for a modern, American, industrial city. In the late-nineteenth century, when Eastern-European immigrants arrived and were looking for work, the spatial organization of New York City industries was such that production and manufacturing districts existed in clusters in various parts of the city. Many tiny workshops of the same nature were crowded side by side and populated by skilled craftsmen working next to less-skilled (or even unskilled laborers).¹¹⁸ The mix of skilled and unskilled laborers in the same industry, and even the same production spaces, was common in both the garment industry and the baking industry.

Abraham Cahan, in his 1896 story of "Yekl," describes the sort of "flexible specialization," that allowed small manufactures to produce a short-run of versatile products with very few personnel, such that samples could be designed by craftsmen, while mass-scale production was carried out in larger factories by less-skilled workers: usually young, unskilled girls. Yekl, an adult male, worked in a small garment shop in Manhattan as a craftsman. The shop was run by a Jewish boss, and it employed other men and women who were experienced tailors and sewers. They would come up with new, original designs and patterns, but would not manufacture them en mass for customers.¹¹⁹ Sarah Levy, Moyshe's daughter in *Rivington Street*, on the other hand, is also employed

¹¹⁷ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 67; Maria Balinska, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 97-98.

¹¹⁸ Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 15.

¹¹⁹ Abraham Cahan, "Yekl," in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (New York: Dover Books, 1970), 1-92.

in the garment industry of New York City, but she worked as an unskilled waist shirt maker at The Triangle Waist Factory, producing skirts that could have originally been designed in the shop similar to one where Yekl worked.¹²⁰ The stories of Yekl and Sarah are consistent examples of how New York City's industry thrived and operated in the mid-to-late 1800s and until the 1950s.¹²¹ Industry was small and skilled, or large and unskilled: employment was possible for all sorts of people, but the conditions were often unregulated.

The phenomenon of how industry and labor existed in New York City between 1880 and 1910, with a wide array of private labor opportunities being offered in the same industry, but with specific occupations and tasks differing by gender, age, skill, and working environments. These differences would come to affect how workers operated both in and outside of their work environments, particularly, how they came to view their livelihood in America, and how they enacted changes to their working conditions. In *Rivington Street*, Sarah organizes a union at the factory. She builds support for its efforts among wealthy Progressive Era reformers— wealthy women who lived uptown. Sarah's character reveals the sort of formal-sector jobs that unmarried females took as a result of the industrial organization of New York City in the early-1900s, and how brave, young, reform-minded women came to enact lasting changes labor policies by unionizing.¹²² The woes of men in grueling work within the city were often harder to generate support for, and as a result, workers like the bagel bakers had a more difficult time improving their working conditions than young women did.

¹²⁰ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 155. Kenneth Jackson, ed. *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 583.

¹²¹ Freeman, *Working Class New York*.

¹²² Tax, *Rivington Street*, 299.

While some Jewish males would arrive in America and become bakers, many Jewish immigrants secured their income through other aspects of the food economy of New York City, including, but not limited to, hotel and restaurant businesses. Others took advantage of the distinct food restrictions that set Jews apart from other New Yorkers, such as keeping Kosher. Many opened their own food-based shops, becoming butchers, vinters, distillers, traders, merchants, and specialized bakers, capitalizing on the Jewish need for religiously appropriate foods. Others became tavern-keepers, who operated not dissimilarly from Irish pub owners, but instead supplied Jews with Kosher foods and drinks in a public, community-gathering space.¹²³

Being Jewish in America, however, had business repercussions just like it had in the Old World, but they were socially and not politically enforced. Many laws in Russia, such as the May Laws of 1881, which banned Jews from owning land or farms, limited Jewish freedoms and prevented Jews from working in various industries, made it impossible for Jews to work in certain trades. For example, in Russia, it was against the law for Jews to own vineyards, breweries, taverns, or partake in the saloon trade.¹²⁴ In America, there were no governmental bans on the trades that Jews could take-up, but Christian-owned establishments were free to turn Jews away, and they often did. As a result, Jewish-owned taverns, cafes, hotels, and restaurants became a solution to the widespread discrimination that Jewish immigrants faced in New York City.¹²⁵ Bagel baking represents one way that immigrants made money and gained employment in the food economy of New York City between 1880 and 1910.

¹²³ Jane Ziegelman, *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2011), 94.

¹²⁴ Tax, *Rivington Street*, 21-40.

¹²⁵ Ziegelman, *97 Orchard*, 94.

Informal bagel peddling might have been one way that these Eastern-European Jews, who were being kept out of other forms of employment, managed to make money to supplement their family's earnings. Since Jews in America faced discrimination, and since Eastern-European immigrants faced prejudice within the Jewish community, it might have been that taking up an informal job was one way that these marginalized immigrants ended up in informal employment. Those that were marginalized and still managed to make it into the formal baking sector, might have done so by gaining employment through another member of his social group, such as from a Jewish baker.

How an immigrant male became a baker was very similar to how Irish immigrants, a couple decades earlier, became civil servants under Tammany Hall. Gaining employment from the local saloon in exchange for Tammany patronage was still an aspect of life in New York City for Jewish immigrants, even if the jobs were not with the local government, but rather, in bake shops. While neighborhood saloons were places to play cards, gamble, or have a beer, bagel, or soup, free time on the Lower East Side was far from free. Saloons, like Rosner's, which was located on the corner of Ludlow and Hester Streets, also served as employment agencies in the patronage organization known by bakers as the "vampire system."¹²⁶ The vampire system shared a number of commonalities with the employment opportunities brought about by Tammany Hall politicians, but seemed to be limited to the baking industry, and operated without Tammany oversight. According to an article written by John Schudel, the Assistant Secretary of the International Union and published in an 1896 issue of the *American Federalist*, the vampire system was the process under which certain beer saloons were

¹²⁶ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 101. The Tenement Museum is currently attempting to revive as an active tour-site.

recognized by master bakers, or bosses, as employment bureaus. In his article, “Bakers and Their Struggles,” Schudel writes:

Journeyman looking for work are compelled to wait at these saloons and spend their money in drinks to get a chance to work. The man who spends most money is the first to get a job; and, if he wants to keep it, he has to visit the saloon at least every payday and spend part of his wages there.¹²⁷

Thus, a significant portion of the baker’s regular wages, which were not much to begin with, were required to go back into the hands of the saloon keeper. Unconnected to Tammany Hall, this system mirrors the political practices of the era, but provides none of the social welfare handouts associated with the machine. Bakers, as a result, suffered from this practice, which limited their freedoms and burdened their pockets.

