

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Eric L. Goldstein, *Book Review Editor*

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# Entering the Mainstream of Modern Jewish History: Peddlers and the American Jewish South

by

Hasia Diner

In his epic work, "Kentucky," Yiddish poet I. J. Schwartz put onto center-stage the life of a Jewish peddler, who "came with pack on his shoulders." Composed between 1918 and 1922 and published initially in serial form in the literary journal *Zukunft*, "Kentucky" solidified a long standing image, that of the "Jew from afar" who had made his way "into the unfamiliar/His feet sore, his heart heavy, /A pack on his back, a stick in his hand," who announced to all around him, that "I carry my business on my back." Joshua, the peddler, sold to, interacted with, and commented on, with lyrical depth, both the black and white denizens of this southern state, which gave the poem its name. This literary work provided one more link in a chain of discourse that linked the South, the Jews, and peddling.<sup>1</sup>

Yet by merely changing the place names and the descriptors of climate, topography, and makeup of the larger population, Joshua's experiences in Kentucky could be seen as one of the paradigmatic Jewish phenomena of the modern world. The story of the Jew as peddler in a new country, navigating new languages, new mores, and complex racial and religious dramas as he went about his businesses could literally have been located in any place in the new world of the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries.

Emphasizing the near universality of Jewish peddling, both in terms of time and place, transforms southern Jewish history from a curiosity, notable for its divergence from the larger

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narrative of modern Jewish history or, more specifically, American Jewish history. Rather, it places it squarely into the overarching paradigm, one which posits a confluence between trade, migration, cultural flexibility, and adaptability, as well as the “betweenness” of Jews as they negotiated among diverse peoples.

For scholars of southern Jewish history who insist on the uniqueness of their region, paying focused attention to the experiences of peddlers as immigrants raises serious question about their very enterprise. These migrations propelled the peddlers from the long-settled regions of central and eastern Europe to multiple frontier societies, new worlds that included the British Isles, a place with a very sparse Jewish presence before the nineteenth century, as well as North and South America, parts of Africa and the Antipodes. The fact that so many Jews, almost universally young immigrant men looking for a way to get a start in a new land, came to the American South as peddlers, has tended to blind observers’ eyes to the global dimensions of this experience. Those Jews who decided to leave their homes in central and eastern Europe from the eighteenth century into the early years of the twentieth by means of peddling and decided to relocate to the southern states joined a global movement. Little distinguished them from their literal and metaphoric peers who went to multiple regions, lands, and continents and who did so as peddlers. The decisions they made as to where to go in order to sell to rural customers from packs on their backs, and then horse-drawn wagons, reflected familial networks, Jewish communal structures, and the paucity of settled merchants able to provide goods to remote rural dwellers, and not the particular lure of the southern part of the United States. As such, by looking at immigrant Jewish peddlers, the American South, long conceptualized by its own residents and by outsiders as unique, becomes like other parts of the United States and the new world.

### *The Ubiquitous Jewish Peddler in Global Perspective*

The ubiquity of Jewish peddling and its inextricable connection to migration awaits a full and systematic historical

accounting.<sup>2</sup> Any conceptualizing about Jewish peddling and the differences between places and times must at present rely on anecdotal gleanings. But the vast trove of scattered evidence, usually derived from memoir, autobiography, the press, Jewish apologetic literature, and from local and regional histories—like that which defines the field of southern Jewish history—points to the historic truth. Jewish men considered migration and peddling as yoked phenomena. This recognition and the behavior stimulated by it represent a broad, deep, and profound historical reality. It could be seen as one of the important common Jewish experiences.

The literature produced by Jews in order to defend their people from attack, for example, offers a place to start thinking about peddling and its connection to migration in global and then local terms. Besides the larger and deeply pervasive antipathy towards Jews that existed throughout the western world in the modern period, peddlers tended to raise local suspicions since they did not quite belong anywhere. Likewise because the mode by which they made a living differed so radically from the more “normal” means of the vast majority of those to whom they sold—agriculture—they emerged as targets sometimes of violence but more often of negative imagery. So, Israel Abrahams, the distinguished British scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, like many other Jewish intellectuals of his time, saw in the study of history a way to defend the Jews. In his most highly regarded book, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (1896), in a chapter on “Trades and Occupations,” he took on the French writer Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu who had asserted that Jews shunned “arduous physical undertakings” because they tended to be “averse to dangerous occupations.” Abrahams sought to prove that the Jewish tendency to avoid certain livelihoods grew out of sources other than a fear of hard work or cowardice in the face of danger. “The Jewish peddler,” wrote Abrahams, “of recent centuries was no coward; had he lacked courage, he must have remained at home.”<sup>3</sup>

