

## WANDERING JEWS: PEDDLERS, IMMIGRANTS, AND THE DISCOVERY OF “NEW WORLDS”

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In the great century of Jewish migration, from the end of the eighteenth century into the 1920s, when over four million Jews left central and eastern Europe and headed for new lands, the humble, ubiquitous and despised occupation of peddling served as the vehicle which propelled them outward. Jews had peddled for centuries in Europe, as well as in the Muslim lands of the Ottoman Empire and in North Africa and it had a deep and complicated history as a pillar of Jewish economic life in these pre-migration settings. But its very nature played a crucial role in the ways in which Jews experienced their migration, encounter, and eventual settlement in the places to which they went. This paper looks at the connection between Jewish peddling and the great migration of the long nineteenth century when the locus of Jewish life shifted to the “new world,” the world opened up through European colonization and settlement.

**Keywords:** Jewish migration, peddling, integration, labour market

In the great century of Jewish migration, from the end of the eighteenth century into the 1920s, when over four million Jews left central and eastern Europe and headed for new lands, the humble, ubiquitous and despised occupation of peddling served as the vehicle which propelled them outward. Jews had peddled for centuries in Europe, as well as in the Muslim lands of the Ottoman Empire and in North Africa and it had a deep and complicated history as a pillar of Jewish economic life in these pre-migration settings. But its very nature played a crucial role in the ways in which Jews experienced their migrations, encounters, and eventual settlements in the places to which they went.

Historians for the most part have ignored it as a factor in Jewish life. While most historians of the Jews have referred to it, few have pondered what it meant, either before or after migration. For many and indeed most Jewish men to have made a living by walking or riding the roads, going house to house, knocking on doors, presenting themselves to housewives, opening their bag of goods and trying, day after day, to sell something. Scholars of Jewish history, on the other hand, have paid a great deal of attention to Jews as industrial laborers and certainly in the field of American Jewish history, historians have carefully studied and invested much significance in the clustering of Jews in the garment industry, primarily as factory workers.<sup>1</sup> But peddling, a Jewish way of making a living through which millions of Jews passed, has eluded the sustained interest of any historian.<sup>2</sup>

But peddling constituted one of the longest and most consistent aspects of Jewish history, in the modern period and before. In their pre- or non-migratory lives, peddling functioned as perhaps *the* most common Jewish livelihood. Extending backward into the Middle Ages Jews sold consumer wares from packs on their backs or, if a bit more affluent, from animal-driven carts. They sold to Jews and non-Jews. Both Jewish women and men developed routes, developed ongoing connections with customers, helped stimulate desire for new goods, and served as fixtures of many local economies. In some regions, like Bavaria, Alsace, and Lithuania, peddlers outnumbered non-peddlers in the Jewish community and it left its mark on nearly all aspects of the Jewish experience. How this took place, variations between geographic areas, and changes over time, all await historical treatment.

Eastern Europe in particular served as a region in which peddling consumed the lives of many, indeed most of its Jews. The lands of eastern Europe, Poland, including the part of which Prussia annexed, that which came under the rule of the Hapsburgs, and that which fell under the domain of the Czars, as well as the non-Polish parts of the Russian empire all supported, usually poorly, legions

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<sup>1</sup> The absence of much of a literature on Jewish garment factory owners hints at a proposition offered by D. Penslar in *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The work of R. Glanz stands out as particularly noteworthy. See for example his, 'Notes on Early Jewish Peddling in America,' *Jewish Social Studies* 7, 2 (April, 1945); also, L.M. Friedman, 'The Problems of Nineteenth Century American Jewish Peddlers', *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 44 (September, 1954), pp. 1-7. It is worth commenting on not only the scantiness of this body of literature, but how early it appeared in the development of American Jewish history as a scholarly field. Since the field has become more professionalized and more thoroughly part of the mainstream of American historical scholarship, no one has picked up on the work of Glanz or Friedman and pursued the subject with greater conceptual sophistication.

of Jewish peddlers. While the prevalence of peddling as well as other petty trade in the Russian Pale of settlement might be attributed to the severity of state restrictions on the Jewish economy, the lack of such draconian restrictions on the Jews of Posen, which fell to Prussia, then Germany, and the Jews of Galicia, who became subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, belie the fact that peddling still predominated throughout this heartland of Jewish life. Here the majority of the world’s Jews lived.

