



Mishpacha

Fresh Out of *the Old Oven*

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In our journeys over the years, we've examined dozens of ancient matzah ovens, but most of these are just relics of now-defunct Jewish communities. That's why we were so excited to discover some old factories still in operation; and while they'd never win an award for state-of-the-art technology, the long-standing customs — together with the fragrance of those fresh-baked matzos — are the mainstay of Pesach tradition



Matzah baking is as old as the Jewish People.

Throughout history, wherever Jews were on Pesach, there was matzah too. Yet despite almost universal use of matzah among all types of Jews, there are very few extant matzah factories that can actually be called old. In our journeys over the years, we've examined dozens of ancient matzah ovens and pre-Pesach baking centers, but most of these are no longer functioning — as they remain relics of now-defunct Jewish communities. That's why we were so excited to discover some old factories still in operation — two in France and one in Israel. As part of a trip to the Alsace-Lorraine region in France to examine some of the spectacular but now empty shuls, we took the opportunity to visit two of the oldest machine-matzah factories in the world. To round out our mission, upon returning to Israel we visited an unusual, one night a year, traditional Iraqi hand-matzah bakery.

The introduction in the mid-19th century of machines to assist in the making of matzah had tremendous halachic repercussions and engendered a veritable halachic war at the time. Some *poskim*, including Rav Yosef Shaul Nathanson (the Shoel U'meishiv), felt that the newfangled machine which enabled mass production actually gave more control over preventing any chance of *chometz*. Other *poskim* opposed the machine product for a variety of reasons — the most basic being that for close to 3,500 years, matzos were made round and by hand, with *kavanah* for the mitzvah. This group, mostly of Eastern European extraction, was led by the *posek* Rav Shlomo Kluger. A hundred fifty years later, remnants of this fight continue until today, with some people — particularly Yerushalmim and some Briskers — eating *only* machine matzah, while others, especially chassidim, will not even let machine matzah into their homes during Pesach. With this controversy still simmering in the background, we were excited to head off to Alsace-Lorraine, the region where the very first matzah machine was invented and two of the oldest machine-matzah factories are still in operation.

In fact, one of the two factories we visited, Etablissements Rene Neymann, has been making matzah in the same region since 1850, a mere



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12 years after the very first machine appeared on the scene. The present owner, Jean Claude Neymann, is the fifth generation in the family line to run the operation, and he graciously showed us around his factory which is under the *hashgachah* of the *beis din* in nearby Strasbourg. When we first called, he was incredulous and thought we were joking; after all, how many people travel such distances to visit a matzah factory? But for us, the opportunity to see the oldest matzah factory in France and one of the oldest in the world was irresistible.

Chinese Crackers We made the half-hour drive from Strasbourg and without difficulty found the village of Wasselonne. We felt like we were in a time warp. The small picturesque town with cobblestoned streets and heavy, dark timber-framed, plastered houses looked like they were built hundreds of years ago. We parked, asked for directions, and started walking. If in doubt about the location of a matzah factory, experience told us to follow our noses; the unmistakable and tantalizing aroma of fresh-baked matzah wafted through the air, and we couldn't believe the quaint building from which it emanated. This factory, like virtually all matzah factories around the world, makes a host of matzah-like items, including flavored and "health" matzah and salted matzah crackers, sold all year long and around the world – and not all with Pesach certification. Yet we were there before Pesach and were able to see their kosher-for-Pesach operation.

Jean Claude Neymann was happy to recount the history of what may be the oldest matzah company in the world. Every box of matzah contains pictures of the five generations of owners. The founder was Salomon Neymann who

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opened his first bakery in Odratzheim, less than six miles from the present site. At first, as was often the case in those years, he baked only for the local community. By 1870 he realized the potential of a wider distribution and with his son Benoit, opened their next bakery in Wasselonne. The idea of selling to the non-Jewish consumer is credited to Benoit's youngest son Rene, who in 1930 began to market to non-Jews. Although it is a relatively small plant, Jean Claude, who took over in 1983, proudly showed us matzah boxes with Chinese writing. The company exports matzah to China, where, it seems, the Chinese enjoy the flavor of traditional matzah.

