

**A Growing American Identity Within A Jewish Community
Kingston, New York, 1880-1960**

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Abstract: In the 19th and 20th centuries, many Jewish people immigrated to America to escape anti-semitism in Eastern Europe. Frank Reher was one of these immigrants. He opened up a successful Jewish bakery in Kingston, New York, where there was a growing Jewish population. His family provides a case study of one family who developed an American identity, largely through Americanizing events in their synagogues. However, they never lost touch with their Jewish identities.

Keywords: *History, Jewish, Immigrants, 19th century, 20th century, bakery, Kingston, Rondout, Jewish business, synagogue, American, citizenship, Jewish women, anti-Semitism*

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For my honors thesis I am working off my history thesis. That paper is on the Jewish community in Kingston. Through research primarily with primary sources, I am exploring how a rising American identity formed in the community. However, because of the strong Jewish ties through community programs, synagogues, and businesses, the sense of Jewishness was never lost. For this presentation, I am shifting attention to the power of the primary sources, which my slides will depict.

Jewish people immigrated to America during specific periods of time. Eastern European Jews dominated immigration that began in the 1880s and lasted until the early 1920s. The Jewish people immigrated because of a mixture of anti-Semitic legislation, persecution, and civil rights violations. The Immigration Act that President Coolidge signed into effect in 1924 severely limited the amount of Jewish people allowed to immigrate to America. By that point around 4 million Jewish people had already made it. Frank Reher, the main immigrant of my case study, (1868-1936) immigrated from Austria to America in the late 1800s.

Frank Reher's story is not unique in its outset. He made many choices that were typical of new immigrants: He immigrated in his early twenties like many other people did to get a new start. Upon arrival, he lived in a part of New York City, Brooklyn. This was common because many new arrivals congregated in similar areas because of shared identity. In Brooklyn, where he

landed first, he had two daughters with his first wife, Rachel (1864-1899): Jennie (1891-1974) and Etta (1896-?). They moved to Kingston together and had another daughter, Minnie (1898-1958). All of them lived with Frank until a year after their arrival in Kingston, when Rachel passed away. By 1925, none of his three first daughters lived with him as they had moved out. A few years later, Frank remarried Ada Rose Aduchefsky (1876-1925). Together, they had six children: Willie (1901-1980), Mollie (1903-1978), Sadie (1905-1993), Gertie (1907-1974), Elsie (1908-2004), and Hymie. (1915-2004). After Ada's death in 1925, Frank never remarried.

In 1908, Frank opened his famous Jewish bakery. The bakery itself was a welcoming establishment. When customers walked through the front door, a bell rang signaling their arrival. The building is on the corner of Spring and Broadway in Rondout, Kingston, nearing the top of the hill. It is three stories and made of brick, with a front and side door and many windows. The interior of the bakery went through some changes, but stayed largely the same. The bakery only made breads. The main product was the Sunday hard roll, made in an Austrian style. The two types of hard rolls were affectionately nicknamed "bumpy" or "smooth" as descriptors of the bread. In addition to the hard rolls, the Reher's also baked pumpernickel, rye, and challah for Shabbat.

The Reher bakery was a functioning Jewish bakery in more ways than its supply of traditional breads. The bakery itself was kosher. This practice is specific to Jewish people and the laws of kosher would never be followed by bakers who were not Jewish. This set them apart from other food businesses. At least in the apartment if not also in the bakery itself were mezuzahs, which is a small plaque holding religious texts which are placed on most doorposts. These are a clear marker of a Jewish identity. One way that the Reher's extended their facilities

to their Jewish community was on Shabbat. They used their oven to keep the cholent warm. Cholent is a Jewish stew that is simmered without turning ovens on. On Shabbat, religious Jews do not work, and cooking food is considered work. Since the Reher's oven remained warm from insulation even when off, it functioned as a heater so that Jewish people could observe the laws of Shabbat. This was a unique way the Reher family could lend a hand to their community.

Synagogues long maintained themselves as the core of Jewish communal life in the Old World of Eastern Europe. As a place to congregate for people of the same religion, they functioned as a home base for Jewish people. They were not only space for religious services but also community events. Its community members continuously worked to create a strong sense of belonging and Jewish identity.