Beyond simply being subject to the vampire system for hiring, workers also had contracts with their employers that forced them to accept “board and lodging,” and were unable to live with their families or choose their own accommodations.¹²⁸ How and where employers chose to board workers varied by shop, but it was not uncommon for bakers to be forced to both work and board within the basement bakery space. This meant that not only were bakers obligated to live and sleep on the workshop benches, but money was also taken out of their wages to cover their living arrangements. Early studies of the baking industry in New York City revealed that almost half of a worker’s wage could be taken to account for these required accommodations.¹²⁹

One brilliant endeavor set up to understand the state of working conditions in New York City bakeries was a questionnaire project taken up by an early baking union—

¹²⁷ John Schudel, “Bakers and Their Struggles,” *American Federalist* (Indianapolis, IN), September, 1896.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Joseph Solarchik, “A History of the Formation of the Bakers Union in New York City,” April 1983. *Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers International Union, Local 3 Records (WAG 135. Box 21. Folder 8b), The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York.*

the same one which would later grow into and merge with the bagel bakers' union. In an early attempt at fact-gathering for organizational and promotion purposes, a German baking union in New York City, operating in 1879, designed two surveys that would produce statistics on the working conditions in the baking trade, querying both bakers and employers. Very successful from the start, the union received answers from 505 bakers—representing one-tenth of the employed bakers in the New York area—and 606 employers. Their survey covered a number of items, including work hours, wages, number of employees, boarding costs, etcetera.¹³⁰ By surveying both bakers and employers, the union was careful to reduce bias in its report on the state of the baking trade in New York City—that way if either group was fudging the numbers, discrepancies would be clear.

The survey concluded that “These 505 bakers work[ed] 50,799 ½ hours a week, an average of 100 ½ apiece, representing an average of 16 2/3 hours per day for a 6 day week, and an average of 14 hours per day for a seven day week.” Hours, however, were irregularly distributed, such that work on one day might be only five hours, but on another might be as high as twenty three hours in a row. For their efforts, “These 505 bakers make a weekly total of \$4,155.50, which amounts of \$8.20 apiece, and approximately 8 and one-fifth cents for each of the 110 ½ hours!” As the survey collectors were sure to note, “This calculation is borne out by the Census on the baking trade,” such that larger surveys of the trade also supported their findings.¹³¹

Of the 606 employers who returned the union's survey, they reported employing a total of 2,094 employees—or four times as many as were canvassed in the employee

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

questionnaire discussed above. Employers reported paying workers, “an average of \$427.74 per year, of which rent amounts of \$4.00 per week or \$208 per year.” In the end, “The bakers therefore received only \$219.74 per year in cash which amounts of \$4.23 per week in cash, or together with rent, \$8.23 per week!”¹³² As can be seen, workers lost nearly half of their wages by being forced to board in the bakeries as a result of the mandatory board and lodging contracts, and then each had to return to the saloon where he was originally hired to hold up his end of the vampire system.

In this way, baking jobs, and private industry jobs overall, were more exploitative than working as part of the Tammany Hall machine. By existing under Tammany-rule, working in the vampire system, and living under the contracts of the board and lodging system, Eastern-European bakers had the short-end of every stick. In fact, many sources have been quick to describe the depraved and inhumane conditions under which young, typically unmarried bakers were forced to work and board, with workers sometimes being forced to sleep, “between the mounds of rising dough and the oven with cats, rats and cockroaches.”¹³³

Yet, if the living conditions seem unhealthy and expensive, the working conditions were arguably worse. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, bagel baking occurred in the basements of tenement buildings, which made for an atrocious working and living environment—dark, wet, crowded, smoky, infested with vermin—they were also stooped, so it was difficult for workers to stand upright while working, and there was nowhere for the smoke from the ovens to go, so it hung in the air by their heads. With coal-burning ovens that required constant tending, workers were subjected to sweltering

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

temperatures. Basement bakery spaces saw temperatures above one-hundred degrees Fahrenheit—even up to one-hundred and twenty degrees in the summer.¹³⁴ Bakers were required to work, “stripped to their waist for thirteen or fourteen hours a day, seven days a week,” even on the Sabbath—the religious day of rest—and had nowhere else to go in their off-hours except to the saloon.¹³⁵ As a result of the hours they were forced to work, the physical conditions of their environment, and their lack of sleep, it is unsurprising that illnesses were common among workers, and that working conditions shortened lifespans.

The environment took a toll on the bakers, affecting their physical appearance, their mental psyche and their livelihood. Joseph Solarchik, in his *A History of the Formation of the Bakers Union in New York City*, notes, “There was hardly another trade with conditions as bad as those under which the bakers worked,” and comments that, “They had the appearance of ghosts, worked in cellars and generally worked at night...Certainly there was no time for any kind of family life.”¹³⁶ Thus, not only were the bakers being financially and physically exploited, but their work environment was unregulated, such that there was no hope of improving their conditions, at least in the early years of the bagel industry.

Despite their miserable conditions, these new immigrant workers in America were, at first, not particularly interested in challenging the political and industrial system they encountered in New York City. A reason for this might be that many bakers were too exhausted from their work and lack of sleep to find the time or mental energy to think and plan for such a venture. However, from a financial standpoint, many immigrant

¹³⁴ Paul Brenner, “Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers’ Union 1881-1914,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Studies* 18 (1983), 39-40; Goodman, “The Rise and Fall of the Bagel,” 92-93.

¹³⁵ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

¹³⁶ Solarchik, “A History of the Formation of the Bakers Union in New York City.” (WAG 135. Box 21. Folder 8b).

bakers would have been appalled by a forced reduction or a limit on the number of hours that he could work; money was scarce and, “every extra dollar earned meant a dollar saved for a wife’s or parent’s Atlantic passage.”¹³⁷

In “Yekl,” the main character discusses his complicated relationship with poverty and his wife, who he left behind in the Old World. In one scene, Yekl receives a letter from her requesting that he send her and their young son passage tickets so that they can join him in New York. He confesses to the reader that when he would receive such letters, they “would touch his heart and elicit from him his threadbare vow to send the ticket at once. But then he never had money enough to redeem it. And, to tell the truth, at the bottom of his heart he was at such moments rather glad of his poverty,” since he was not so sure he would want his family to arrive and disrupt the solitary lifestyle he was leading. In Yekl’s case, the lack of funds from his job in New York City made it possible for him to continue a life not unlike that of a young bachelor.¹³⁸ Since many bakers on the Lower East Side were separated from their family members without their own accommodations, it is unlikely that they felt as Yekl felt; more likely they saw each dollar earned as a step closer to reuniting with loved ones.

Additionally, every dollar gained could make a worker one step closer—if he desired, and from accounts, many of them did—to becoming the boss himself.¹³⁹ As a result, the Jewish bakers’ labor movement in America was slow to get off the ground. With many obstacles to face—the lack of political support from Tammany Hall, the lack of governmental oversight, the lack of industrial oversight, the worker exploitation, the low wages, and the vampire system—it is remarkable that a bagel bakers union arose at

¹³⁷ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 103.