No place however equaled Lithuania, a region incorporated into the Russian Empire, as the epicenter of Jewish peddling. A borderland between Prussia to the west, and Russia to the east, Lithuania housed a massive Jewish population, with most living in small towns who went out weekly on their peddling circuits. Jewish peddlers in Lithuania needed to know German, Lithuanian, and Russian. Their existence, well into the early twentieth century, crops up in memoirs, fiction, and scholarly works. For example, dozens of *yizkor bikher*, or memorial books, composed to recall the Jewish towns liquidated by the Nazis and their allies, paid homage to the peddlers. “The Rakishoker Jews whom one met on the road...peddlers who went from village to village with boxes of goods on their shoulders is one such typical comment from a *Yizkor bukh*.”<sup>3</sup> Or, the compiler of the memorial book for Sokolov-Poldliask, chose to remember his destroyed town as one where, “the *dorfs-geyer* would travel dozens of *viorsts* by foot, carrying a heavy sack with hammer, shoe forms, nails, pieces of leather, linen, scissors, needles, thread.” Mindful of fulfilling personal religious needs, these men on the road would place in their sacks “a *talis* [prayer shawl], *tfilin* [leather boxes with straps donned by Jewish men for their morning prayers] and food so that they would not have to eat with the peasants.” That the compilers of these memorial volumes made specific mention of the peddlers, amid the many memories they must have had of these liquidated towns and murdered townspeople, indicated the degree to which this fact constituted part of the fabric of community life.<sup>4</sup>

Here in eastern Europe, the Jewish masses would constitute the majority of those who flooded out to the new world. And here, peddling undergirded the Jewish way of life. This enormous region, particularly the further east one looks, the less of a commercial infrastructure existed in the small towns. And as new sub-regions developed, for example the Ukraine, Jews came in along with the Russian colonial powers. The latter represented the state with its armies and its bureaucrats, but the former, the Jewish merchants, with peddlers as the

<sup>3</sup> *Yizkor-bukh fun Rakishok un Umgegent* (1952), Johannesburg: Privately published, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in: J. Kugelmass, *Native Aliens: The Jews of Poland as a Middleman Minority*, unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, New School for Social Research, 1980, p. 241.

foot-soldiers, fanned out, bringing finished goods to peasants now incorporated into the Russian empire.

This vast expanse of land, home to millions of Jews, indeed the world's majority, provided opportunities, no matter how paltry, for Jews to peddle. Most of the peddlers combined selling a jumble of non-essential goods to the peasants with the buying up of agricultural commodities. Not unlike the Jewish peddlers' role in Alsace, Bohemia, Moravia, Bavaria, and Hungary, Jewish peddlers functioned as low level middlemen. But regardless of how low the level at which they operated, they had a hand in getting the peasants paid for their labor while the Jews sold goods. Even if the peddlers themselves did not strike the final deal between peasant and landlord, as the agents of the Jewish merchants who did, they constituted a third point in a triangle between peasant and landowner.

Their triangulated relationship between the classes gave their peddling much of its substance. The number and centrality of the peddlers grew with the abolition of serfdom, in Galicia in 1848 and in Russia in 1861, and opened up further possibilities for the Jewish peddlers. Independent peasants, as opposed to serfs chained to their landowners, had more possibilities for making small purchases and also they could negotiate one by one for the prices of their agricultural produce.

Their ubiquitous presence captured the attention of writers, both local and foreign. One 1882 French article, "The Jews of Russia," or, "*La Russien et la Russes*, as an example, made its way to newspapers around the world. It focused on the town of "Berditschew," more conventionally spelled, Berdichev, in the northern Ukraine. The unnamed writer claimed that no place else could one see the true characteristics of the "strange race," the Jews, both as they lived in nineteenth century Russia and thirteenth century Italy, France or Germany. Here one could see, as the first and most salient point in the description, "the traveling merchants, the colporteurs, or, in common parlance, the peddlers, who carry their goods strapped on their backs as they traverse the great highways of Poland, Bessarabia, and the adjoining provinces come to make their purchases of jewels, necklaces of amber and coral laces, handkerchiefs, soap, perfumery and other costly *etceteras* which only a Jewish peddler knows how to collect for delighting the eyes and piquing the vanity of great ladies and village beauties." The author erred in making the peddlers' customers women of the better-off classes exclusively, but got it right in as much as peddling constituted so much of what the Jews of Berdichev, or Poland or Bessarabia would have done.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A. Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 225.