While similar to most machine-matzah factories we have toured over the years, one of the ovens in this factory has a particularly interesting tale. When the Nazis overran Alsace, the owners fled to southern France, and when they returned in 1945 at the end of the war they discovered that the Nazis had confiscated the oven and shipped it back to Germany for a bread bakery there. The present owner's grandfather, Rene, tracked down the oven in Germany. He contacted the JDC

who, in 1947, helped him in his efforts. In fact, we actually found a copy of the telegram sent on March 18, 1947 from the Paris JDC office to the Frankfurt JDC office in this matter. The oven was eventually brought back to France, and the bakery restarted operation in 1948, providing matzos for those Jews who made it back alive.

That oven is still in use, and we were fortunate to watch the entire operation, including the long break between batches as the young *mashgiach* diligently cleaned every nook and cranny with strong blasts of air. While not outstanding in size or technology, this plant is truly historic.

Starting from Scratch In the tiny town of Soultz-sous-Forêts we located the Paul Heumann matzah company. We knew almost from the moment we entered that we had found matzah friends, who appreciated and valued their family's history and involvement in matzah baking. Initially hesitant to admit us into the factory, Isabelle Heumann, the fourth-generation owner, was quickly won over when we began to show her our collection of thousands of historical matzah photos. She said, "Wow, my father needs to see this," and called her dad to come quickly to the factory. Guy, her father, had been born into the matzah world and was happy to share matzah tales with us and show us some of the historical pictures and items he has collected over the years. Here was a true kindred spirit. Since then, they have been so kind as to scan photos from their collection and share them with us.

The Heumann matzah empire started as a small village general bakery founded by Max Heumann in 1907. His son Paul eventually took over the bakery, but with the coming of the Nazis, Paul abandoned it and



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Mishpacha

1. FOLLOW YOUR NOSE In the village of Wasselonne, we felt like we were in a time warp, until the machines started rolling

2. OFF TO BEIJING Even the Chinese love traditional matzah

3. RESILIENCE The Heumann matzah empire started as a small general bakery in the tiny town of Soultz-sous-Forêts, which we nearly passed

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fled 435 miles southwest to Clermont-Ferrand, where he hid and worked in a bakery. After the war he returned home to find his own bakery in ruins. Never one to give up, he relaunched the business, and in the late 1940s decided to branch out and start baking matzah as well. He found an old matzah factory 62 miles south in Muttershotz, bought all of the equipment, and some of the staff even followed. Isabelle proudly showed us an old black and white picture of that original factory. Paul died young and his son Guy took the reins of the growing matzah business. He expanded the product line to include a wide range of non-*kosher l'Pesach* matzah varieties that he hoped would be an alternative to biscuits or crackers. What started in 1907 as a general bakery was by 1987 baking only matzah.