The Jewish community of Kingston began flourishing a couple decades before all the Reher children were born by 1910. Three synagogues were established in the downtown area of Kingston, Rondout, alone, by the time Frank Reher opened his bakery in 1908. The Jewish population in Kingston was so sizeable that it required the establishment of multiple synagogues. This is because the new immigrants had no wish to discard their Jewish identity upon arrival to America. The Reher family belonged to Agudas Achim, the second synagogue of Kingston, which was established around 1864, a few decades before Frank arrived in Kingston. The synagogue was a similar environment as the one the immigrants were used to back home because it was Orthodox.

The establishment of the Jewish community of Kingston is how the immigrants kept their old world traditions alive, despite a growing sense of an American identity that both informed, and sometimes threatened it. The active and prosperous synagogues, businesses, and community

organizations of Kingston are how they maintained their Jewishness. The addition of American culture to their Jewish identity is what created a specific biethnic identity. This was a twinned product of their desire to become American but their refusal to dismiss their Jewishness. The Reher family, descendants of original immigrant Frank, exemplify the biethnic identity. This was done through their participation in Americanizing events as well as their contributions to the Jewish community.

The pride in what it meant to be an American and a Jewish person grew over time. At an event for the 50th anniversary of Congregation Ahavath Israel in 1956, the guests of the dinner began the service with the American National Anthem and concluded with the Israeli National Anthem, Hatikvah. The community felt a connection with both America and Israel, especially since by the 50th anniversary, Israel was a sovereign state for eight years. Prior to immigrating to America, Jewish people would never have sang the American national anthem. Its inclusion in the service reflects the way the Jewish people identified with both their Jewish identity that they were born with and the American identity they adopted either through citizenship, customs, or both.

In addition to singing both American and Israeli national anthems, the American flag was also present in Jewish spaces. In a photograph of a tailor's picnic of one of the synagogues, a child holds the American flag. This is symbolic of the connection the Jewish people felt to America. The child holding the flag as part of a younger generation represents how the children of immigrants grew up with a sense of an American identity in a different way from their parents who obtained it after immigrating.

In 1955, Gertie Reher, one of Frank's daughters was announced as the new secretary of the Women's Board of Agudas Achim. The meeting was opened by religious prayer and following the elections a Mother's Day program was presented in which there was a candle lighting ceremony to honor the mothers of the congregation. The combination of both religious prayer and a Mother's Day ceremony depicts the integration of American culture into traditionally Jewish spaces. Prayer before a meeting at a synagogue is not out of place at a religious building where all of the members are of the same practice. The Jewish people in Kingston began to establish American identities through the celebration of Holidays such as Mother's Day, an American holiday popularized in the 20th century.

The 1936 Congregation Ahavath Israel's first annual Thanksgiving Ball fundraiser established another American tradition in a Jewish community. Thanksgiving is a Holiday created out of myths of American history, and would have held no significance in Eastern Europe Jewish communities. The new establishment of an annual fundraiser ball during Thanksgiving reflects how American traditions increasingly affected Jewish life. However, the Jewish immigrants were able to maintain their Jewish identity despite growing American influences. The permanency and stability of the synagogue as the core for the practice of Judaism is a major reason why the Jewish people of Kingston never lost touch with their Jewish identity. Rather, they grew to develop a specifically biethnic Jewish-American one.

American citizenship largely informed Jewish immigrants' relationship to their American identities. Holding citizenship allowed individuals to gain privileges. The drive many Jewish immigrants had to become citizens shortly after arrival was important for them. It validated their

permanency in their new homeland. Frank Reher saw great value in earning his citizenship. Born in Austria in 1868, he petitioned for his citizenship of the United States in 1903.

The process for Frank to obtain citizenship took around a year. A certificate from the Office of the City Clerk of Kingston certifies Frank Reher's final application on November 28, 1903. Another certifies his petition for citizenship on December 5, 1903. Frank was naturalized around February 15, 1904. All of Frank's children were automatically citizens upon birth in this country. Frank no doubt wanted to obtain citizenship to mark his place as an American, especially because he ran his own business. For Jewish immigrants, including Frank, the entire process would have been an exciting declaration of Americanness.