The observation about Russian Jewish peddling, as imagined by the French writer, typified writings on this theme. Many of these pieces noted, among other matters, the fact that the Jewish peddler, rather than being always a figure of opprobrium, received a degree of positive endorsement by both state officials and other local commentators. A petty bureaucrat in the Austro-Hungarian empire, evaluating the state of trade of one particular district in Galicia remarked upon the region's Jews, "Were it not for them, it would be impossible to procure even a strand of cotton or silken thread...The estate owners would not sell their grain and linen, the peasants would be unable to buy on credit and thus obtain their most vital commodities."<sup>6</sup> The Jewish peddler became a stock character in Latvian literature, and in that Baltic state, the *panu zids*, travelling Jewish merchants, traversed the countryside, laden with bundles of needles, cloth, notions, and house wares, while buying up flax. That literature, by and large, offered sympathetic portrayals of the peddlers, describing the excitement of the peasants when the peddlers arrived. The constant presence of the Jewish peddler made its way into the folk cultures of the peoples of eastern Europe. One recent scholar has found no fewer than 232 Latvian folksongs which include him in their lyrics, and those images revealed the Latvian customers' enjoyment of the peddlers' goods and as such of the peddlers as well.<sup>7</sup>

Statistics as to the number of Jewish peddlers in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empire varied by region and changed with the passage of time, but all such efforts at counting them pointed to a robust concentration of Jews in this field. A 1907 United States Department of Commerce and Labor *Bulletin* provided one of many statistical portraits of the state of the Jewish economy in Russia. "Over 90 per cent of the grain dealers," the *Bulletin* reported, "are Jews—in southwestern Russia as high as 96.7 per cent and in Lithuania 97.1 per cent. A very large number of Jews is found in general commerce or the group of commercial middlemen and peddlers which usually means very petty trading."<sup>8</sup> A recent study of one Polish town in the eighteenth century, based on local enumerations in the town of Opatow, concluded, "Jews became

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in D. Penslar, *Shylock's Children: Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> A. Reinsch-Campbell, *Traditional and Modernity: Images of Jews in Latvian Novels, 1934–1944*, Stockholm: Stockholm Studies in Baltic Languages, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Bulletin. No 72-September, 1907*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, p. 555.

the only commercial element,” and most of them fell into the category of “peddlars and agents.”<sup>9</sup>

This paper however looks at the connection between Jewish peddling and the great migration of the long nineteenth century when the locus of Jewish life shifted to the “new world,” that is, the world opened up to European colonization and settlement. In this momentous era Jews from all over the European continent spread out to North and South America, southern Africa, and Australia. They also moved to parts of Europe which had never had much of a Jewish population or indeed any and these included England, other parts of the British Isles such as Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as Sweden and elsewhere in Scandinavia. Of those who left, about 85 percent headed for the United States, making it the most desired Jewish migration destination, yet the reliance on peddling and the nature of the occupation as a Jewish enterprise differed little in terms of which country the Jews chose as their new home.

In all of these places peddling took place in tandem with the extension of colonialism and European conquest as well as the spread of commercial agriculture. As European nations, and in the case of North America, the expansion of the United States and Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific spread their control over indigenous peoples by acquiring their lands, the prospects for the Jewish peddlers rose. As places like Ireland and Sweden sent out their immigrants, those poor people who remained behind could command higher wages and therefore had more disposable income which they could spend, for the first time, on consumer goods which had previously been limited to the well-off.

