

‘This sack will teach you’

The story of impoverished and maligned newcomers who rose within a generation into the ranks of the middle class provides a fascinating case study **By Janice Weizman**

EVEN NOW, over a century after the mass migrations from the old world to the new, Jewish success in integrating and thriving in societies vastly different from the lands of their birth continues to inspire and impress. The story of impoverished and maligned newcomers who, through resilience and determination, rose within a generation into the ranks of the middle class, provides a fascinating case study of the factors that contribute to the successful absorption of immigrants into a new host culture.

How did it happen? Two new books attempt to explore this question by subjecting it to a scholarly socioeconomic analysis. “Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged The Way” by Hasia R. Diner, a renowned scholar of American Jewish history, homes in on the disdained but common figure of the immigrant Jewish peddler.

Long considered the very bottom rung of the commercial spectrum, Diner shows that peddling was, for Jewish immigrants to the Americas, Australia, South Africa, the UK and Scandinavia, a springboard into economic prosperity

and cultural advancement.

The book delves into the social-psychological circumstances that gave rise to peddling. Who were these peddlers? Who were their customers? What merchandise did they sell? The work was physically difficult, often involving long journeys on foot or by horse and wagon to remote villages, farms, mining camps and plantations.

To make a living, peddlers had no choice but to overcome the strangeness and loneliness of their livelihood and learn their customers’ language, needs and desires. Yet Diner’s book moves past anecdotal accounts of individual peddlers’ experiences and concentrates on the economic implications of the phenomenon. She explores the role of peddling in the spread of capitalism, its effect on standards of living, and the contribution of peddling to the economies of host countries.

Peddling, Diner, explains, is based on a transaction. “Successful outcomes depended upon a synergistic relationship between newcomers and those they encountered. The history of new world Jewish peddling reveals that despite differences in class, race, ethnicity, religion and language, Jews

and their customers changed each other’s lives... However much the two differed from each other, their interactions hinged on the reality that one had something to offer, and the other wanted it badly enough to expend resources on it... Customer and merchant engaged in a dance, choreographed by desire and availability and the common interest of both to exchange items for cash...”

Diner calls it “a convergence of self-interest,” noting that peddlers’ customers were, more often than not, women. “By using their hard-earned cash to buy goods from the peddler, they enhanced their standard of living. Once, not so long before, these women had owned no towels, sheets, pillowcases, bedspreads and tablecloths, or pictures with frames to put up on their walls. Now, with the peddlers’ visits, these luxuries were in reach. ...They could have some of the accoutrements of bourgeois life...”

THIS PRINCIPLE held true for many of the peddlers’ customers, including indigenous peoples and ex-slaves. Seen in this light, the peddlers’ role in transforming Western



COURTESY DIGITAL PUBLIC LIBRARY OF AMERICA

Jewish peddler on the Lower East Side, New York City, early 1900s

economies through the stimulation of a desire for merchandise was perhaps far greater than has been acknowledged.

Another interesting characteristic of Jewish peddling was the extent to which individual peddlers were often part of an organic but comprehensive network of Jewish commerce. Diner describes how “each new peddler arriving in a place encountered another Jew who had already ceased his days on the road. That old timer provided information, credit, goods, and the means to realize the goals of migration.”

It was in everyone’s interest that the peddler prosper. The Jewish credit network thrived, she explains, “when peddlers succeeded and offered credit on generous terms. Jewish peddlers operated in concert with Jewish shopkeepers, warehouse owners, and other wholesalers, all linked in an economic network that worked to get goods to customers.”

Diner explains in her preface that rather than explore a single place or time, the

book “moves from place to place and time to time, seeking comparisons, connections and differences in trying to answer questions about the nature and legacies of Jewish peddling.”

JEWES DISTINGUISHED THEMSELVES BY THE RAPIDITY WITH WHICH THE TYPICAL WORKER SOUGHT TO STRIKE OUT ON HIS OR HER OWN

She has done an impressive job of organizing a vast and varied body of material and culling some fascinating insights about the evolution of Jewish economic assimilation and prosperity. Though based on extensive research, the book is written for the

lay reader, and will appeal to those with a particular, perhaps genealogical, interest in this chapter of Jewish history.

For those looking for a more rigorous exploration of Jewish integration into Western economies, “The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire,” by Adam D. Mendelsohn, director of the Pearlstine Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture and associate professor of Jewish Studies at the College of Charleston, provides an intriguing comparative perspective. The book won the 2014 National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish Studies.

“To be properly understood,” Mendelsohn writes, “the economic experience of Jews in twentieth-century America must be seen in the context of a much larger history.” Indeed, his inquiry traces the trajectory of Jewish involvement in the clothing industry, from the 1830s to the 1930s. How was it, he asks, that Jews in the American market rose from peddlers and piece work-

Books

ers to become traders, entrepreneurs and manufacturers, while their counterparts in England were, generally speaking, less successful?