¹³⁸ Cahan, “Yekl,” 27.

¹³⁹ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 103.

all. In fact, the first specifically Jewish bakers' union, called the Local 31, was formed in 1885 on the Lower East Side. While it fell apart, failed, and attempted to resurrect itself for many years, its formation was still a major turning point in the baking industry of the Lower East Side, as will be discussed further in Chapter 3.¹⁴⁰

What gave the bagel bakers a renewed sense that unionization was a viable option in the late-1800s, ironically, might have been a failed legislative attempt by New York State to add governmental oversight to the baking industry with the Bakeshop Laws. Progressive politicians, in the 1860s, had made legislative attempts to develop more salubrious New York City living conditions within the tenements, but issues of health and hygiene in various industries associated with tenement life, such as the commercialization of basement bakery spaces, was not a priority at the time.¹⁴¹ Thus, in 1896, when New York State passed a policy that would add oversight and regulations to bakeries, it was not unheard of for the government to attempt to address issues of public health through political channels. Unfortunately for the bakers—and ultimately for the public, too—the policy was legislative only: bakeries were rarely inspected and bosses rarely held accountable for the quality of their goods, let alone the working environment or the safety of their workers.¹⁴²

The state of New York was actually the first of five states to adopt a bakeshop law, and the bakers of the Lower East Side were instrumental in its passage. While the

¹⁴⁰ Brenner, "Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers' Union," 39-121; Balinska, *The Bagel*, 103.

¹⁴¹ In 1865, a 506 page document, *The Report of the Council on Hygiene and Public Health of the Citizen's Association of New York upon the Sanitary Conditions in the City*, addressed concerns about tenement conditions. One year later, New York City established the Metropolitan Board of Health, America's first permanent public health agency. The early Metropolitan Board of Health concerned itself with animals roaming free on the Lower East Side, and not with issues facing the working and living conditions of humans.

¹⁴² Solarchik, "A History of the Formation of the Bakers Union in New York City." (WAG 135. Box 21. Folder 8b).

law was written, amended, and approved in 1895, it was not put into effect until the following year. According to news articles from the time, the passage of the bakeshop laws by New York State, “smoothed the road,” and made it “a comparatively easy task to have similar laws enacted in other states,” including New Jersey, Ohio, Maryland, and Massachusetts.¹⁴³ Had the laws been effective, they would have insisted on cleaner and more sanitary bakeshop conditions—including prescriptions for shop heights, better ventilation, and off-sight toilet facilities—to protect the quality of the food being fed to consumers. It also would have put an effective end to the board and lodging system.

The law would have made it possible for bakers to live independent lives outside of the unlit, tenement cellars they were bound to, improving the quality of the baked goods as well as their own health concerns. In fact, the health of the bakery customers was the primary reason that the bakeshop laws passed, and this was not an accident. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, the bakers’ unions chose to frame their cause as a matter of public health, because had the bakeshop laws been enforced properly, their regulations would have had the added side effect of improving the working environment for bakers. Such sanitary regulations would have improved not only the health of the public, but also the health and livelihood of the workers. Since concern for the workers’ well-being was not a political issue that the government was willing to address at the time, motivations for improved conditions needed to come from other sources, like the bagel-consuming public, who came to recognize they had something to gain from more hygienic bakeshops.

¹⁴³ Schudel, “Bakers and Their Struggles.”

As can be seen from this chapter, the structure of machine politics could not be avoided in New York City between 1880 and 1910. Even if Tammany Hall was not interested in appealing to Eastern-European Jewish immigrants to earn their votes by providing them with social welfare or government jobs, the structure of the Tammany patronage system had huge impacts on the bagel economy and the bagel bakers. By modeling the vampire system of hiring on the patronage system of the New York City political machine, saloon keepers and bakery bosses perpetuated the exploitation of new immigrants in the private, formal, baking industry. Deprived of their democratic voices, abandoned by the political machine, left with no way to get the government to represent their issues, bagel bakers were without political opportunities to improve their working conditions in the 1880s.

In 1896, with the bakeshop laws, it might have been possible for conditions to improve—even possible to put an end to the unsanitary board and lodging system that kept bakers working and living in the same place. Unfortunately, the bakeshop laws were not enforced, and conditions continued to worsen for bakers. With no place to turn except to one another and their community—found in bakers of other ethnicities, Jewish religious communities, and social communities of the consumers on the Lower East Side—these young, male, Jewish bakers would find the strength to unionize, time and again, until their life-expectancies and livelihood in New York City improved.

Chapter 3: The Bagel Community as a Whole

*In this land of prosperity, there are people in deep misery,
people who supply us with the most important nourishment,
our daily bread! Can that be possible?
But then, who has ever spoken to a baker
who can be found in places of recreation or amusement.
By day and night, he is found in the bakeries.¹⁴⁴*

In 1879, in an era known as the Gilded Age, when prosperity seemed to flourish in the United States, a pamphlet containing the epigraph above was published and circulated through the streets of New York City. The pamphlet, entitled “The Slaves of the Bakery”—an acknowledgement of the vampire system and the mandatory boarding system inflicted upon bakers at the time—was published and distributed by the Bakers Union of New York, Local 1.¹⁴⁵ The pamphlet did what it was designed to do, creating a stir in both Manhattan and Brooklyn, as it explained the bakers’ struggle for decent conditions at work, better wages and human rights. How bagel bakers came to eventually obtain these demands is a product of hard work, dedication, sacrifice, strategic efforts, and community solidarity. The focus of this chapter will be on how Jewish bakers on the Lower East Side of New York City between 1880 and 1910 improved their labor conditions, and subsequent livelihoods’, by inspiring community support in the urban environment.

This chapter addresses how early bakers’ unions by earning the trust of consumers and appealing to their best interest for clean, uncontaminated baked goods, convinced the larger, Jewish, immigrant community—bagel customers—to support their strikes and boycotts. It is hypothesized that support for unionization from the Jewish community was

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Solarchik, “A History of the Formation of the Bakers Union in New York City,” April 1983. *Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Workers International Union, Local 3 Records (WAG 135. Box 21. Folder 8b)*, The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

not automatic, but rather, that the bakers forced a division in the Eastern-European Jewish community of the Lower East Side around their cause, between persons who supported the bakery workers and those who chose to side with the bosses.¹⁴⁶ By framing their personal concerns about the bakery environment as public health issues that impacted the entire bagel-consuming population of New York City, the unions were able to make their personal concerns and desires for improved working conditions into issues that impacted the community of consumers, cultivating a base of supportive customers for their strikes and boycotts. By forcing a dividing line in the Jewish community, unions and their proponents were able to unify the bagel consumers as a base of support with personal aims that aligned with the laborers' cause.

