A Maine professor spent a month in Poland making bagels and searching for his past

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Robert Bernheim, a professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Maine at Augusta, removes a bagel from a mixture of water, barley malt and honey, where it was boiled before baking. He is wearing a Montreal Expos baseball cap in place of the traditional Jewish kippah, to honor his great-great-grandfather Feivel Brill, who owned a Jewish bakery in the town of Kanczuga in Poland. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

There are lots of ways to search for your family history: by reading old letters, diaries and newspapers; scrutinizing old photographs, and marriage and death certificates; visiting city hall for property and tax records; or – popular these days – spitting into a tube and sending it off to test your DNA.

Robert Bernheim, a South China resident and associate professor of history at the University of Maine at Augusta, had a less orthodox method in mind when he and his wife, Patricia, took a monthlong sabbatical in Kanczuga, Poland, this spring. He hoped to uncover, recover

really, his family story through baking bagels in a town that hadn't tasted them in more than 80 years. As he wrote in an email from Poland, "This corner of the world is truly a bagel desert."

In the late 19th and early 20th century, though, Bernheim's paternal great-great-grandfather, Feivel Brill, owned a Jewish bakery on Kanczuga's bustling town square famous for its rolls, challah, rye bread and bagels, that last a bread that Jews in Poland were making at least as far back as the 17th century. At the time the Brill bakery operated, an estimated 40%-50% of Kanczuga's population was Jewish. A few older people in the town still remember the bakery and can point to the spot where it once stood; today, the building houses a kebab shop.

You know where this story is going. Though Brill himself was dead by the time the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, three years later his entire community, including his extended family – children, cousins, nieces and nephews, siblings – nearly 1,000 people in all, were rounded up over the course of a few days and massacred. Bernheim doesn't know exactly how many members of his extended family in the old country perished. When he was a child, his family in the U.S. didn't talk about it.

"Bagels are a connection," said Bernheim, who grew up in New Jersey and Massachusetts in the 1960s and '70s and studied history at Bowdoin College. "It's a form, for me, of active memorialization, active remembrance. It connects me to a family that I never knew. I only know about. I don't have a recipe. I don't have a kneading trough or a bread bowl. I don't have any of these things from any of these relatives because the Holocaust erased that."

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While in Kanczuga he also hoped to practice bagel diplomacy, to help repair the complicated relationship between Poles and Jews, to literally break bread as a way in to a conversation about an excruciatingly painful shared past.

"How do we reintroduce an awareness of Jewish culture that is not pushy and like a Maccabee hammer slamming down on the people figuratively by saying, 'Wake up to your past!' and instead how do we do this in a way that is respectful and maintains the integrity of the Poles that are there but also maintains the integrity of memory of what happened?' " Bernheim asked himself. (The Maccabees were rebels who revolted against the Greeks in 2nd century BC, reasserting the Jewish religion.)

Robert Bernheim points to a photograph of his great-great-grandfather, Feivel Brill, in a Polish-language book by Patryk Czerwony about the town of Kańczuga in Poland. Brill once owned a Jewish bakery in the town. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

ASSIMILATION AND SILENCE

Bernheim's great-grandfather, Abraham Brill, the oldest son of Feivel Brill, left Poland in the late 19th century, arriving in America as a penniless teenager. He disappointed his parents: His father had hoped he'd take over the bakery. His mother had hoped he'd become a rabbi. Family lore says he left home after the wealthy Jewish girl he was engaged to suddenly died.

In the United States, Abraham Brill taught himself English, put himself through school, then more school, and eventually became the first translator of Sigmund Freud into English and a famous psychiatrist in his own right, the subject of a 1925 profile in the then brand-new New Yorker magazine. (Abraham Brill named his daughter, Bernheim's grandmother, Gioia, Italian for Joy, after Freud, a German word that means "joy." Freud was her godfather.)

Abraham Brill and his descendants – Bernheim's grandmother, his father and eventually his own generation – were raised in assimilated, highly secular households. As a child, Bernheim never went to synagogue, never celebrated any Jewish holidays, never had a bar mitzvah. "Jewishness was kind of kept from us," he said. His connection, such as it was, revolved around food: his mother's latkes, or potato pancakes, at Hanukkah, his father's never-ending search for a good loaf of Jewish rye.

“God and religion were seen as a crutch, a weak thing, not something to be celebrated,” Bernheim said. “You were Jewish, but you were Jewish in a cultural sense — and you were Jewish because of the constraints put on you by society.”

The family’s history in Poland was pointedly never discussed. Perversely, what Bernheim today calls his family’s “inherited silence” had the effect of stoking the young boy’s curiosity. Why was the paternal side of his family so small? What had happened to his Polish family? Why were there no photographs, letters or treasured family possessions? The young boy wanted answers to these mysteries. The young man sought them out.

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At Bowdoin, Bernheim studied modern European history and German. He went on to get a doctorate in history at McGill University in Montreal, focusing his research on the Holocaust and World War II. Over his career, he has directed the Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Vermont and the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine. And alongside his serious scholarly pursuits, Bernheim, from college onward, “engaged in a fruitless pursuit of the lost family recipes,” he wrote in an email.