JEWISH PEDDLERS OPERATED IN CONCERT WITH JEWISH SHOPKEEPERS, WAREHOUSE OWNERS, AND OTHER WHOLESALEERS

Mendelsohn begins his investigation in the street markets and used clothing marts of London, where Jews played a major role in the sale of used and cheaply made new garments. “To an objective observer in the 1830s,” Mendelsohn writes, “the Jewish secondhand dealers of London would have looked more likely to be the midwives of future Jewish dominance of the clothing trade than would the scattering of peddlers in the Midwest.” The fact that things did not play out that way sparks the central investigation of the book.

For a time, it appeared that the continuing spread of the Industrial Revolution, coupled with British colonial expansion, offered great opportunity to Jewish entrepreneurs willing to risk the capital required to venture into the manufacture and sale of ready-made menswear. Jewish family businesses in the trade grew and prospered, aided by networks of relatives, landsmen and partners in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa.

Yet most of the petty dealers in London’s secondhand markets ultimately could not respond to the challenges of expansion, adaptation to new modes of production and competitive distribution networks. As Mendelsohn notes, “Focused on the collection of clothing and its sale in marts and on the streets, the English secondhand trade did not create the elaborate and geographically dispersed distribution chain that peddlers at the outer reaches of an ethnic economy established in America.”

By contrast, the fortuitous economic conditions resulting from the spike in demand brought on by the Civil War, as well as the opening of the American West and

the Gold Rush of the 1850s, offered ample opportunity for enterprising peddlers, clerks and petty shopkeepers, who had the motivation and flexibility to take on the distribution and selling of goods on a national scale. Mendelsohn describes this developing American economy as “centrifugal” in structure, and contrasts it to the “centripetal”, more family-based nature of the Jewish business community in England.

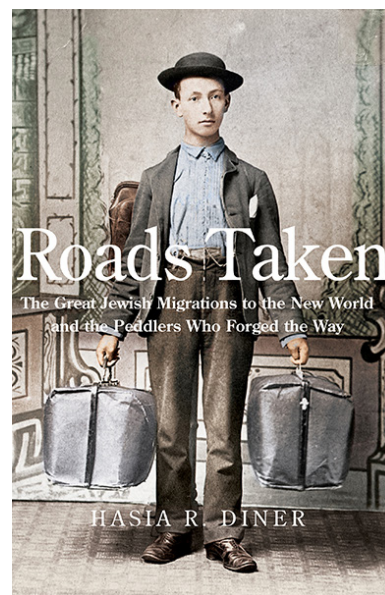
LIKE DINER, Mendelsohn cites what he terms “the ethnic ecosystem” as an important factor in enabling Jewish immigrants to set up businesses. “The provision of credit and the promise of mutual benefit fertilized bonds of solidarity, obligation and reciprocity between Jewish peddlers and the clerks, storekeepers and wholesalers with whom they did business.” This, combined with a burning drive toward entrepreneurship, characterizes the conditions that enabled immigrants to prosper.

As he explains, with particular regard to American Jews, “What seems to have set Jews apart from other immigrant groups who were recruited to stitch in the early twentieth century... was not the speed with which they sewed but the rapidity with which the typical worker sought to strike out on his or her own.”

“The Rag Race” not only traces the path of Jewish participation in the garment industry, but scrutinizes the cultural factors, such as Jewish communal networking and solidarity, that spurred it. “The culture that immigrants carried with them undoubtedly aided their ascent. There was nothing inevitable, however, in the rise of Jews from [London’s] Chatham Street; theirs is a history larded with a dose of good fortune. But for the confluence of structural forces in the American market, the fortunate positioning of Jewish immigrants on the edges and then at the center of the unfolding industry, and considerable individual effort aided by ethnic cooperation, the outcome would have been subtly or substantially different.”

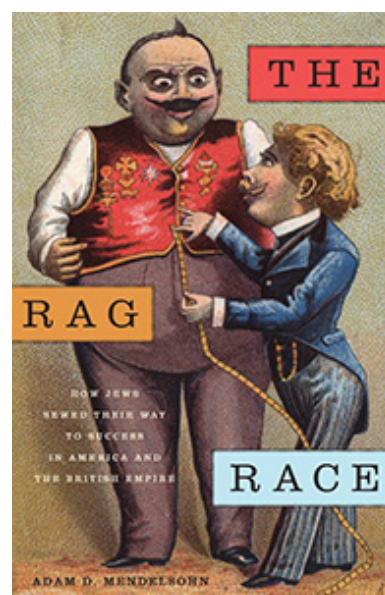
Toward the end of “Roads Taken,” Diner quotes the advice given to a novice peddler by his supplier. “This sack will teach you to talk, will give you food to eat, will give you an opportunity to emerge from your greenness, will teach you to integrate yourself into American life.”

Now generations later, we can see that these simple words of advice carried the weight of prophecy. ■



Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way

Hasia R. Diner
Yale University Press
280 pages; \$35



The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire

Adam D. Mendelsohn
NYU Press
320 pages; \$35