Even though bakers' unions arose in fits and starts, often falling apart and needing to be resurrected a few years later, organizers seemed to comprehend early on that strikes and boycotts were not effective if the customers were not supporting them: purchasing only products marked with a union label or boycotting those establishments where workers were currently on strike.¹⁴⁷ By appealing to the concerns of customers—that is, by leveraging their personal labor concerns about their work environments and trade conditions into broader public health issues addressing the quality of bread and the ability of contaminated food to spread diseases—these bakers were able to hold successful strikes, pass legislation, and eventually form a powerful union of bagel bakers.¹⁴⁸ They did not achieve success by solely being Jewish immigrants with a justice-minded

¹⁴⁶ Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881-1905* (Albany: SUNY Series in American Labor History, 2000).

¹⁴⁷ Maria Balinska, *The Bagel: The Surprising History of a Modest Bread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 105-106.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 120-149; John Schudel, "Bakers and Their Struggles," *American Federalist* (Indianapolis, IN), September, 1896.

community backing them; they were successful because they managed to appeal to consumers effectively and *convince* the community that supporting laborers was socially just and in each customer's personal best interest.

While, admittedly, there were social factors that the bakers benefited from—such as established, local and ethnic papers inclined towards workers rights' and *landsmanshaftn* associations¹⁴⁹ that bonded the social and financial services of Jewish immigrants—it must be acknowledged that both the workers and their bosses were part of the Jewish community of New York City, such that community support for union efforts would not have been automatic or assumed; rather, it required determination and strategy to get the public on their side, and to keep them there. This was not an easy task when there was so much tension within the Jewish community on the Lower East Side surrounding the bagel baking trade between 1880 and 1910.

Translated literally from the Yiddish, *landsmanshaftn* means *compatriot-ship*, since the organizations often centered on hometown bonds from the Old World. Originally designed to help immigrants maintain social networks once they arrived in America, *landsmanshaftn* associations later grew and evolved into groups of people with common interests; they became less focused on town or region of origination.¹⁵⁰ This chapter argues that the notion of a *compatriot* changed from a spatial bond to a meaning

¹⁴⁹ Landsmanshaftn benefit societies were mutual aid associations composed of immigrants from the same hometown or region, and tended to fill a financial role in times of need while also providing a social structure. Landsmanshaftn associations originally served a vital role in the lives of Jewish immigrants, many of whom arrived in poverty. Each member would pay monthly dues that served as an insurance policy, and might have been spent to support community members who were disabled or ill, to help families suffering from a death or unemployed head of house, or to subsidize a burial. The organization was thus turned to by individuals in times of need for assistance to keep them or their family afloat. The original practice was that only men joined the organizations, with an understanding that family members all benefited from his involvement. Bakers' unions, composed exclusively of male laborers, came to adopt the same model for their unions, with family-issues being handled by, and through, the unions.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Soyer, *Jewish immigrant associations and American identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 49-80.

more closely associated with one's view of community. This change might also represent divisions that existed and expanded as social and economic circumstances became exacerbated within the Eastern-European Jewish community of the Lower East Side. Bagel bakers and bosses, more than other Jewish bakeshop tensions, might represent one such division that changed the notion of *compatriot*, setting a divide along class lines.

In order to fully understand how bagel bakers differ from other Jewish bakers in forming this divide, it is important to understand how bagels are different from other Jewish baked goods, and as a result, how their bakery environments might have differed in terms of labor-boss relations and health conditions. Bagel bakeries would have differed from other Jewish bakeries in New York City at that time because unlike challah bread and matzo, bagels are not a religious food; they are a secular baked good associated with Yiddish culture—and thus not necessarily limited to its religious community or religious ceremonies.¹⁵¹ Truly Jewish bakeshops would have had to abide by Kosher food preparation laws and might have been inspected by rabbis or other religious officials to ensure the cleanliness and observance of the holy baked goods. Bagels, being secular, would not have been produced with religious oversight.¹⁵² This meant that the ingredients, working conditions, and environment might have been worse in bagel bakeries than in other Jewish bakeries. If bagels had a religious purpose, it is likely that their bakeries would have been inspected by the religious community, but since they were not, workers were subject to whatever conditions the bakery boss subjected them to.

Another important difference between bagel bakeries and other Jewish bakeries at the time is who employed the workers. Part of the history of how Jewish bakers got

¹⁵¹ Jonathan Deutsch and Rachel Saks, *Jewish American Food Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008).

¹⁵² Paul Brenner, "Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers' Union 1881-1914," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Studies* 18 (1983), 39-121.

involved in union efforts in New York City in the first place came in the form of German bakers deciding to extend union membership to Jewish-German bakers in the mid-1850s, in an attempt to increase their own numbers.¹⁵³ As the German-Jews graduated up the ranks of the bakeshops, eventually becoming bakery bosses, they left the union and tended to hire later-arriving Jewish immigrants—ones from Eastern Europe—to work in their shops primarily for financial and cultural reasons.¹⁵⁴ Financially, Second-Wave immigrants arrived in New York City in large numbers, and needed employment; as a result, they were eager for work and would be paid low wages. Socially, a German-Jewish baker producing Kosher baked goods, would be more inclined to hire a Jew to work in his shop over an immigrant baker of another ethnicity. As a result, in many cases, at least in the 1870s and 1880s, Jewish bakery workers tended to be Eastern-European, Yiddish-speaking Jews, while bakery owners tended to be German-speaking Jews. When conflicts arose in these bake shops, they did not divide the community, because German-Jews and Eastern-European Jews did not view themselves as compatriots.¹⁵⁵

Bagel bakeries present a different story. Since bagels arrived in America with the Eastern-European immigrants, in bagel bakeries, it was Eastern-European Jews working for bosses who were members of their own *landsmanshaftn* associations, preparing food for customers who were, likely, also members. Thus, when tensions arose, it led to neighbors striking or boycotting against neighbors. Balinska notes that many of the bagel bakery bosses came from the same towns in the Old Country as their workers, sometimes having made a point to hire someone from their own *landsmanshaftn*. As a result, work-related tensions strained the community. With *landsmanshaftn* associations serving as the

¹⁵³ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 104.