Although writing about the Middle Ages, an era in which European Jews entered in large number into this field, Abrahams’

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words offer a template for thinking about Jewish peddling, Jewish migrations, and the linkages between these two global phenomena, which also left their profound mark on one very small corner of the world, the American South. Going out on the road, laden with a jumble of goods, or sometimes specializing in one particular type of ware, functioned in the modern (and indeed earlier) era as a profound, binding, and nearly universal Jewish experience. Not that all Jews peddled, but rather because so many did for some period of time, the history of Jewish peddling played a pivotal role in the shaping and functioning of nearly all Jewish communities. Particularly after the eighteenth century, peddling served as a powerful vehicle for fostering Jewish migrations out of more stable, but economically declining regions, to new lands, wide open for settlement and business. Peddlers, prosaic and peripatetic figures who left little in the way of paper trails, can be seen as the juggernauts of Jewish migrations. Their experiences on the road as the human engines who drove the massive Jewish population shift, which brought Jews out of central and eastern Europe into a variety of new lands, deserves historicization.

Historians, Abrahams' statement notwithstanding, have largely ignored peddlers and peddling as a formative Jewish experience. References to peddlers abound. Systematic and focused analysis does not. Scholars of the modern Jewish experience have produced a robust literature on Jews as industrial laborers, for example. Certainly in the realm of American Jewish history, historians have studied, referred to, and invested with great analytic significance the clustering of Jews in the garment industry, primarily as laborers and to a lesser degree as manufacturers. Studying Jewish workers in the needle trades has allowed historians to chart oppressive work conditions, worker militancy, class consciousness, and union organizing, and to connect the history of Jews with the dramatic and heroic narratives of labor history in a number of countries.<sup>4</sup>

But peddling, a field of Jewish enterprise through which on a global scale millions of Jews passed, has not been the focus of any systematic research and analysis. Indeed with the exception of

a few articles, many of them with a decidedly southern focus, it has almost completely eluded the attention of historians.<sup>5</sup>

This absence in the scholarship merits thinking about in and of itself inasmuch as Jewish peddling functioned as 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 represented perhaps “the” paradigmatic Jewish means of livelihood, with maybe money lending as a competitor for that status. The particularly attractive narrative of Jewish immigrants in America as industrial workers and the dramatic tale of their union organizing may also provide a way to think about why southern Jewish history, characterized so profoundly by commerce, has gotten short shrift.

To date few historians have attempted to study the Jewish small business sector in America at all, whether urban or small town, northern, southern, or western, whether stationary or itinerant. Historians concerned with the Jewish past have almost purposely eschewed deep research on commerce, particularly at the more modest end of the business spectrum.

Even more so is this the case with the peddlers, whose presence caused so much negative local commentary and who stood at the bottom of the Jewish commercial hierarchy.<sup>6</sup> Yet Jews and peddling had a history so much longer and deeper than that of Jews and industrial labor. Extending backward into the Middle Ages and encompassing nearly the entire world as known at the time, Jews engaged in the retail sale of wares from packs on their backs or from animal-driven carts. They sold to Jews and non-Jews. Both Jewish women and men developed their routes, forged relationships with customers, helped stimulate desire for new goods, and served as fixtures of many local economies. In some regions and towns peddlers outnumbered non-peddlers in the Jewish community, and the clustering of Jews in this one occupational group affected nearly all aspects of the Jewish experience.

Before turning to the peddling experience, its historical roots and its connection to migration, two kinds of peddling need to be delineated. The first of these took place on city streets. Urban peddlers hawked their goods, both foodstuffs and finished

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products, from wheelbarrows, pushcarts, or other kinds of contraptions at times slung around their necks and on their backs. These women and men engaged in work described by one historian as the “quintessential job of the urban poor and a particularly easy form of first employment for the newly arrived.” They differed, however, from the peripatetic peddlers, the subject of this essay and the ones who left their impress on the rural South, in that, at the end of the day, they repaired to their places of residence. They lived in Jewish enclaves, participated in Jewish societies, and interacted with other Jews. The second kind of peddler embarked on relatively lengthy road trips, spent time among non-Jews, did not return home with nightfall, and faced the challenge of living away from settled Jewish communities. This held, although in somewhat different ways, for both Jewish peddlers who plied their wares in Europe and those who chose to join the exodus to a series of new world places.<sup>7</sup>