Through these recipes, he hoped to piece together “this puzzle, this mosaic if you will, of my family’s past.” Bernheim likes to quote June Hersh, author of “Food, Hope & Resilience: Authentic Recipes and Remarkable Stories from Holocaust Survivors.” He keeps a copy of her cookbook in his homey kitchen in his cozy, antique-filled, 19th-century farmhouse. As he made bagels one day in September, he held the copy up and paraphrased her: “Without a story, it’s just a list of ingredients.

A sticker on the hoosier cabinet in the Bernheims’ kitchen captures Robert’s love of bagels. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

“That’s what I am always seeking,” he said, “the stories behind these recipes.”

A batch of Robert Bernheim's bagels, fresh from the oven: from left, everything, cinnamon raisin, plain and sesame. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

PREP TIME

The first time Bernheim went to Kanczuga, in 1996, he was engaging in what scholars call "memory tourism," looking for his personal connection to a dark time. He spent just a few hours, stopping at the town library; encountering, astonishingly, elderly people who'd known his murdered grand aunt (sister to his great-grandfather); and visiting the old – and, at the time, much neglected – Jewish cemetery. It's since been periodically spruced up.

The second time Bernheim visited Kanczuga, for several days in 2019, he gave a talk about his great-grandfather, Abraham Brill, at the library. But when a resident of Kanczuga suggested naming a street for the man or making him an honorary citizen for a day, Bernheim sensed "real hostility in the room. The library meeting got contentious." He thinks some in the audience felt fearful of outsiders and accused of complicity with the Nazis.

These days, Bernheim has mixed feelings about memory tourism, which has become a research interest of his.

"You show up, you go to the synagogue, you see the house where your family lived, you see the cemetery. Check those boxes and then you write negative things about anti-Semitism in Poland and how you didn't feel welcome," he said. "I was guilty of that in some ways. This

time I wanted to change that, and so we thought bagels, or Jewish food in general, are great conversation starters. And – it's a rhetorical question – who doesn't love a good bagel?"

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Bernheim's monthlong stay in Kanczuga this year was his third visit. In the run-up to his sabbatical, as he battled prostate cancer and helped care for his dying father and father-in-law, both suffering from dementia, Bernheim narrowed his planned focus from Jewish foodways generally to bagels. He'd teach himself to make them, instead of "trying to be the Jack of all Jewish foods," and he'd bring the bagel back to Kanczuga.

Robert Bernheim and his wife, Patricia, who grew up on Peaks Island pose in their South China kitchen.
Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer

Bernheim likes to cook and he likes to bake, but before he conceived of this project, he'd made bagels exactly once. "It was a disaster," he said. So to prepare for his sabbatical, he searched for a professional baker to mentor him. Unable to find one, he instead immersed himself in cookbooks. He consulted with a friend who is a pizza baker and took advice from Jeff Mao, of the Brunswick-based Knead & Nosh. He bought himself a bread bowl at the Green Store in Belfast and got a donation of 50 pounds of flour from Maine Grains in Skowhegan.

And he churned out dozens of bagels, and dozens more, as he tried to develop his own recipe, one that would honor the spirit of Feivel's missing one. Even now, he describes that recipe as a work in progress, not yet ready to be printed in this newspaper. "I have never made the perfect bagel," he said, adding wistfully that "Patricia made one once." To recreate his great-great-grandfather's Polish-Jewish bagel, he uses malt, honey and egg yolks in the dough and sources as many ingredients as he can, whether in Poland or Maine, locally.

Bernheim baked the bagels in his 19th-century bread oven, original to the fireplace in his home's original kitchen. He baked them in his 21st-century oven, too, and he baked them in the commercial kitchen at Double Z ranch in Turner, teaching himself to scale up. Then he and Patricia, whom he met at Bowdoin, gave them away – at the town dump, the bank, the dentist's, the car mechanic's, the hairdresser's. Last winter, as they listened to the local news about storms battering the coast, Bernheim made a batch, delivering them to exhausted workers battling the weather in South Bristol. Homemade bagels bring smiles, he said. "In a way, it's a mitzvah."

A good deed.

Bernheim paints the bagels with egg wash before baking them. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

BAGEL DIPLOMACY

On May 8, Bernheim arrived in Kanczuga for the third time, toting measuring spoons and a biscuit cutter; lacking a scale, he'd use the latter as a rough and ready way to measure dough. The year leading up to his sabbatical had been a challenging one, so he and Patricia hadn't been able to prepare for the trip as well as they'd hoped to. For one thing, they hadn't found a moment to study Polish, a fact that was evident their very first day when Bernheim tried to buy bread flour using his phone's Google translate. He ended up carting rye flour back to the kitchen they'd borrowed from the parents of Patryk Czerwony, a Polish friend now living in New York, who wrote a book on the history of Kanczuga.