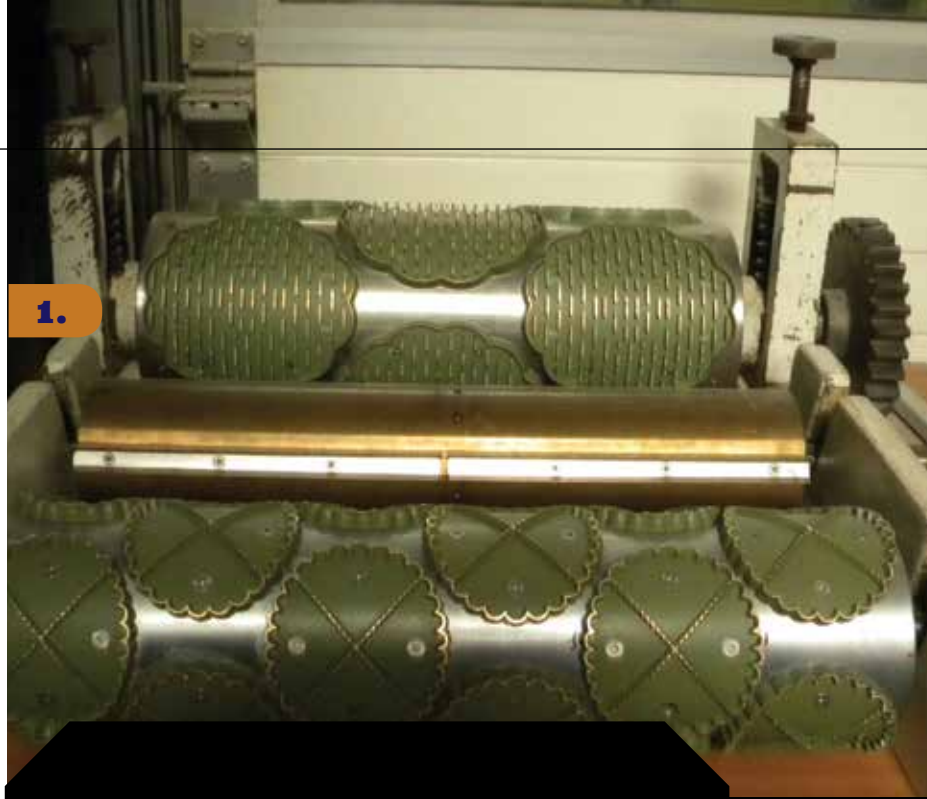
In 1996, one of Guy's daughters, Isabelle — a bright, talented multilingual young woman — completed her master's degree in foreign languages at the venerable 500-year-old University of Strasbourg. When she let her father know that she was ready to take over as the fourth generation, he told her, "Write a CV and a cover letter." She did, and he then put her through three grueling interviews about every aspect of the business. Today she runs the operation that produces some 200 different products, of which more than 70 percent is sold in more than 20 different countries including Russia, Australia, and parts of Africa. Isabelle and her father are also responsible for the local shul, built more than a century ago in 1890.

Designer Matzah We have seen some unusual matzos over the years. In a room in the back of the main synagogue in Rome, the chief rabbi once showed us a wicker basket containing a thick round matzah with many large holes in a concentric design. He explained that because making a community *eiruv* involves designating an item of food, there was a Roman custom to make such a complicated matzah once a year for the *eiruv*. So, despite the fact that there is no longer an *eiruv* in Rome, they still keep up the unusual *minhag* so that it should not be forgotten.

Still, we have yet to find a more unusual matzah than the machine matzah that we first encountered many years ago in the Italian town of Pitigliano, hanging on the wall. The Pitigliano Jewish community was bolstered in the 16th century by Jews forced out of the papal state and other locales. Beneath the shul in a cave carved out of the mountainside, we found a *forno delle azzime*, or matzah oven. A window carved out to the mountainside provides light and an exhaust vent. The last remaining Jewish lady showed us around, and in a display case we noticed something fascinating that we had never seen before — a doily-like machine matzah, slightly thicker than the ones we are used to eating today.

Despite the Talmud's prohibition against making fancy ornamental matzos in

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In Pitigliano, the last remaining Jew showed us a doily-like machine matzah

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1. STAMPED WITH STYLE This rotating drum makes "designer" matzos just like the Italians did 200 years ago

2. TASTE OF TRADITION On the other side of the Mediterranean, the Iraqi taboo makes Pesach "pita"

shapes like animals, for fear the effort would take time and lead to the product becoming *chamotz*, there was an ancient custom in Italy to beautify the matzos by making holes in a pattern. We had been told that that particular matzah was made in southern France, although at the time we did not know about any factories there.

To our surprise, while Isabelle showed us the multitude of products manufactured in the Paul Heumann factory, we noticed a box with those designed "Pitigliano" matzos on the shelf. We saw that they were stamped out on a rotating drum, the same way that original Italian matzah machine made round designed matzos almost 200 years ago.