Numbers of Jewish peddlers in the pre-migration setting varied from place to place and changed over time. They also can be elusive in that the peddlers came in and out of towns and regions, and individuals peddled at some point or another in their lifetimes. But just a few samplings of efforts at counting peddlers in pre-migration Europe demonstrate the significance of peddling to Jewish history. In 1863, one writer for the French Jewish newspaper, *Univers Israelit*, looking backward to an earlier era, remarked that “during the First Empire peddling was the chief occupation of Jews. Thus according to the census of 1808, twenty of approximately twenty-six Jewish families of Fontainebleau were so engaged; in Versailles, Orleans and Nantes all the Jews were peddlers.” In Wurttemberg in 1812, no fewer than 85.5 percent of the Jews made a living as “hucksters,” and a study of Polish Jewry in the nineteenth century stated quite simply, “a majority of the Jewish population in Poland made their living in trade, but this principally meant peddled trade rather than retail.” It may not be at all outrageous to suggest that every European Jew would have known peddlers as family members and neighbors, real presences in the ordinary course of everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

*Poor Jewish Peddler or Beggar.*  
*German hand-colored etching*  
*by unknown artist, nineteenth century,*  
*19 cm x 11.5 cm.*  
*(Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.)*

The reality of Jewish peddling not only impacted on the peddlers themselves and their families, but Jewish community life both responded to and took its form from the ubiquity of the peddlers' presence. Jewish communities in the pre-modern and pre-migration settings, for example, made certain that either individual Jews or the community as a whole provided food and lodging for Jewish peddlers. The existence of hundreds of scattered Jewish communities in relative proximity to each other also meant that these peddlers in the Germanic states, Poland, Alsace, and elsewhere on the Continent did not have to return home for the Sabbath. They could often avail themselves of Sabbath services in the towns along their route. They spent holidays away from their own families but still in the comfort of Jewish homes.

The European Jewish economy rode on the backs of peddlers, and this fact made the peddlers' presence a constant feature of Jewish life and forged Jewish relationships independent of place of residence. Peddling along Jewish routes helped make the Jewish people transnational. It fostered a sense of themselves as cosmopolitans rather than as locals. Jews in one country came to be familiar with Jews from another. They learned each other's cooking styles and modes of dress as well as the details of lived life in the communities they came to. In the 1770s, as one of many possible examples, the bishop prince of Paderborn allowed Polish Jewish peddlers to come into his territory. Later when their number grew too large, he rescinded the invitation.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the fickle whims of the Paderborn official, local Jews came in contact with Polish Jews in their homes, synagogues, and other sites of Jewish community life. Among other profound implications, this reinforced the maintenance of Yiddish, a transnational Jewish language that allowed Jews to communicate with each other regardless of whether they hailed from Alsace in the West or as far east as Lithuania and the Russian lands. Peddling as such sustained the Jews' linguistic continuity at the same time that it exposed them to the many variants of Jewish practice.

Similarly the peddlers took on, by circumstance, a political role in the age before newspapers: they served as crucial agents of information, linking Jewish communities and making possible

the emergence of an integrated Jewish identity within and beyond the borders of particular nation states. Historian Jacob Katz in his elegant *Out of the Ghetto*, linked the peddlers of “Ghetto Times,” the title of the first chapter of the book, with the statement that no Jewish community, “even the largest, could be said to have been self-contained or self-sufficient. Business transactions brought members of different communities into touch. . . . It was a typical feature of Jewish economic activity that it could rely on business connections with Jewish communities in even far-flung cities and countries.” Katz, expansive in the scope of his thinking, saw this internationalism as paradigmatic of both business and community life among these Jews and asserted that it characterized not just the highest levels of commerce, but also “peddlers, even if they did not travel great distances or even go abroad.”<sup>10</sup>

In the European setting, Jewish peddling played a crucial role in forging relationships between Jews and non-Jews. Jews not only sold to non-Jews, but they often bought agricultural goods as well as scraps, like bones and rags, which could be reused, from non-Jews, thus enabling inter-religious contact. At times Jewish peddlers spent the night in Christian homes or in inns catering to varied kinds of wayfarers. The Jewish peddlers, as it were, taught their Christian customers something about Judaism, and real, as opposed to mythic, Jews. In a family reminiscence of the peddling experience in the early nineteenth century in Rhenbischsheim, a small German town, Moses Kahnmann’s grandson recalled that his grandfather described how he “occasionally might find in a village inn or with a friendly peasant a pan especially marked with the sign of kashrut, for the exclusive use of Jewish guests,” the majority of whom came as peddlers. Others, both in personal memoirs and in historical studies, observed, “the pedlars [*sic*] stayed overnight with peasant acquaintances with whom they left their own kosher crockery for repeated uses.” Peasant meant non-Jew and such respectful behaviors demonstrated the possibility of Jewish-Christian amity in an otherwise hostile environment and underscored the significance of the peddlers as historical actors.<sup>11</sup>