The bagels he made with it were not a success, and he actually cried. "This is not what I imagined," he said. But by Day 2, he'd overcome self-pity and he was back in the swing of things. Soon he was waking every morning with the sun at 4:30 a.m., making bagels in a tiny jerry-rigged oven, while listening to klezmer music to honor his Polish relatives who had been klezmer players. By making "life-giving" bagels, he felt he could focus on their lives, not their deaths.

The couple began introducing themselves to the residents of Kanczuga and the surrounding towns, bringing bags of warm, homemade bagels to the bank that stood where Feivel Brill's home once had, to the owner of the kebab shop, to the farmer who plowed the fields that contained a Jewish cemetery, to an English teacher, a translator, a Catholic choir, the mayor (who turned the bagels down) and a class of bored ninth graders. Bernheim shaped, boiled, baked and gave away hundreds of bagels.

"Here's a bagel. Let's sit down and talk about this," he told the students, whom he taught a history lesson. "As an invitation to an experience of a Jew, it is, I think, unmatched. There is something about a bagel that is disarming."

Polish citizen Anna Maria Balawender met the Bernheims at an embroidery workshop she and Patricia attended. The Bernheims brought bagels. "They were extremely tasty and I went straight to him to ask about it, how it was baked and why did he gave us such a generous surprise. During that fortunate meeting I invited them to my house to try 'proziaki,' " she emailed. "It's a special kind of a bread called also soda bread, we exchanged proziaki for bagels and even though my family don't speak English we got on very well, I think food can break the ice even when the barrier is language. I believe that bagels somehow represent Robert's family history that can finally speak through this simple gesture of giving them to people. In my opinion this gesture made many conversations easier."

A Polish radio reporter interviewed the couple, and after that interview aired, Bernheim found himself teaching bagel-making to two commercial bakeries. Since returning to Maine, he's heard that three bakeries in the region now make and sell bagels.

Bagels, unsurprisingly, did not solve everything. Nothing is ever that easy. The Bernheims said they encountered some suspicion, some cultural barriers, perhaps anti-Semitism. Bernheim wrestled with his own feelings about the role of Poles in the murder of his extended family. It was painful to see that part of an old Jewish cemetery in a nearby town had been paved over for a bus stop, that a former synagogue housed a tractor supply store, that many in the town seemed to have no idea Jews had ever lived there.

Patricia and Robert Bernheim at a bakery in Mikulice, Poland, where Robert taught the bakers how to make bagels. *Photo courtesy of Robert Bernheim*

But, on the whole, his family (a daughter and her partner came to visit for a week) "were welcomed warmly by many strangers who were fearless in facing challenging topics," he said. "The courage, compassion, and willingness to assist, translate and discuss topics great and small by many of these locals left an indelible mark on us."

Dawn LaRochelle, director of the Maine Jewish Museum in Portland and no stranger herself to efforts to bring people together through food, doesn't know Bernheim and was unfamiliar with his project, but when it was described to her, she was all for it.

"I think it's brilliant and creative and outside the box and exactly what is needed in these polarizing, divisive times that are adding extra layers of anger and hatred on top of generational trauma," LaRochelle said. "I think food performs miracles."

'SIMCHA BAGELS!'

Most Jews know that the traditional bread for Rosh Hashanah, which starts on Wednesday night, is challah. The holiday begins the Jewish new year and 10 days of self-reflection known as the High Holy Days. For Rosh Hashanah, the slightly sweet, eggy loaf is always shaped in a circle, a geometry that holds symbolic meaning. The circle is said to represent many things, among them the cyclical nature of the year; a new year in which life and blessings will, with luck, like a circle have no end; and the responsibility of Jews in the coming year to improve themselves, a job which, like a circle, should be never-ending.

Far be it for Bernheim to suggest swapping that round challah for a bagel. Still, he *can* make a good case. A bagel is round. The honey and barley malt in the dough could represent hope for a sweet new year, and the holiday's aspect of remembrance perfectly applies to his own

bagel sabbatical. Also, for Bernheim, bagels – making, sharing and researching them – bring joy. “Simcha bagels!” he said several times during an interview, using the Hebrew word for joy. Rosh Hashanah, he said, is about introspection, yes, but also joy.

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He’s not sure where bagels will lead him next. Maybe, he’ll write a storytelling cookbook. Maybe he’ll return to Kanczuga with his youngest daughter, Lilja – of the couple’s three daughters, she is the one who has “embraced the bageling,” he said – to organize a BagelFest, an idea he’s borrowed from an annual festival in New York City.

Closer to home, he’s thought about buying a food truck and hitting the road, stopping to make bagels in borrowed commercial kitchens, then giving them away. He’s already registered a company name, Feivel’s Old World Bagel, and printed up labels with the tagline “historically delicious.” (They are contemporarily delicious, too.)

Through his bagel quest in Poland, Bernheim knows more than he used to about his ancestral home and a lost community. But, he said, “I’m not satisfied. I don’t have enough. I’m not there.”

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