¹⁵⁴ Brenner, “Formative Years in the Hebrew Bakers’ Union,” 39-121.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

backbone and social life on the Lower East Side at the time, for many years, loyalty to the Old Country and to one's neighbor-relations tended to trump worker solidarity, both for the bakers themselves, as well the community of customers that kept everyone in business.¹⁵⁶

Thus, the divisions between German-Jewish bosses and Yiddish-speaking workers would have caused a certain type of rift in the Jewish community of New York City—one that highlighted the economic, cultural, and wave-of-immigration experiences of the two groups. But conflicts between bosses and workers in bagel bakeries involved a division in a smaller, closer-knit community: a Yiddish-speaking, Eastern-European group that all arrived in the Second Wave of Immigration from similar places. Conflicts within this group made neighbors choose sides against neighbors when deciding to buy items produced in a certain shop or not.¹⁵⁷

Community presses, such as the *Jewish Daily Forward*, helped the unions gain support by coming out publically on their side and requesting that their readership do the same. Abraham Cahan, the author of “Yekl,” as well as the lead editor on the *Jewish Daily Forward*, wrote to the Jewish community of the Lower East Side during the bakery workers’ strike of 1905:

It is wholly a domestic matter with us. The workmen are ours and the bosses are ours and we alone are the customers... Let us show the world that when a struggle like this occurs in our midst, we settle the question in a feeling of justice and human sympathy—that we settle the issue in favor of the workmen and their just demands.¹⁵⁸

While Cahan, a known socialist, favored the bakery workers and wrote publicly for the larger Jewish community to support them in their efforts, the mere fact that he had to

¹⁵⁶ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 103.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-106

¹⁵⁸ As quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 112.

address the workmen and the bosses as “ours,” meaning Jewish community members, meant that community support for the bakers would not have been automatic or assumed. When Cahan writes in 1905 that the liberal, Jewish community should support the workmen, in this wholly “domestic matter” that was dividing the community, he does so appealing to a sense of “justice and human sympathy” in the customer. These qualities were not magically granted, however. By 1905, these sentiments had been carefully crafted by the bakers’ union organ, the *Bakers’ Journal*, as well as other supportive presses for their cause.

New York City’s bakers’ attempts at unionization –beginning with the 1879 “Slaves of the Bakery” pamphlet, followed by a strike in May of 1881, the implementation of union stickers, the lead-up to the passage of the Bakeshop Laws in 1895, and then their failure which was discussed in the past chapter, all the way up through the 1905 strike—represent a waxing commitment to the bakers’ cause by the Jewish community of the Lower East Side, as the emphasis on the bakers’ plight shifted from one of personal concern to a matter of public health and consumer protection.

This chapter makes the case that bakers’ unions, through the framing of their position as a public health concern, were able to shift the understanding of *compatriot* away from region of origin and towards solidarity for those of one’s economic class or labor-based trade. Already familiar with mutual aid organizations from their experience with their landsmanshaftn associations, the Jewish community was able to understand unionism as serving a similar financial and social function, but with a different notion of neighborliness. As a result, the formation of the bagel bakers into a union with community backing represents a social shift that defined one’s neighbor based on trade

and class. By casting the bakery bosses as “un-neighborly,” the unions were able to get the community to support them through the use of union stickers, boycotts, political support, and public outcry.

In 1905, when Abraham Cahan used the *Jewish Daily Forward* to address the divide within the Jewish community of the Lower East Side, requesting the public’s support for the bakery workers’ strikers’ demands—such as an end to the board and lodging system, an end to the vampire system of hiring, a recognized union, and a limited workday—he knew he was forging a rift within the Jewish community that could not be undone. This was, arguably, his exact goal. Cahan was making the case that the bakery workers had been making for many years: bakery workers held the best interest of the public in mind, while bakery owners only wanted to make a profit, even if that came at the expense of the health of the whole bagel-consuming community. Jewish bakers had spent two tireless decades attempting to get the public to support their efforts for better working conditions and improved livelihood, and by 1905 it was finally working in their favor.

The learning curve on how to frame their concerns took time, and a number of failed attempts before the bakery workers got the idea of publicizing their cause, and building support through their own press. In May 1881, shortly after Journeymen Bakers’ Union Local 31 was organized, the workers held a strike with the principle demand of a twelve-hour day. Initially, the Journeymen won a surrender and agreement from the bakery owners, but soon the owners reneged on the labor limit, managing to defeat the union because there was no way to enforce the win. As a result, the union took to the

press, beginning their own publication in 1885, publishing complete issues of the *Bakers' Journal*, which broadcasted their cause and their concerns.¹⁵⁹

The *Bakers' Journal* ran many issues publicizing the plight of bakery workers, appealing to possible union members, and advertising for support from the local community. Their union grew, slowly and gradually, until, by 1891, it was the third-largest union, with widespread public support on the Lower East Side.¹⁶⁰ The *Bakers' Journal*, soon became the voice not only of the local union in New York City, but the whole Journeymen Bakers' and Confectioner' International (to which they had changed the union's name in 1891).¹⁶¹ At the same time, the union continued to issue its own label to appeal to consumers. The union label, a “small square or circle of paper pasted on to the crust of baked goods to show that they were made by union members,” proved itself to be an effective and popular tool on the Lower East Side.¹⁶²

Gaining support from one of the socialist, Yiddish-language papers, *New York People's Journal*, which urged its readers to “buy no bread [other] than that which carries the union label,” Jewish bakers soon needed more than 200,000 labels a week to satisfy the demand.¹⁶³ As a result, the *Bakers' Journal* felt confident when it reported “the Jewish working population has become so much accustomed to the label that it is a very powerful weapon for the union.”¹⁶⁴ According to Balinska, the union's label technique had become such a successful tool for the unions, that “some bakery bosses actually

¹⁵⁹ Matt Bewig, “The Bakery Workers' Fight for Shorter Hours: A “New Social Movement” of the Late Nineteenth Century?” (Unpublished paper, 2004).

¹⁶⁰ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 105.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 105-106.

¹⁶³ As quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 105-106.

¹⁶⁴ *Bakers' Journal* (October 25, 1890) as quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 105-106.

resorted to producing counterfeit labels to attract customers.”¹⁶⁵ What the union label provided was a social tool that reinforced for customers each time they purchased bread in the market place that they were supporting the union members’ cause.

In July of 1893, the journeymen bakers made, what appears to be their first bold attempt in the press to raise the issue of public health in connection to bakeshop reforms. The article, published in the *Bakers’ Journal*, discusses the obstacles workers face as they attempt to create more salubrious conditions:

The movement for clean and healthy bakeshops is evidently in time throughout the world. The organized bakers are taking the matter up and forcing public attention to the existing anomalies. The movement is of spontaneous growth; it is natural and therefore permanent until the object is gained. The spirit of self assertion among the journeymen, which in spite of unfavorable odds has forced its way into the hearts and minds of a majority of our craftsmen, thanks to the untiring labor of the unions, is making itself felt in every custom of the baker. For years he willingly abided by the dictates of boss and master, without a murmur he would submit to the most nauseating surrounding and willingly labor in a manner suicidal to life and health.¹⁶⁶

Claiming the motive of the movement for clearer and healthier bakeshops to be out “of spontaneous growth” and “natural and therefore permanent until the object is gained” is a remarkable assertion; it gets to the heart of the issue, and states that a desire for improved bakery environments is intuitive for workers, and comes from a place of organic desire, such that it cannot be fulfilled until the changes are made and the conditions finally improved, once and for all. It casts the issue in a new light than it had been explored before—not simply as a grievance on the part of particular workers within a trade, but rather as an issue of abstract, natural, class-based rights. The article frames the bakery workers’ position as an issue of broader social progress, rather than personal grievances.

