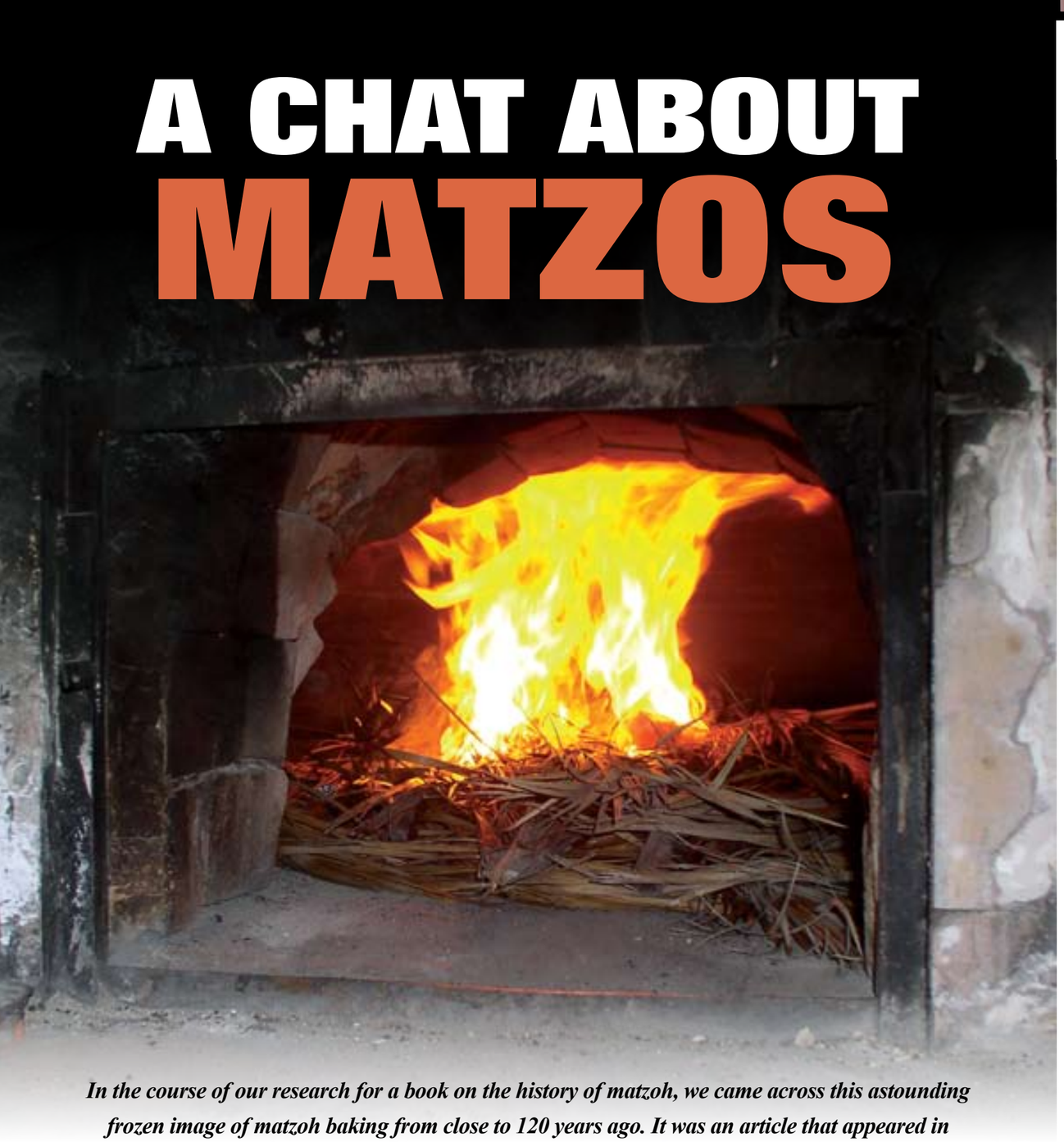
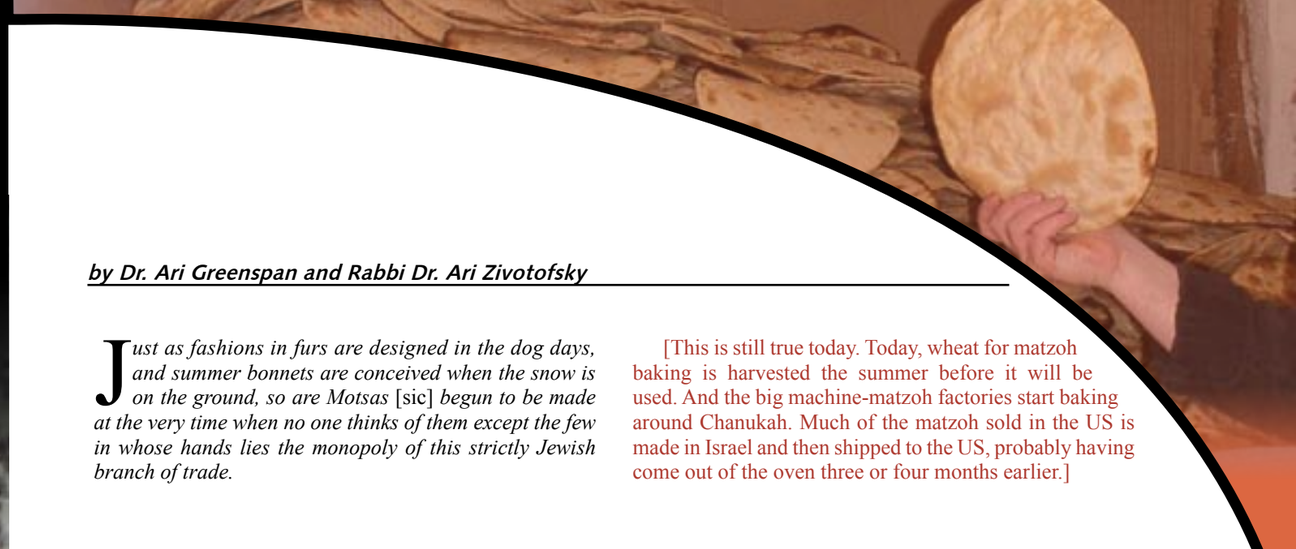
A CHAT ABOUT MATZOS