Jewish migration and Jewish peddling followed along a global script with few variations. As word filtered to particular Jewish communities that opportunities existed in a particular new world place, some young men picked and left.<sup>10</sup> They went to places where they believed there would be a market for the kinds of consumer goods which they could carry in a pack on their back, needles, thread, fabric, ribbon, sheets and towels, tablecloths, napkins, pictures and picture frames, eye glasses, watches, jewelry and the like. They got their goods from some Jewish merchant already present who set the new immigrant up with a route and a bundle of goods. That merchant, likely came from the same town or region as the new immigrant, often a relative who had already gone through the peddling stage. Over time particular places became particularly attractive for Jewish immigrants from specific towns, regions, and countries.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Hundert, *The Jews in a Polish Private Town: The Case of Opatow in the Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> This paper represents a distillation of my book, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migration and the Peddlers Who Led the Way*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Nearly all the Jewish men who migrated to Ireland and South Africa came from Lithuania and not just Lithuania, but particular towns sending new recruits to one or the other of the places. In both places they became peddlers, called “weekly men” in the former and *smous* in the latter. But, by whatever name locals called them, they migrated in the same ways, for the same reasons, and conducted their business similarly.

Immigrant peddlers sold only to non-Jews. Since the peddlers mostly operated in minimally settled and farming regions as well as plantations and mining regions, they encountered no pockets of Jewish life. The young Jewish man who emigrated from Alsace or Lithuania – two important senders of Jewish migrant-peddlers – and try his luck in the Mississippi Delta, the Pacific Northwest, as well as the Transvaal, the Australian outback, the Argentine Pampas, the Irish midlands, the mining regions of Wales, or the foothills of the Andes, had no string of Jewish enclaves to turn to at the end of the day. They could not depend upon local Jews or Jewish communities for places to lodge at the end of long day on the road, as Jewish peddlers in Europe had.

Rather immigrant peddlers spent the days of the week only among non-Jews, depending upon customers for places to sleep and food to eat before setting out again on the road. Since Jewish peddlers divided up the countryside among themselves, no one encroaching upon another’s territory, they lived pretty much devoid of contact with other Jews. The random and scattered documents written by peddlers about the conditions of their lives tell stories of loneliness and drudgery, of boredom and harsh conditions. Abraham Cohen who came from Bavaria to the United States in the 1840s went so far in his diary to rhetorically address the “youth of Bavaria,” exhorting them to

beware, for you shall rue the hour you  
embarked for a country and a life far different  
from what you dream of. This land, and particularly  
this calling, offers harsh, cold air, great masses of  
snow, and people who are credulous, filled with  
silly pride, cold toward foreigners and toward all who do  
not speak the language perfectly.

Peddling in the American hinterlands forced him into a “life that is wandering and uncertain.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A. Kohn, Reflections of a Peddler in New England, in: J. Rader Marcus (ed.), *Memoirs of American Jews: 1775–1865*, Vol. 2, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1955, pp. 12–13 [original, American Jewish Archives].

Five days out of the week the Jewish immigrant peddler had to depend upon his customers not only for sales but also for places to sleep and food to eat. Peddlers, at the end of the day, asked their customers if they might spend the night in their homes or their barns. Even a barn would be more comfortable and less dangerous than sleeping in a forest, an open field, or on the back of his wagon if he had made the move to travelling that way. Peddlers went to the same homes, on the same day of the week, as they sold on the installment plan and tried to organize their schedule so that the most hospitable of their customers lived in the last home of the long day. By and large peddler memoirs emphasize the welcome they received in these homes and the conversations which they had with their customers. In Protestant homes in particular they and their customers found common ground in nightly bible reading and religion became rather than a barrier between customer and immigrant Jew, something which they could discuss.

Food, on the other hand, proved to be a bit of a problem. Most of these immigrant men came from traditional backgrounds and observed to one degree or another the complex laws of *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws which prevented them from eating most of their customers' foods and forbade them from using their customers' pots and pans, dishes and cutlery.

Different peddlers responded differently to the challenge of having to eat unkosher food and being unable to get kosher food. Some carried bread, dried fish, and other light and portable items with them. Others decided that they would eat whatever the housewife offered them. Still others told their hosts that they could not eat the food for religious reasons and this in turn opened up extensive conversations about Judaism and Jewish practice. Many of the women did what they could to accommodate the peddlers, serving them vegetables, eggs in their shells, fruit and bread while others took a pot and designated it for the peddler, so he could prepare his own meal. Peddler narratives and some written by customers made the point that these laws, designed to keep Jews separate from non-Jews, could be surmounted.