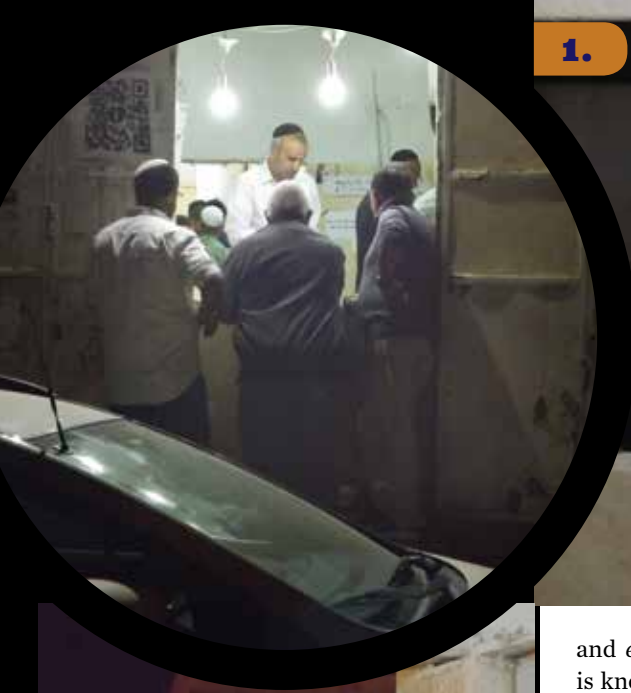
When we asked her if these round designed matzos had Pesach certification, she said, "Of course, but they are not kosher for Ashkenazim." We realized that she was referring to the fact that Askenazic custom has moved over the last several hundred years from thick soft matzos to our present thin crackers, and despite the fact that these were a mere few millimeters thicker than the regular machine matzos, it seems that the *beis din* of Strasbourg ruled them out for Ashkenazim.

Back to Baghdad Back home in Israel, we discovered some vintage bakeries as well. When we were told that there was an old Iraqi bakery that would be baking matzah for just one day, starting the night of *bedikas chometz*, we knew our ancient matzah tour wouldn't be complete without a visit. As we entered the cramped brick building off Bezalel Street in Jerusalem's center, we were greeted by the usual frenetic pace of a hand-matzah factory. But the products of this factory were not the usual thin, hard cracker-like matzah used by most Jews today. Despite the bustle of activity, the patriarch of the operation, Ovadia Haba, was willing to explain to us the process and the history.

Over 100 years ago Reuven Haba founded a family *esh tanur* bakery in Baghdad, in which, in the days before Pesach, he would bake matzah for the once large and proud community. His son Sasson took over the factory in Baghdad. Then, beginning in 1948, large numbers of Iraqi Jews made the treacherous journey to Israel via Iran, and Sasson was among them, having left part of his family behind. Two years later Sasson's wife and son Ovadia joined him in Israel, where Sasson — who, like all of the Iraqi Jews, had been forced to leave everything behind — had already set up a bakery. That bakery, later run by brothers Yaakov and Ovadia, made pita in the Nachlaot neighborhood. Its fame spread and in 1969 the family opened a branch in Machane Yehudah, where well-known Israeli personalities were known to regularly buy their Shabbos challah. Today, Haba bakery's branches in Givat Shaul and Machane Yehudah are popular all year round.

But that night, we weren't interested in their famous pita

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and *ish tanur*. Among Iraqi Jews, Haba is known as *the* place to come to get your traditional Iraqi matzah for the Seder. This one-day matzah factory is not part of the main Haba bakeries, but is tucked away in a building locked all year, opening only for one day of operation. For the family, this is the jewel of the family's baking legacy. Ovadia proudly told us how 20 years ago his 78-year-old father suddenly felt unwell on Erev Pesach, the special day on which the matzah baking was taking place, and he instructed his daughter that if something was to happen to him, to tell no one, and that the baking was to go on. He lived until just after Shavuot that year. When Ovadia heard later what his father had instructed, it reaffirmed his own commitment, realizing how seriously his father took their role of providing the community with traditional matzos.

While much of the process resembled every other matzah bakery, there were small but significant differences. While Ashkenazim use dough which is generally about half a liter of water to a kilo of flour, they use a full liter of water for 1.5 kilo of flour, yielding a much moister batter. The *naglas* (portion of dough) given to each roller to make into individual matzos was also larger than we are used to; they had an individual whose job was to measure out 220 grams (nearly half a pound) of dough per matzah, in an old-fashioned copper balancing scale. The dough was rolled out and then smacked onto the side of a *taboon* — a metal circular oven with a fire on the bottom. The fully baked matzos, which resemble pitas, were being

sold as fast as they came out of the oven, as Ovadia's twin granddaughters — the fourth generation to work in the factory, he proudly notes — wrapped and handed them over.

