

Making a minyan is no problem in this fancy-food deli

By SETH AKABAS

Can a kosher gourmet food business prosper when its store hours are interrupted by a daily religious service? Judged by the way Leibel Bistritzky operates his Lower East Side delicatessen and food market, the answer is yes.

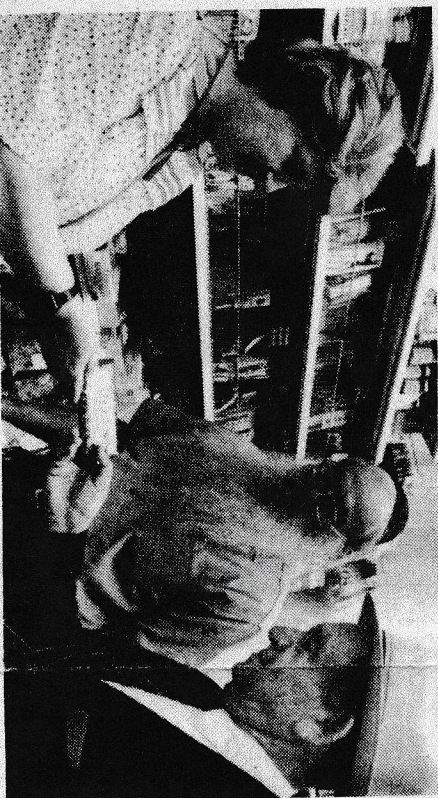
Because he pauses in the quest for profit to pray, his shop on Essex Street has become an institution for its religious significance. But cognoscenti also know it for the variety and quality of its kosher foods.

Promptly at 4 o'clock each afternoon, Bistritzky closes his shop for business and opens it for *mincha*, the afternoon prayers which conclude a half-hour later. At times he must shoo out non-participating customers. At times they join him and the local businessmen who stop in for the minyan.

Under pressure from soaring rents, Leibel and Edah Bistritzky moved in June from 27 Essex St., where they had sold foods for 23 years, to number 39, a larger refurbished space. They have since added a machine for toffutti (the soy-bean-based dessert that looks and tastes like soft ice cream) and hired an assistant.

Bistritzky, an imposing, broad-shouldered man with an even more imposing long, white beard, goes out of his way to support Israel. "I promote Israeli products," he says. Some Israeli products, like Jaffa

Seth Akabas, a clerk for U.S. District Court Judge David Edelstein, is a regular customer at Bistritzky's and a freelance writer.



Leibel Bistritzky, center, with his wife, Edah, help a customer.

oranges and tomatoes, ripened in the Mediterranean sun, have been available for years. But variety picked up slowly, says Bistritzky. "Israeli companies would wait and see one product selling, like olives, so they'd all make olives," he says. Recently, however, a wealth of Mideastern foods (falafel, hummus, sesame paste), specialty items and quality canned goods have been stocked on his shelves.

"Any Israeli product that comes into America, if it's good, I buy it," says Bistritzky. However, he is quick to point out, the one remaining Israeli marketing problem is packaging. Everything from gourmet chocolates to Israeli Mediterranean sardines is available, he says, but not fancy packaging.

"The cheapest food shouldn't always be on everyone's mind," says Bistritzky. "If people can buy from

Israel, they should."

Despite or perhaps because of his daily interruption for services and his campaign for Israeli products, business is booming.

"We're seeing an improvement," says Bistritzky cautiously.

His caution comes from a life in the food business rooted in his father's trading company in Europe. The senior Bistritzky maintained the business in Russia. Leibel was born in 1926 in Germany. The family next moved to Holland and, before World War II, fled to America, where they founded a fish oil and coffee-trading company.

Bistritzky was with his father's company for a time and later operated his own chicken farm in Vineland, N.J., near a communal agricultural settlement of Jews transplanted in a Depression-era project.

In 1961, he opened the shop on Essex Street that has become a household word on the Lower East Side for novelty and specialty items that are "kosher, only kosher," he emphasizes.

Despite his arduous duties at the shop, Bistritzky finds time to serve as a volunteer for Hatzodah, an emergency medical service. He and his sons raised money for the first community ambulance in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. He now wears a radio in his belt or has it by his side 24 hours a day. During the day he answers calls on the Lower East Side; at night he responds to Crown Heights emergencies.

He once dashed out of the shop on a call and left the store keys with a customer, telling her to lock up and push the keys through the mail slot.

"If you want to write something else about him, something that says a lot about him," says Edah Bistritzky, "write about his work for EMS. He lives through every call that comes through on that radio for the love of the next person."

Edah fits well into this mix of religion and business. Her father, Samuel Travis, a successful businessman in the petroleum industry in Tulsa, Okla., sent Edah's two older sisters and a brother to Frankfurt, Germany, for a proper religious education, unavailable then in Tulsa. Edah was born in Frankfurt while her mother was visiting her older children there.

Soon after the family moved to Jerusalem, where they lived until Edah was 10. They returned to the U.S. in 1939 and finally settled in Chicago, after a stay in Evansville,

Ind. Edah met her future husband when she vacationed in Hunter N.Y.; they were married in 1948. Mrs. Bistritzky says her father was one of the founders of B'nai Emanah, a Tulsa synagogue which was established over 50 years ago. A residential section in Tulsa has been named Travis Heights in honor of Samuel Travis who died 15 years ago.

Edah participates in the daily minyan at the Essex Street store distributing prayer books to the women, who, of course, pray in separate area of the shop.

The Bistritzky's combination of business and religious values have thrived. Their 10 children have prospered in business and religion as well, in Israel and elsewhere. One has carried on the family tradition in the food industry. Another is a Chabad rabbi in Israel.

The Bistritzkys are convinced that Americans will realize that profit is not everything, that a good balance of religion and business should prevail. They believe that is the essence of Judaism. For them, their children and their 2 grandchildren, theirs is a life of work and religion, a life of joy.



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