This then meant that new world Jewish peddlers did not travel as far and they organized their selling lives on a weekly cycle so that they could get back to whatever constituted the nearest Jewish enclave for the Sabbath. The life histories of many immigrant peddlers repeatedly noted how they set out on their routes on Sunday and returned by Friday to whatever existed in the way of a Jewish hub for Jewish food, fellowship, and rest. Joseph Jacob in his 1919 apologetic defense of the Jewish people, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* described how in England among the Polish immigrants, "it was customary for the Jews of the seaport towns....to send out their sons every Monday morning

to neighboring villages as hawkers, who would return in time for the Friday night meal." These hawkers, the British word for peddler, came to be known as "wochers," the Yiddish or German for "weekly people."<sup>12</sup> In Ireland to which several thousand Lithuanian Jews immigrated after the 1880s and where nearly all the men peddled in their early years there, Jews described themselves and their customers did so as well as "weekly men," the ones who showed up week after week at the farm house doors, ready to collect payment for previously purchased goods and to show the woman of the home some new "things" to buy.<sup>13</sup> In much of South and Central America Polish as Jewish men and those from the Ottoman Empire went by the moniker, "*semananik*", *semana* being the Spanish for week.

But come Fridays, whether in England, Ireland, or indeed South Africa, Australia, Cuba, Argentina, or any of these places, the peddlers repaired to the nearest hub of Jewish life. The Jewish shopkeepers in the towns and cities maintained intense personal connections to peddlers, often kin or compatriots from the same towns. They provided them with goods and credit. They witnessed the peddlers' applications for licenses and vouched for them in legal proceedings. They also offered the space for the peddlers who came back for the Sabbath.<sup>14</sup>

These nodes of Jewish life scattered through the hinterlands, where peddlers spent their weekends and holidays reflected the densely Jewish underpinnings to the migration and settlement. Here peddlers ready to upgrade and settle, as nearly all did, met young Jewish women, daughters and female relatives of Jewish merchants. The outlines of congregations began to take shape as numbers grew. Even before congregations formed Jewish peddlers fulfilled their Jewish obligations in these crossroad villages. The story of how the death of two Jewish peddlers in the area surrounding Meridian Mississippi compelled the few Jews living there in the 1860s to purchase land for a cemetery can be told about Australia, Ireland, South Africa, and Canada.<sup>15</sup>

Time off the road, spent with other Jews, often fellows from familiar European places, who spoke a common language, involved not just, or even primarily, Jewish activities, but socializing played an important role as well. With time

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<sup>12</sup> J. Jacob, *Jewish Contributions to Civilization*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1919, p. 219.

<sup>13</sup> On Jewish peddling in Ireland and the use of the term "weekly men" see, L. Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Year 1910*, Jewish Historical Society of England, London 1972, pp. 160–166.

<sup>14</sup> L.E. Turitz, E. Turitz, *Jews in Early Mississippi*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 1983, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Jews from multiple places tended to gravitate to common new world destinations, particularly in larger towns and cities. Edward Cohen's Rumanian grandfather, a peddler upon arrival in America, would spend, "Saturday night" in New Orleans, where "he'd rest, drink whiskey with the Alsation [sic] peddlers and play poker all night."<sup>16</sup>

Moise Cohen's recollection that he, a Rumanian Jew, relaxed with a pack of Alsatian Jewish peddlers pointed out yet another implication of peddling for Jewish history around the modern world. It provided a common experience for young Jewish men, drawn from many different European homes. Bavarian, Bohemian, Lithuanian, Polish, Galician, Ukrainian, and Prussian Jewish men peddled, alongside Alsatians, Rumanians, and others, in England, Canada, South America, Central America, the United States, and the like. Peddling, despite its centrifugal nature, helped unify the immigrant Jews, as they embarked on their journeys toward creating new Jewish identities based not on where people came from but where they had gone to.

