

# The Last Jews Of El Barrio

After a half-century, cod merchant Bernard Lifschultz and T-shirt salesman Sol Kukawka are nearing the end of the line in Spanish Harlem.

**Deborah Lynn Blumberg**

*Special To The Jewish Week*

**F**or the last 55 years, in his stall in East Harlem's La Marqueta at 115th and Park, 87-year-old Bernard Lifschultz has sawed the ends off stacks of dried cod and tossed countless spiky fish tails into an orange plastic bucket beneath the counter.

Down the street, at the corner of 116th and Park, after 47 years, Sol Kukawka, 79, still sells T-shirts and socks to what is now a largely Hispanic clientele.

In the early- to mid-1900s, a host of Jewish vendors owned businesses in La Marqueta, a once-bustling marketplace

where customers shopped for staples such as meats and cheeses, rice and beans, and milk and eggs. Jewish-owned businesses, such as Louie Daitch's dairy store, also dotted the surrounding streets.

Now, only seven of La Marqueta's 30 or so booths are occupied, mostly by Hispanic vendors, and most Jewish-owned businesses in the area closed or relocated years ago.

But Lifschultz and Kukawka remain, among the last of the European Jews who once worked in Spanish Harlem.

"After the war, all the stores here were Jewish — 75 percent of the market and 90 percent of the businesses outside," said

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**Bernard Lifschultz, next to stack of dried cod at La Marqueta, says, "Years ago tourists would come here by the busloads."**

*Richard Levine*

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Kukawka, who came to El Barrio to work for a ladies' clothing store, saved up a few thousand dollars and then opened his own clothing shop.

Germans and Eastern European Jews, along with Italian immigrants, dominated Harlem in the early 1900s. In 1917, the neighborhood's Jewish population peaked at 150,000, but by 1930 only 5,000 Jews remained. Harlem's Jewish population continued to dwindle over the years, and most members of the Jewish community moved to the suburbs of Manhattan or to New Jersey.

Lifschultz and Kukawka made their way to Spanish Harlem in the 1950s at a time when Hispanic immigrants began to settle El Barrio. Both men came to the neighborhood after serving overseas in World War II, but each from a much different path.

At Benny's Place in La Marqueta, Metro North trains rumble overhead and mix with heartfelt sobs from Mexican *telenovelas* and Dominican *bachatas* from radios and televisions in adjacent booths.

Six days a week, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Lifschultz slices fish on a worn white cutting board and chats with regulars in English and Spanish from his swiveling gray office chair with a lambskin cushion.

"I'm not the kind that likes to stay home and watch TV," he said. "I prefer to be active."

In a nod to an earlier era, he keeps a small black-and-white television set from the '60s in his stall, complete with dials, and says he tunes in for baseball and football games. During school breaks, his teenage grandkids visit him in La Marqueta. They like to come there and practice the Spanish they are studying in school, he says.

When Lifschultz returned to New York after serving in China, Burma and India during the war, he converted his family's wholesale egg business into a retail venture in La Marqueta. Because eggs were scarce in Puerto Rico, he said, they were a novelty and became a major part of Puerto Rican immigrants' diet.

"Eggs were very lucrative," said Lifschultz, wearing a cream-colored "I Love N.Y." baseball cap with a big apple in the middle and gold-rimmed glasses. "After the whole cholesterol scare, though, their sale went down drastically."

So Lifschultz promoted bacalao, or cod, as his main product. These days, the fish is the store's most popular item, and Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican and Haitian regulars flock to his fish stall for the various types of dried cod.

"Not many people come as strangers anymore," said Lifschultz. "I know most everyone who comes in."

One of the regulars called him "a legend. It doesn't even seem the building has been here as long."

Some customers come from as far away as Boston for the hard-to-find dried salt fish. Others come for herring, prominently displayed in front of the booth in a wooden case atop a

for years, Lifschultz admits they're not his favorite fish. Instead, he prefers fresh fish, especially gefilte fish.

"We used to make it for festive occasions, for Passover," he said, "but usually my wife buys it ready-made at this stage of the game."

Lifschultz, who grew up on the Lower East Side and remembers getting sour pickles off pushcarts on Avenue C, now lives in the suburbs and is a member of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

But he still has connections to Judaism in East Harlem. Lifschultz is the sole survivor of Congregation Tikvah Israel, at 160 E. 112th St., he said, and though the synagogue is now a church — Christ Apostolic Church of

USA — he still administers the congregation's cemetery plots in New Jersey.

Down the street, Kukawka (who declined to be photographed) lingers on the sidewalk outside his men's clothing store, K&B's, also known as the Hot Spot. Dressed in his work clothes — a floppy denim hat, red flannel shirt and baggy blue jeans — he adjusts bundles of socks and packages of long underwear in



**Sol Kukawka has sold T-shirts and socks at the Hot Spot for 47 years. "I'm here for a reason," he says, "and it's not to make money anymore."** Deborah Lynn Blumberg

blue milk crate.

"Years ago," Lifschultz said, characterizing the arc of his career at La Marqueta, "tourists would come here by the busloads. They come occasionally now, but less."

Business isn't what it used to be 10 or 15 years ago, Lifschultz said, noting a fire in the building was never sufficiently repaired.

Though he has sold dried cod and herring

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wooden display cases. He once had five people working for him; now he has two.

Though his trip from the store to his home in Lynbrook, L.I., can take up two hours using public transportation, Kukawka still works every day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., except Sundays.

Kukawka was born in Poland to what he calls an ultra-Orthodox family, and was there in 1939 when the Germans attacked. Soon after, he and his family found themselves living as refugees in Russia, but Kukawka's father did not want to stay.

"I remember very clearly him saying, 'I would rather be killed as a Jew with the Germans than give up Judaism with the Russians,'" Kukawka recalls.

But the Russian government had other plans and sent the family on a 13-day freight train ride to their new temporary home in Siberia, where Kukawka remembers cleaning up stray branches after other workers who chopped down trees.

After Russia, Kukawka spent five years in Austria in a displaced persons camp. When the camps opened in 1950, his parents made plans to go to Israel, but Kukawka wanted to come to the United States.

"At 25 I came to New York alone, without a penny and without the language," he said. "I had been in the army though, so I wasn't afraid to go alone."

In New York, Kukawka married a Cuban-Jewish woman and saved money to open

K&B's. At the time, he said, he was the youngest Jewish business owner in the neighborhood, and soon he came to own the whole building. While he used to rent the space above his store as apartments, the space now sits empty — the cost of repairs was more than it was worth, he said.

In their more than 100 years combined in the neighborhood, Lifschultz and Kukawka find it hard to imagine leaving El Barrio. Lifschultz plans to stay through the upcoming renovations of La Marqueta, during which the East Harlem Business Capital Corp. will expand the market from 111th Street to 118th Street, replacing the steel structure with glass and adding more international businesses.

Talking about Lifschultz, one of his patrons, a West Indian, said: "I've been coming to the store for 12 years. The prices are reasonable, and Bernie always gives you a little extra."

Kukawka is thinking about selling his building and recently has had several offers. But if he sells the building, the store will go, too, and he's not sure he's ready for that.

Kukawka paused to direct a customer to the store's blue jeans and to greet a neighborhood friend — a man who once worked for a Jewish-owned business — in Yiddish.

"I'm here for a reason, and it's not to make money anymore," said Kukawka. "My body is telling me I should stop, but I want to stay because I'm used to it here." □

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