¹⁶⁵ Balinska, *The Bagel*, 105.

¹⁶⁶ *Bakers’ Journal* (July 15, 1893) as quoted in Bewig, “The Bakery Workers’ Fight.”

Additionally, the press makes it clear that the workers wish the conditions were improved and that it is the “dictates of boss and master” who insist on these work conditions. In this 1893 article, the bakers’ unions link the disgusting conditions of their work environment to the demands of their bosses, and not to their own immoral characters or desire for filth; conversely, they put forth the statement that their desire for a salubrious habitat is universal and organic.

Unfortunately, the *Bakers’ Journal* did not have a wide readership outside of the bakers’ unions, so their articles and arguments were not publicized to the community until the environment of the bakeries became issues of public concern. In 1894, two events got the press they the bakers needed in order to get their voices heard. The first event got the bakeries of the Lower East Side inspected by the health department, and the second was an article that publicized what the inspectors found, and opening the eyes of the Jewish community to how the work requirements of bakers affected them, as consumers, personally.

Late one night in 1894, Bernard Weinstein, secretary of the United Hebrew Trades, got wind of an emergency occurring in a bakery shop, where a baker collapsed with a terrible illness while working in the middle of the night. Weinstein and his men ran to try and remove the baker from the “mine,” as the bakery was known. Discovering first-hand what the bakery conditions were, Weinstein wrote his observations down, and sent them to the City’s inspectors, depicting the cellar bakery setting as a place where “two or three small men, half naked were kneading the dough... The filth everywhere was terrible.”¹⁶⁷ Weinstein convinced a factory inspector to check out the bakery he had

¹⁶⁷ As quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 107.

visited. As a result, the city inspectors decided to do an investigation of all of the bakeries on the Lower East Side—both Jewish and non-Jewish.¹⁶⁸

The *Bakers' Journal* and the union members had been preparing for over a decade for this moment, having published numerous articles on the link between their health and working conditions and the unsanitary quality of their products, and now in the wake of the collapsed worker, it was time to step-up their campaign to the public on their side.¹⁶⁹ Henry Weissmann, responding to the incident of the collapsed baker, published an article the following week in the *Bakers' Journal* asserting the connection between the number of hours that the bakers were being made to work and the health ramifications this had for the public's bread. Consumers, he reasoned, wanted clean, wholesome baked goods, yet, if they ever laid eyes on the bakery conditions existing in the tenement cellars, they would lose their appetite for bagels all together.¹⁷⁰ Wanting to make clear, as the 1893 article in the *Bakers' Journal* had done the year before, that it was not the fault of the bakery workers that they were unkempt, tired, dirty, sick, the *Bakers' Journal* published an article contending that, “the master bakers in their eagerness to enhance their profits give their employees neither time nor wages sufficient to keep themselves, their tools and general surroundings in a clean and wholesome condition.”¹⁷¹ As a result, the argument was present for the public that the filth of the bakeshops was a consequence of the bosses' desire for profits, such that they forced their workers into long hours of labor, and as a result sacrificed the sanitation their products.

¹⁶⁸ Bernard Weinstein, *Di Idische Yunyons in Amerika* (New York, 1929) as translated by Balinska, *The Bagel*, 108.

¹⁶⁹ Bewig, “The Bakery Workers' Fight.”

¹⁷⁰ Bewig, “The Bakery Workers' Fight.”

¹⁷¹ *Bakers' Journal* (September 29, 1894) as quoted in Bewig, “The Bakery Workers' Fight.”

As a result of the inspections and the articles in the *Bakers' Journal*, the press was soon aflutter with articles that caught the eye of not only the public, but also politicians. New Yorkers were being forced to face the miserable conditions of the city's poor, since it came with major health ramifications for all bread consumers. At the same time, boards of health across the country had begun to pay attention to the health ramifications of dirty bakeries, since medical studies had recently confirmed that "a loaf of bread could easily transmit contagious diseases."¹⁷²

On September 30, 1894, a week later, the *New York Press* published a seminal story with the headline, "Bread and Filth Cooked Together," which painted a gruesome picture of the tenement cellar bakeries.¹⁷³ For the first time, the larger public of New York City was given a glimpse into the bakery cellars of the tenement houses; no longer could they purchase their bagels from the peddlers in the market place without considering the means of production that made that bagel. This story had huge ramifications for the bakery unions in the social and political arena, and it brought public attention to the story that the *Bakers' Journal* had been attempting to tell for years.

Visiting what very well may have been a bagel bakery, Edward Marshall, author and editor of the Sunday *New York Press*, a known advocate of policies that would alleviate poverty Lower Manhattan, writes:

Trays of pretzel biscuit [possibly, bagels] more or less fresh from the oven, stood upon barrels...the wooden floor was rotten and bent under the weight of person in every part... and wet, so wet that if a man stepped on that portion the splash of the water underneath could plainly [be heard]...The shop was thoroughly infested

¹⁷² Balinska, *The Bagel*, 108.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

with a great variety of insect life...real genuine cockroaches, about an inch long, were seen springing at a lively rate in the direction of the half moulded dough.¹⁷⁴

As soon as a week after the expose, the *Bakers' Journal* came out publically, citing the *New York Press* for support, and got the attention it had been craving from the all of the bagel-consuming public. In their press, they asserted that “for the permanent relief of the men, which is essential to their cleanliness, the principal requirement is the reduction of the hours of labor,” and confidently took credit for their establishment of this viewpoint over the past years.¹⁷⁵ While other presses and periodicals were late in forming this conclusion and taking up the call for bakeshop reform, the organized bakers were there, pushing the intertwined issues of labor conditions and public health.

These stories, and several that followed them—to say nothing of the report that the New York City Health Commissioner would produce after the bakery inspections, as well as the decade of articles from the *Bakers' Journal*—worked to fully expose for the public conditions under which their street-hawked baked goods from the informal economy were produced as part of the formal economy.

Formal or informal aside, the public outcry that ensued, put enough pressure on politicians that a Bakeshop Act passed the New York State Assembly within eight months.¹⁷⁶ Only few months before the passage of the Bakeshop Laws by the New York State Assembly, however, the bakers published the following resolution, which expresses

¹⁷⁴ Edward Marshall, *New York Press* (September 30, 1894) as quoted in Balinska, *The Bagel*, 109. Upon numerous occasions, including with the help of the reference librarians, I cannot seem to locate where Balinska located this article, so her quote of the passage is the only one I have.