The reality that Jewish peddlers spent most of their time, while peddling, with non-Jews forced them into a quick encounter with difference and forced them right away on the path of integration, learning new languages, cultures, and social realities. Language in particular challenged the peddlers. Peddlers had to immediately master the language or languages which their customers spoke. Unlike those Jews who remained in the big cities—New York, London, Leeds, Toronto, Montreal, Buenos Aires, among others—and functioned in thick Jewish communities where they mostly worked with and for other Jews, peddlers had to learn English, Spanish, French, or whatever their customers spoke. Initially other Jews, many former peddlers, helped them with the rudiments of the language, writing out in Yiddish characters the key words and phrases that peddlers needed to know, since the newcomers could not delay the process of becoming familiar with the language they needed to make their sales. The better they spoke the language, the better they could pitch their wares.

Despite being new immigrants they had to develop personal relationships with the people to whom they sold, and to do so had to become familiar with their customers' tastes, particularly with the sensibilities of the women, the people to whom they sold, who opened the doors, looked in the baskets, and made the decision whether or not to buy the eyeglasses, pictures, picture frames, curtains, blankets, pots, pans and other sundry goods. A memoir written by a woman who grew up in Oregon in the 1850s described the interactions of

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<sup>16</sup> E. Cohen, *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi*, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson 1999, p. 50.

the women of Pass Creek Canyon with the peddler, Aaron Meier, a Bavarian. The women complained that they had no needles with which to do their sewing and had no access to a store to buy some new ones. But then "one day, about Thanksgiving time, a peddler with a mule came over the pass and down through the canyon. The children playing...on some logs saw him and ran to tell their mother a visitor was coming" When the women barraged him with their pressing need for a needle, he "reached into his inside pocket," and said to them, "My people do not celebrate Christmas...but I suppose you good people will soon be having a holiday with presents." Meier reached into his pocket from which he removed a "thin package." From inside the package Meier took out some darning needles, "all I have, but I believe there will be enough for every family in the canyon to have one," and he gave these as Christmas gifts to the women who remained his loyal customers as long as he remained on the road. For the Jewish Maier to be conscious of the flow of the Christian calendar and the traditions of his customers meant the cultivation of good will and good business.<sup>17</sup>

Yet at the same time, in one place after another around the peddlers' globe, the entry of Jewish itinerant merchants into the rural region unsettled locally prevailing economic relationships. In places where class, religion, race, and national background mattered greatly, the fact that peddlers sold across those lines made them different and notable. The Jewish peddler in the rural South may have been the only individual to enter the homes of blacks and the homes of whites with the same goal in mind: selling goods to anyone willing to pay. So too, Jewish peddlers who made their way around the Cape Colony made no distinction between the homes of the English farmers and those of the Boers. In a profound sense the peddlers did not see "groups" but rather customers.

Even though peddlers had to learn the mores of the new place, they could sometimes ignore them and did so in order to enhance their selling. That Jewish peddlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century southern communities in the United States at times lodged with African American families, ate at their tables, and developed, what for that time and place constituted respectful public relationships, offered a case in point. Morris Witcowsky asserted that he and his "brother" peddlers "were probably the first white people in the South who paid the Negro people any respect at all," and he insisted that he, and the other Jewish newcomers consistently addressed black customers as "Mr." and "Mrs.," something white people just did not do.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In: S. Lowenstein, *The Jews of Oregon: 1850–1950*, Jewish Historical Society of Oregon, Portland 1987, pp. 24–25.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in L. Rogoff, *Homelands: Southern Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2001, p. 95; see also, L. Schmier, "For

Peddlers could break the rules because local people, on farms, in mining camps, and on the fringes of cities not connected to downtown shopping districts liked the items the peddlers had for sale. The peddlers not only offered new goods, new standards of consumption, and cosmopolitan styles, but invoked the ire of settled shopkeepers whom the peddlers could undersell. Local shopkeepers and farm women, by and large, shared religious, linguistic, and national identities. This empowered the women who with their limited dollars (or pounds or pesos) could purchase from either the Jewish peddlers or their compatriots. As such merchants, non-Jews, around the new world argued, directly and indirectly, that group loyalty demanded that the women buy from them. They pointed out that the Jewish peddler combined foreignness, religious otherness, and an economic challenge to the local order.

Yet the peddler offered new goods, on easy credit, and came directly to the women's homes. They showed them exactly how the curtains and the pictures would look and sold at lower prices than the local store keepers.

