

Kosher certification got its start 100 years ago – in Pittsburgh

**Frank Butler helped develop the national
Orthodox Union’s familiar logo – a “U” in a circle
– in 1923, exactly 100 years ago.**

Justin Vellucci April 26, 2023



Rabbi Baruch Poupko and Heinz mashgiach Frank Butler inspecting a vat at the Heinz plant in 1951. (Image courtesy of the Rauh Jewish Archives)

Frank Butler, the grandfather of Squirrel Hill-based Magisterial District Judge Dan Butler, was a Ukrainian man drafted into the Russian army to fight in the Russo-Japanese War around 1905.

After he deserted the army and fled Europe, the Kyiv native settled in Squirrel Hill — in the house where five generations of Butlers have since lived — and, as an observant Jew, entered the world of regulating kosher food.

A mashgiach, or Jew who supervises the status of kosher foods, working on foods produced by the H.J. Heinz Co. in Pittsburgh, Frank Butler helped develop the national [Orthodox Union's](#) familiar logo — a “U” in a circle — in 1923, exactly 100 years ago.

“It was an obvious idea to create a national entity that would supervise kosher foods — at the time, there was nothing like that,” Dan Butler told the Chronicle. “And, as the Jewish community expanded around the country, they realized they needed unified standards.”

“We have deep roots in Pittsburgh, particularly in the Orthodox institutions,” Butler added. “The things my grandfather did and said are still things we teach our children. I got it all from my parents, who got it with their mother’s milk.”

The Orthodox Union has grown immensely in its 100-year history — today it certifies the products of 7,000 companies and 14,000 facilities in all 50 U.S. states and 105 countries, said Rabbi Moshe Elefant, its chief operating officer and executive rabbinic coordinator.

“We’ve been certifying food around the country and around the world,” Elefant said.

The Orthodox Union, though it is based in New York City, started its history with a single account in Pittsburgh, that of the H.J. Heinz Co.

“Heinz was the first major Orthodox Union account,” Elefant said. “Heinz was the first packaged food that was OU-certified.”

Packaged items certified kosher for Heinz in the 1920s included, famously, its baked beans, as well as lesser-known items like its chili sauce.



Heinz started using the OU symbol in 1927. (Image courtesy of the Rauh Jewish Archives)

Kraft Heinz, the parent company of H.J. Heinz Co., did not respond to multiple calls and emails seeking comment.

Heinz first displayed the OU symbol on its goods around 1927, according to Eric Lidji, director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the Sen. John Heinz History Center.

Heinz was “all about cleanliness and safety” in the 1920s, packaging its horseradish in clear bottles so people could see the ingredients, Lidji said. Before that, people relied on fresh, locally made and purchased foods.

“When you start to get packaged foods, it just got hard to know what the ingredients were,” Lidji said. “And the OU started to work and talk about ways to address this.”

There also were economic benefits to the drive to certify packaged goods as kosher, Lidji said. A huge immigration wave crested in the United States around 1924, and many companies, like Heinz, were looking for ways to gain the trust — and dollars — of that population.

“This was the largest this immigrant market was and companies wanted to target it,” he said. “Heinz just did it in an innovative way.” **PJC**

Justin Vellucci is a freelance writer living in Pittsburgh.