In the course of our research for a book on the history of matzoh, we came across this astounding frozen image of matzoh baking from close to 120 years ago. It was an article that appeared in the* London Jewish Chronicle *in 1892, describing the "lost art" of making hand matzos with the advent of machine matzos. We have woven our own comments into the original article, hoping that our notes, and the photos we have included, will enhance this peek into the life of Victorian English Jewry. (Italicized text is the original; our notes are in brackets.) Perhaps this glimpse into the past will help us view our own adherence to the mitzvah of matzoh in a different light



by Dr. Ari Greenspan and Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky

Just as fashions in furs are designed in the dog days, and summer bonnets are conceived when the snow is on the ground, so are Motsas [sic] *begun to be made at the very time when no one thinks of them except the few in whose hands lies the monopoly of this strictly Jewish branch of trade.*

[This is still true today. Today, wheat for matzoh baking is harvested the summer before it will be used. And the big machine-matzoh factories start baking around Chanukah. Much of the matzoh sold in the US is made in Israel and then shipped to the US, probably having come out of the oven three or four months earlier.]

One of the earliest known matzoh-baking pictures. Rome circa 1890

The advent of machinery has made the modern Motsa [sic] *a work of science. Its defunct prototype was much more truly a work of art, and those whose curiosity led them to watch the older process while it lasted may be regarded as those who have looked upon a now lost art, who witnessed the occupation of men in serious and really clever handicrafts, the exercise of which, in England at least, will never be seen again.*

[It's interesting that what seemed to be the complete displacement of handmade matzoh by machine matzoh led some people to feel that the baking of "old-fashioned" hand matzoh was a lost art. Today, of course, both commercial hand-matzoh factories and mom-and-pop outfits are sprouting like mushrooms, and hand-matzoh baking is far from being a lost art.]

The writer has often, when a child, watched the rapid conversion of the flour into the Motsa, attending it with unabated interest from the kneading trough to the storeroom. The first operator in the process was the mixer who, in the courtyard of the premises familiar to the writer, stood in front of his copper kneading trough kneading to its right consistency the flour and water.

This gentleman at his work was the very personification of laborious busyness. His bare arms twirled about with astonishing rapidity. The fine flour flew around, surrounding him with a perfect halo. His white cap and whitened face gave him the appearance of a clown, and his ready wit and propensity for practical jokes helped to increase the similarity.

[Kneading the matzoh dough is indeed one of the most difficult jobs, particularly in an Ashkenazic factory, where the matzoh is thin and hard, and the batter is extremely dry. A precise, very low water-to-flour ratio is used, and the muscles in the kneaders' forearms get quite a workout, ensuring that all the flour is mixed with the water in the short time span allowed.]

Hard by stood the "breakers," ready to twist and torture the rough paste to a consistency sufficiently malleable to permit its being worked in the further process. The "break" was a mangle-like machine provided with a revolving cogwheel under which the dough was brought by a sliding table. This was worked by two strong men — in the writer's experience they were always wiry Dutchmen — a regulation number of turns being invariably accompanied by a regulation number of grunts.

The dough, being duly broken, was borne down into the bakehouse on the shoulders of the carrier. In the bakehouse it was all heat, noise and work. The first person to claim the dough was a workman who placed it on a copper slab and very cleverly pinched off sufficient to make two Motsas. The quantity never varied — so proficient was the artist. Not less proficient was his next-door neighbor, to whom the lumps were handed. This gentleman broke each piece into pieces sufficient for one Motsa, and flattened the two

pieces together by means of what had the appearance of a copper tennis racket. It was under his hands that the dough first began to assume its rounded shape.