Ovadia told us how the Iraqi Jews from around the country would continue to come all night and into the next morning, lining up by the little window to purchase their Seder matzah. Ovadia is thinking of perhaps next year organizing a baking day earlier in the season, so that he could then ship frozen Iraqi matzah to his compatriots who live in *chutz l'Aretz*.

What makes these matzos especially unique is the unusual design on them. Just before they go into the oven, each matzah is marked with one, two or three lines, by sort of scraping a finger into the soft dough, and slightly pinching the dough at the top of that line to make it jut out. These lines identify the matzos for their order on the Seder table: top matzah (Kohein), the middle (Levi) and the bottom (Yisrael).

With obvious ethnic pride, Ovadia told us that these matzos were being baked almost exactly as he remembered them in Iraq, with the caveat that there were a few changes that “the rabbis have imposed on them.” He was referring to some new standardization procedures.

Prized Possession During last year's contentious voting in Beit Shemesh, while serving as an observer at a voting station, Ari Z. met a very recent *oleh* from Yemen. The obvious first question he asked was “How do you bake your matzah?” (Isn't

that the foremost question on everyone's mind?) The Yemenite explained that since they pined for those hot, fresh, soft matzos like from the old country, he had actually brought a matzah oven with him from Yemen. Now that says something. Most of us are concerned when making aliyah about bringing over a washer and dryer, a stereo and a couch. What was important to him was matzah.

We arranged to see these Yemenites bake before the *chag*, and indeed, they gave us a private demonstration, since they usually bake only on Erev Pesach and then daily on Chol Hamoed so that the matzos are fresh. The oven itself is a double-walled round tin drum with gas jets between the walls and below the floor.

Here, as in Yemen, the hard work was exclusively done by the women. As we watched, the flour and water were mixed and the woman of the house kneaded, while her seven-year-old daughter sat at her side. An important law in matzah making is that the dough should never be stopped from being worked, lest the heat of kneading cause it to rise within 18 minutes. The Yemenites understand that any movement of the dough is sufficient. We were amazed to see that the little seven-year-old took hold of the bowl when her mom started making the matzos and began to jiggle it. Nobody told her to — she just seemed to know what to do. The mother took the wettish dough and slapped it on the side of the oven where it began to bake.

Each batch produced only three to four matzos; yet each matzah had not less than ten *k'zeisim* of dough. That is important for two reasons. Firstly, when the leader of the Seder makes the *brachah*, he can hand out a full *k'zayis*-worth from the actual *matzas mitzvah*. (This is how the Yemenites measure a *k'zayis* with their hand: Rip off a piece with your four fingers on top and thumb on the bottom, and that is a *shiur*.) Secondly, because the batch has such few matzos to shape, it takes less than five minutes from the time the flour and water meet until the matzos reach the oven.

We were intrigued by the oven and asked if we could acquire one. Sure enough, an acquaintance of our new Yemenite friend, who lives in Be'er Sheva, had a brand-new one. We brought it home, still with the original sticker in Arabic and the capital of Yemen, Sana'a, spelled out in English. We have made several attempts to make some soft matzah on it, but admit that none have been successful, showing that the mimetic process of millennia is how tradition is truly passed on.

Once again, that most loved of Jewish foods, matzah, continues to tell our story of suffering and survival, love and devotion, the richness of Jewish custom, and the tenacity of the Jewish People — all with a little flour and water, quick hands, and a generous spirit of devotion. ●

Additional photo credit: Chaim Guggenheim

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1. HOT CAKES In Ovadia Haba's one-night bakery, the matzos are sold as fast as they come out of the oven

2. SLAP THAT DOUGH Our Yemenite friend (and his wife) treated us to their specialty — fresh out of their most prized possession