¹⁷⁵ *Bakers' Journal* (October 6, 1894) as quoted in Bewig, “The Bakery Workers’ Fight.”

¹⁷⁶ Already discussed in Chapter 2, The Bakeshop Act, which would have limited the hours of bakery labor to ten a day, and would have established a set of minimum requirements relating to ventilation, flooring, tiling, plumbing, and other structural aspects, was purely legislative and never properly enforced. That being said, it marks a major milestone in the New York bakers’ labor history, and the part played by Jewish bakers, including Lower East Side bagel bakers cannot go unnoticed. In 1905, the bakeshop laws were voided by the case of *Lochner v. New York*.

the philosophy for the need for increased regulation of their trade that they had been attempting for almost two decades, and providing their full support of the adoption of such legislation. In their press, in 1895, the bakers formally adopted a set of revealing resolutions. The five resolutions below provide a concise summary of unions' major arguments in their struggle for shorter hours between the 1880s and 1905:

Whereas the hard labor in bakeshops has done and is still doing much to undermine the health and the life of the journeymen bakers;

Whereas the long hard hours of labor prevalent in bakeshops have forced a great many bakers into idleness while those employed perform almost the work of two men each, and

Whereas in consequence of these evils the workingmen in the baking shops continue to sink in the scale of moral and physical manhood, a condition unworthy of citizens of a free community.

Be it therefore resolved, that we regard the bill now before the Legislature, which provides for a ten-hour work-day for bakers as a measure for the physical and intellectual elevation of the operative bakers, which having been passed by the Senate should now be passed by the assembly without hesitation.

Resolved, that this law is not alone a measure in the interest of public health but equally so of a higher state of morality and civilization of the entire community.¹⁷⁷

Here the bakers present a line of argument for shorter hours, citing the demands on them by their employers which have been threatening their own lives, demands that have produced unemployment and low wages in the baking trade, demands that have diminished the rights of bakers to participate in civic life, and demands that the long hours are an affront to the whole community and its values, since they harm the public. They propose that if their goals for better conditions are met, it will benefit not only them as laborers, but the greater public good and the health of their entire community. In 1895, when the bakery workers supported the legislation of the Bakeshop Laws, they believed a political change would help them. Only after the Bakeshops Laws failed did the unions

¹⁷⁷ *Bakers' Journal* (April 27, 1895) as quoted in Bewig, "The Bakery Workers' Fight."

reform, making their case louder and more widely within the community that had already supported them.¹⁷⁸ Even though the Bakeshop Laws were too weakly enforced to help the bagel bakers, the support of the community that the legislation brought into being was invaluable in the long run.

While the passage of the Bakeshops Laws failed, their initial passage was a victory.¹⁷⁹ At first glance it might appear to be victory for bakery workers, but it was actually a victory for the community of the Lower East Side as a whole—it showed that the press, including union organs, could be successful in appealing to their consumers and gaining their support, as long as issues were framed as public health concerns that directly impacted the consumer. Looking closely at how the bakers appealed to consumers, it is clear to see that addressing the system of compulsory boarding and lodging was not of public concern, nor were the number of hours that bosses insisted workers bake; additionally, consumers were not concerned with the loss of humanity that bakers felt, or their physical or moral well-being. That is, these factors were not of concern until they all could be seen to impact the hygiene of products that were being consumed locally by the public every day. It was the discourse of public health, rather than private grievances of the bakery workers, that proved to be rhetorically successful in gathering community support for the unions, but it was the revelation of the insalubrious conditions that got the bagel consumers to open their eyes. The separation of the formal bagel production from the informal economy of bagel distribution for a number of decades kept the public from seeing the grit that accompanied their favorite breakfast food.

¹⁷⁸ John Schudel, “Bakers and Their Struggles,” *American Federalist* (Indianapolis, IN), September, 1896.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

As can be seen from the chapters that make up this investigation, the urban environment of the Lower East Side of New York City between 1880-1910 made it possible for the bagel economy—in both its formal and informal parts—to grow, survive, and thrive. Bakery bosses, who can be viewed as aspiring entrepreneurs, saw the spatial limitations of the tenement kitchens not as burdens, but as opportunities for profit, and decided to commodify otherwise unused cellars. The urban environment, with its cramped spaces and high density of possible customers, makes multi-use spaces like the tenements possible. In fact, I believe it can be seen that the bagel would not exist as it does in New York City, America, or the world today, if it were not for the urban environment—spatially, politically, financially, or socially—of the Lower East Side as the Eastern-European immigrants encountered it when they arrived during the Second Wave of Immigration between 1880 and 1910.

As this study reveals, the economic limitations of Eastern-European immigrants, as well as the high volume of people settling in New York City, meant that housing and employment were scarce, and as a result, many immigrants lived in poverty, stuffed into slums, and piled into tenement apartments. Bagel baking became a formal occupation for young men, while bagel distribution became an informal means for young boys and older women earn money as peddlers. Informal jobs were common the Lower East Side, as they are in many migrant communities in cities experiencing accelerated rates of industrialization around the world today.¹⁸⁰ A rise in informal work is common among

¹⁸⁰ They can be seen in the Bronx selling churros and shaved ice, in Manhattan selling flowers, and in Queens selling mangos and handmade bracelets. In the fall of 2011, Dr. Arturo-Ignacio Sanchez, an Assistant Professor of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, came to talk to my Issues in

members of marginalized migratory groups in cities rushing to adapt and profit from the global economic pressures of today's neo-liberal markets.

One way that this investigation relates to issues of social and economic concern in the urban environment today is that economic and political structures are making it increasingly difficult for marginalized groups, or newcomers to globalizing cities, to practice their informal trades, while at the same time, formal occupations for laborers in these places are not healthy atmospheres. As a result of the global economic pressures being felt by politicians to appeal for manufacturing jobs in their cities, the work-load demands placed on to workers are dangerous and detrimental to their health and livelihoods. Additionally, these neo-liberal conditions have been shown to burden workers at the same time that governmental social welfare programs are being cut. How can workers in global cities of the south improve their working conditions, despite the increase in neo-liberal political and economic circumstances that they are facing, and have been facing increasingly since the 1980s?