[Today we tend to assume that hand matzos are round, and machine matzos are square. But in the early days of machine matzos, the bakers tried to make them round, because that was the traditional matzoh shape. The discarded corners were problematic, but when the machine-matzoh factories switched to the square shape, they were accused of breaking with tradition.]

The rounded cakes of dough were next handed to the rollers. The rollers held the blue ribbon of the Motsa bakers' calling. The great art of this branch was the rapidity of the rolling and the evenness of the work. Old Motsa eaters will remember the hard edges of the Motsas, the terror of people with teeth and without them, the parts, in fact, that were given to the children — or to the husbands, where there were no little ones. It was the aim of the skilled roller to reduce the hardness to as much of a minimum as possible, and a quick workman and a reliable would be proud of his record among his craft and do much to safeguard his reputation.

[The most obvious difference between professional hand matzoh and that baked by amateurs is in the rolling. The factory product is of an even thickness and a consistent shape. This skill — and in many factories this job is done by women — is the envy of all us amateurs.]

The next process was one which ever attracted attention from the interested stranger. The thin wafer of dough was thrown onto a

hard wood table close by. The manner in which the doughy unbaked Motsa was picked up and thrown — always without failure — raised this part of the process to jugglery. It was most cleverly done, and the wondering visitor was shown the wafer slapped, and tossed about and twirled up into the air as though it was a disc of wood instead of an unbaked Motsa. Sometimes, if the visitor was popular and the men in good humour, the Motsa would, for his edification, be thrown round and across the bakehouse from hand to hand, never being any the worse at the end of its journey.

The next process would be "shtuppling". By this name of Dutch (or doubtful) origin was known the means by which the holes were made in the Motsa. These were needful, or it would rise and take the shape of an inverted basin when placed in the oven. The "shtuppler" placed the victim Motsa on his table, and then rapidly wheeled across it his little spiky machine. Beginning at the top, he would rapidly pass his wheel all over the Motsa, which he then threw onto the next table. Skill was required here, and the ignorant layman would tear the Motsa to pieces.

[Today the hole-making process is known not by the Dutch term but by the Yiddish "*reddlen*." The purpose of the holes is to allow the steam in the dough to escape, lest the dough swell up like a pita.]

The Motsa was next thrown into the oven — a large arched furnace heated with a great wood fire at the back — while the Motsas baked on the smooth slabs near the oven mouth. Skill was — and is, I suppose, for the matter of that — required by the baker to keep the oven at proper temperature.

[The baker next to the oven needs additional skills as well. He usually rolls (not throws) the matzoh into the oven and must do this without any folds' developing in the dough. Such folds invalidate the matzoh. He then must determine when they are baked enough, but not burned, and then remove them from the oven while still whole. The task is much harder in a Yemenite hand bakery, where the dough is smacked onto the side of the oven and removed by sticking one's hand into the oven.]

The Motsa thrown in baked its allotted time under the supervision of the baker, who kept all his unleavened clients in full view and, as soon as they were done brown, brought out his Motsas with a long pole — a bakers "peel."

Jewish man on the island of Djerba, Tunisia, baking matzoh

[In every factory there's one more important person, and that's the *mashgiach*, who inspects each and every matzoh that comes out of the oven. He checks that every part of it is sufficiently baked, that there are no folds or bubbles, and that it is halachically whole.]

Of course while the visitor travels with his individual Motsa, the work is going on all round, fresh dough being kneaded, broken, pinched, rolled and "shtuppled" all the time. There were occasionally those who actually did watch in this manner the making of all the Motsas for their own use, those which they watched being put away for them — at least we hope so.

The interest attaching to the Motsas did not always end with their exit from the oven, at least in the good old days — rather, might one say, bad old days — before railway companies learned how to handle Motsa boxes, and before the dealers learned how to pack them. The domestic comfort of many a Jewish household in the provinces used to tremble in the balance until the annual box reached its destination without accident. In the days when geography was not universally cultivated by Motsa bakers, the Great Northern Railway would be commissioned to carry Motsas to Penzance, while the South Western would receive parcels for Hull and Newcastle. Sometimes these boxes arrived in time for Shevuos, and the travel of other boxes anticipated — though it is not generally known — the system of circular tours. At times a bottle broke, and the Motsas would be flavoured with shrub, while the cakes were deluged with olive oil. It is impossible to say how many years of evolution resulted in the pathetic remonstrance printed in red ink on the prospectus of modern days in which it declared at last that "on no account will cucumbers [ed. pickles] be packed with Motsas."

[Today we're blessed to have a wide variety of matzoh and no problem of quantity. But in many times and places throughout history Jews had to scrape together flour for matzos and barely had enough for Pesach. This peek into a matzoh factory of over one hundred years ago reminds us to appreciate what we have today.] ■

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US soldiers loading matzoh onto a train during World War II