The Reher Center interviews past customers to detail their memory of the bakery. Guerrin Matthew remembered (in an interview for the Reher Center), "On Sunday mornings from the 1940s through the 1970s, Kingstonians from the German, Irish, Italian, and Polish communities converged at Reher's Bakery to pick up rolls for breakfast on their way home from church..." This memory aids in painting a picture of the communities of people who lived in Kingston by the mid to late 20th century, which looked different from the first waves of immigration. The popularity of the Reher bakery is evident in the interviews of people who fondly recall looking forward to the rolls every week. Matthews also remembers "...leaving church early on Sundays in the 1940s to help the Rehers bag rolls in preparation for the post-mass rush. Sometimes he also paid for the rye bread which Willie Reher had delivered to his front door earlier that week. The bakery clearly made an impression on many people of Kingston including non-Jews.

The anti-semitism that the Jewish people of Kingston were subjected to and fearful of gives reason to the intense community that formed to not only aid each other, but Jewish people

in other parts of the world. In November of 1905 there was “A mass meeting of the Jewish residents of [Kingston] in one of the synagogues for the purpose of raising funds to meet the crying demands for assistance coming from Russia.” Many of the Jewish immigrants to Kingston came from Russia. An unbalanced dynamic formed when the Jewish American people of Kingston were of a privileged position enough to send help to Jewish people elsewhere. While anti-semitism was present in America, news articles make clear that there was wider scale physical violence in Eastern Europe against Jewish people.

The care that the Jewish people of Kingston felt for the persecuted Jews of Russia represents a national identity many felt not only towards being an American but also what it meant to be a Jewish person.

Although the Jewish people of Kingston took part in many aspects of American culture, they still maintained their Jewish identities by following practices of Judaism. By doing this they rejected the idea that in order to become American that they had to completely reject the part of their original identities as Jewish people. An “Odds and Ends” announcement in *The Kingston Daily Freeman* stated, “The Jewish stores in the city are closed today because of the Hebrew holidays. Services were held during the day in the Jewish temples.” The holiday celebrated was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which fell on the evening of September 18th, the day before the article was published, and lasted until the 20th in 1895. Jewish businesses owners closed their stores in order to spend their holiday celebrating it without having to work. This is a fundamental Jewish practice because this is a holiday that only affects Jewish people. Non-jewish store owners would not have closed on this day. Since the announcement was made in the newspaper it is obvious that enough stores would be closed it made sense to let the people of

Kingston know. Additionally, because the Jewish stores are not specifically named makes two implications about the Jewish store owners of Kingston. Firstly, it implies that there were a significant amount of them that an announcement was necessary to make. It also implies that the people of Kingston would know who the Jewish store owners were.

Jewish history in the United States has long been centered around immigration to New York City. This framework of understanding Jewish history excludes thriving Jewish communities in other places. Kingston, New York, was a significant community for the larger part of a century. By paying attention to the efforts of the people there in building a community, there is a greater chance that Jewish history will be understood as a fuller picture. The Reher Family bakery in Kingston offers a case study of what one families participation in the community was like. Plenty of primary sources highlights the continual contributions and how they affected the growth of the community. Since Frank Reher immigrated to New York during the height of immigration from Eastern Europe, the family even more so is a helpful case study.

Urban renewal in Kingston had a drastic effect on the City. At its height in the 1960s, buildings were destroyed and many people were displaced from their homes. The Reher family bakery holds a place in this story as well. The street opposing where the current Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History stands today on Broadway was completely knocked down and renovated. The bakery, however, remains the way it was left by Hymie Reher, Franks youngest son, who resided in the building until 2004 when he passed away. Therefore, the bakery stands in juxtaposition as an old establishment with new ones. This highlights the ways that the bakery is still important in Kingston today. The bakery serves many functions: it has an archive available for research, provides tours and educational projects, and does work with other immigrant groups

if Kingston. The continuation of a project to keep the story of the Reher's and Jewish immigrants alive is integral in preserving a history that has been forgotten by many.

The Reher family has allowed for a deep exploration of what happened in a specific community when an American identity emerged within a community with a strong Jewish one. The biethnic Jewish American identity that emerged, while it is not unique solely to Jewish immigrants of Kingston, tells a powerful story of immigration that is relatable to many others.

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