This question has gone around and around in my head since I first started studying the effects of globalization and industrialization on the urban condition. While the bagel bakers and the bagel economy might not provide a perfect answer, this study includes a consideration of the top-down organizations of New York City that immigrants met upon arrival—circumstances that they could not change because they were too deeply engrained in the political practices of the city, such as the Tammany machine and its lack

Urban Studies course about the rise of informal economies in Jackson Heights, Queens, along Roosevelt Boulevard. Energetic and captivating, Dr. Sanchez imparted upon my peers and me how informal economies in the urban setting are vital to the survival of recent immigrants, but that translating informal occupations into formal work is sometimes a difficult step. More work needs to be done to see what sorts of entrepreneurial interventions can help immigrants transition their “businesses” into the formal sector, both functionally and legally.

of interest in the needs and concerns of Jewish immigrants—it is a decent jumping off point for understanding how, in the past, other marginalized urban groups improved their collective livelihood by unionizing with community support. Neo-liberal economic practices and governmental ideologies in many countries around the world will not change easily, so other means to achieving better working, social, and physical conditions for people will have to come from other sources. It is my belief, that by understanding the politics of why Jewish immigrants were forced into trades in the private sector, rather than civil servant jobs, and why bakery bosses, looking to make a profit, were able to create horrific and insalubrious working conditions for bakers, that it is possible to recognize why workers saw no other hope to improve their lot than to join together, and attempt to unionize.

Unionizing is a difficult and terrifying task, especially when bosses are only focused on one thing—profits, and when unemployment rates are high. The glimmer of hope in this story, which I would like to be taken and applied to persons and trades working under horrific conditions in plants and factories around the world today, would be that if the circumstances of the Lower East Side could be overcome by the bagel bakers, then maybe the conditions of other developing manufacturing cities can be overcome in a similar manner.

As Chapter 3 of this study argues, by framing their personal grievances about bakery working conditions as larger, public health concerns for their customers, bagel bakers were able to earn the trust and support of their customers, and successfully organize, boycott, strike, and unionize for improved working conditions. Getting out the proper message to the proper people is both more difficult and less difficult in the

globalized world we are currently occupying, since the internet spreads information faster and further—reaching more publics than ever before—but the producers and consumers of goods are farther apart spatially than ever before, too. While the bagel bakers had their neighbors as customers, and could appeal to them directly, the people most in need of customer support today are also often unseen, and even unconsidered, by their customers.

More activism has to be done to get the word out about harmful working conditions in cities of the global south, but those messages, like the articles in the *Bakers' Journal*, need to be framed so that consumers understand what is at stake for them, personally, as customers. While the trials and tribulations of bagel bakers a century ago might seem disconnected from our understanding of urbanism today, this project could be helpful in changing how workers organize and gain public support in the future.

The global economic pressures being felt around the world today might not fit perfectly into the model of the bagel bakers and their struggles, but this project is a start. Unionization is not as common today as it was in the past, and companies that fear losing their competitive edge or profits no longer make it possible for workers to unionize. There is a global fear of what unions in industries will cost employers, and less contact between workers and customers, since often, manufacturing of products occurs half way around the world from where the goods are actually sold; not in the same neighborhood, like bagels. Additionally, capital is more fluid thanks to the internet and shipping technologies; no longer are industries stuck manufacturing close to their customer base, items can be produced wherever the cost of labor is the cheapest. From the perspective of environmental history, there is no longer as strong of a connection between industrial cities and their hinterlands; goods now come from all over, and get sold globally. As a

result, laborers of goods are faceless to consumers, their stories and struggles are less likely to be heard, and due to the competition of the global markets, any industry that organizes or threatens a strike, risks not only losing their jobs, but also losing all of the nation's industry—companies have more options than citizens or governments do, and it is the workers who struggle. Industries like baking are also different than other manufacturing industries, since food goes bad faster than iPhones. iPhones can be produced in China and shipped to the United States, bread needs to be made closer to home. Those differences aside, however, this project still adds something valuable to the industrialization and globalization discourse.

By studying the informal and formal sectors of the bagel economy in the context of the urban environment of New York City, it has been possible to see how phenomena sociologists are observing today concerning informal economies or dangerous formalized industries in cities of the global south, relate to the history of Jewish immigrant laborers in New York City. Additionally, the achievements' of the bagel bakers provide a glimmer of hope that conditions can be changed; such hope is often lacking when scholars describe the impacts of globalization on workers. And while I can fully appreciate why scholars need to describe the working conditions in such a bleak manner, it has been my desire with this project to add some sort of solution to the situation: It might be that the successes' of the bagel bakers can be emulated with workers today, and as a result, unions—or at least collective organizations with community support—might rise again.

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Abstract

Jamie Sarah Feigenbaum
B.S., Cornell University
M.A., Fordham University

The Bagel Economy: What An Iconic Urban Food Can Teach Us About Immigrant Life in New York City, 1880-1910

Thesis directed by Mark Naison, Ph.D.

This work investigates how the spatial, political, industrial, and social dynamics of the urban environment influenced, and were impacted by, the production and distribution of bagels on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. By combining methodologies from literature, history, and sociology, this project breaks-down the limitations of specific disciplinary modes of investigation, and makes it possible to more fully see what the Jewish immigrant experience in New York City was like for Eastern Europeans. Applying the lens of a modern sociological urban methodology reveals the dynamics that existed between the urban immigrant life and the bagel economy, composed of both a formal sector and an informal sector.

Spatial and economic analysis explains why formal bagel production existed in tenement basements, while informal workers—young boys and older women—peddled bagels in markets. Top-down organizations of New York City, including Tammany's machine politics and baking industry organization, shed light on why Jewish immigrants were forced into trades in the private sector, rather than civil servant jobs, and why bakery bosses, looking to make a profit, created horrific and insalubrious working conditions for bagel bakers. Conditions might have seemed hopeless, if not for attempts at unionization in the formal sector of the bagel economy. By framing personal grievances about their working conditions as larger, public health concerns for their customers, bagel bakers looking to unionize were able to earn the trust and support of their community, allowing them to strike for improved working conditions and win.

By studying the informal and formal sectors of the bagel economy in the context of the urban environment of New York City, it is possible to see how phenomena sociologists are observing today concerning informal economies or dangerous formalized industries in cities of the global south, relate to the history of immigrants in New York City a century ago. Additionally, the achievements' of the bagel bakers provide a glimmer of hope to conditions that are often described by scholars as bleak. It might be that the successes of the bagel bakers can be emulated, and unions might rise again.

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Vita

Jamie Sarah Feigenbaum, daughter of Peter Feigenbaum and Ricki Rusting, was born on June 22, 1987, in Brooklyn, New York. In 2004, she was named a National Semi-Finalist in the Intel Science Talent Search. After graduating as salutatorian, in 2005, from Croton-Harmon High School in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, she entered Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, as a Rawlings-Cornell Presidential Research Scholar. In 2009, Jamie graduated with honors, receiving her Bachelor of Science degree in Biology & Society with a Certificate in Gerontology Studies. She then entered Fordham University, in the Bronx, New York, in the fall of 2009, completing a Master of Arts degree in Humanities & Sciences in May 2011, while serving as the Vice-President of the Graduate Student Association and interning at Nature Publishing Group. In the fall of 2011, she began her second Master of Arts degree program at Fordham University, this time in Urban Studies. While working towards her degree, Jamie served as the President of the Graduate Student Association at Fordham University from August 2012 until graduation.