At times competition which pitted Jewish peddlers and non-Jewish merchants against each other, led directly to anti-Jewish agitation and even violence. The presence of Jewish peddlers at times, and in various places, played itself out in local and national politics as the merchants and their representatives sought to limit the access of peddlers, defined directly or obliquely as "foreigners" or "Jews," to the privileges of the marketplace. That states like North Carolina passed laws requiring peddlers to show proof of citizenship before obtaining a license demonstrated the desire of local merchants to cut out the Jewish peddlers. The halls of city and county councils, court houses, state legislatures, and even national assemblies, debated the merits and demerits of Jewish peddling and Jewish migration.<sup>19</sup>

Yet non-Jewish women, as chief customers, continued to buy from the peddlers, challenging the power of clergy and other local elites who implored them to shun the peddlers. Despite the agitation, Jewish peddlers persevered with their routes, returning time and again to these locales to cultivate customers. They abandoned them only when better opportunities beckoned elsewhere or when they had amassed enough savings to open a store and end their lives on the road. When they gave up their peripatetic work and settled down, many

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Him the 'Schwartzers' Couldn't Do Enough': A Jewish Peddler and His Black Customers Look at Each Other,' *American Jewish History*, Vol. 73, No 1, pp. 39–55; M. Adams, J. Bracey, eds, *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks and Jews in the United States*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1999, pp. 223–236.

<sup>19</sup> Rogoff, *Homnelands: Southern Jewish...*, p. 56.

times in towns situated in the rural regions around which they had peddled and they became respected members of the community, sometimes winning enough trust of the local non-Jewish populace to hold public office. Most set themselves up as modestly successful storekeeper who maintained friendly relations with customers, mainly non-Jews.<sup>20</sup>

European Jewish men migrated to peddle and peddled to migrate. They did so for just a few years. Rather than being a life sentence, Jewish peddlers in their destination homes used peddling as a way to leave it. They not only did not continue in it for decades, but their sons did not pick up their fathers' packs or sit down behind their fathers' horses. Rather peddling represented merely a stage in a Jewish immigrant man's life and did not get passed on to subsequent generations. The actual biographies of countless peddlers in their migration destinations demonstrate the unilinear trajectory on to and off the road. The preponderance of former peddlers among the ranks of shopkeepers, large and small, in the towns and cities of the destination countries, further proved the temporary nature of new world peddling.

The trajectory from unskilled but eager-to-learn peddler to respectable shopkeeper represented social reality. But it also served as a powerful image in the Jews' quest for rights. Jews in the age of migration in the many places to which they migrated, made a point of defending themselves from negative stereotyping by showing how transitory the peddling experience had been. Just give Jews the chance, this line of reasoning went to immigrate. They would, the Jews argued, provide the services of the peddler, but soon would transform themselves into settled and responsible community members. George Cohen author of a 1924 book, *The Jews in the Making of America*, provided a similar way of thinking about peddlers, Jews, and immigrants, and Jewish mobility. One of a number of books in "The Racial Contribution Series," sponsored by the Knights of Columbus, Cohen intended to use history to dispel the anti-immigrant spirit which had captured the nation, culminating in the passage of restrictive and racially-based immigration legislation. Cohen argued that the Jews' contribution to America could not be understood without attention to their long history of migrations and commerce, with peddling an heroic part of that narrative. "The result," wrote Cohen of "the nomadic tendencies of the Jews' Bedouin ancestors still are potent forces in the make-up of the modern Jew. That restlessness which impels the race to seek newer realms and better climes impart to it during the course

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<sup>20</sup> S. Suberman, *The Jew Store*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 1998.

of its vicissitudes an adaptability and a readiness that re useful in the life struggle. What is so potent a factor in mental development as travel, and Israel has been the most traveled of peoples. The tribe of the “wandering foot” to keep traveling had to develop the gift of quickness of thought, of improvisation, of ready comprehension.”<sup>21</sup> Cohen rightly depicted the European Jewish immigrant peddlers as actors who had made history, who created every Jewish population center in the new world, the United States, Canada, England and the rest of the British Isles, South Africa, Australia, as well as Central and South America.

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<sup>21</sup> G. Cohen, *The Jews in the Making of America*, Stratford Company, Boston 1924, pp. 243–44.