The history of Jewish life in Europe could be narrated around the history of peddling: its actual details, in terms of what

peddlers sold, to whom, by what means, and for what price. Such a study would examine how Jewish peddlers interacted with, or avoided, non-Jewish peddlers and the ways in which Jewish peddlers and settled town merchants, both Jewish and gentile, influenced each other.<sup>12</sup> It would explore the impact of peddling on the Jews' inner communal lives and on the multiple ways in which peddling affected relationships between Jews and Christians as individuals and as members of distinct communities. How peddling figured into Christian polemics against the Jews, how it emerged as matters of the state as many rulers and decision makers pondered the assets or liabilities of the Jewish peddlers, and how Jews who represented their people to those with state power fretted over the peddlers' visibility and distinctiveness all represent crucial and conceptual issues with which such a history would be concerned.<sup>13</sup>

Peddling clearly provided the overarching economic and, as such, political, social, and cultural framework for the lives of many, indeed most, European Jews in the period before the late eighteenth century, the period that heralded the onset of modernization, the beginnings of emancipation, and the first stirrings of the massive east to west migration that profoundly transformed Jewish life.

#### *New World Immigration and Peddling*

Although Jewish peddling did not come to an end in eighteenth-century central and eastern Europe, at that point in time another transformative factor entered into Jewish life and made peddling an even more significant force in the history of the Jews.

From the eighteenth century onward, peddling provided central and eastern European Jews with an effective means by which they could not only enhance their chances of making a living, but also it gave them the opportunity to find new places to live, among those the American South.

That is, peddling as a familiar occupation, as the Jews' economic *métier*, became caught up with and indeed facilitated the great movements of Jews out of long-established places of residence to a series of new worlds. Nearly every place that Jews

*Jewish Peddler in the United States with His Wagon and a Customer.*  
*Daguerreotype, by unknown photographer, nineteenth century.*  
*(Courtesy Richard W. Welch, Graphic Antiquity*  
*and the Jacob Rader Marcus Center,*  
*American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)*

went as they left continental Europe, central and eastern, opened up to them through the actions of peddlers, men who took up their old-style trade but in radically new settings.

The act of leave taking pivoted in a number of ways around the peddling phenomenon. Notably, these new world Jewish peddlers may not themselves have ever peddled before their migrations. Many came from the ranks of young men unable to find a place for themselves in the local economies of the regions where they had grown up. Migration offered them a way of establishing themselves as adults. They may have been too young to have ever peddled themselves, but when they needed to find a means of migration and a means of making a living in their new homes, they turned to what they knew. After all, they would have known in their immediate families and in their villages many peddlers whose experiences and skills they could draw on. In addition, these young Jewish emigrants abandoned precisely those places where Jewish over-competition in the field of peddling had made it impossible for them, as young people, to get started with their lives. Finally, the young men poised to emigrate by taking up the peddlers' pack departed from towns and regions that no longer needed peddlers because new commercial realities undercut the peddlers'—and the Jews'—longstanding modes of making a living.

Instead, these young men began a process of moving outward, discovering as Jews a number of new worlds. Peddling, the old, familiar economic *modus operandi* of the Jews, structured and linked physical movement and the process of discovery. This new age of Jewish peddling took Jews out of continental Europe and brought them over the course of the next two-and-a-half centuries to no fewer spots around the globe than the British Isles, the Americas—North, South, and Central—South Africa, and Australia.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, the less developed a region, the poorer the internal transportation networks, the fewer settled merchants present, the further the distance from one settlement to another, and the more agrarian the region, the more attractive immigrant Jewish peddlers found it. Certainly the southern region of the United

States fit all of these criteria. The least urbanized part of the United States for the longest time, the most agrarian, and the one with the least articulated system of roads and railroads, it attracted Jewish immigrant peddlers well into the early twentieth century. In the absence of focused case studies of Jewish peddling, let alone comparative ones, one can at least begin with the hunch that the South's persistent agrarianism, its fairly small commercial class, and its lag in industrial and urban development as compared to other American regions, made it a particularly attractive magnet for young Jews looking to gain a foothold in American commerce.<sup>15</sup>

But nearly every other region of the United States at one time or another drew in and used the services of Jewish peddlers. References to the arrival, commercial and communal activities, and subsequent careers of Jewish peddlers in every part of the United States testify to that historical reality. Nearly every issue of the journal *Western States Jewish History*, for example, contains articles that refer to the presence of Jewish peddlers west of the Mississippi River. So, too, publications surveying the Jewish history of other parts of the United States demonstrate the national nature of Jewish peddling.<sup>16</sup>

A few non-southern examples will have to suffice to point to the national scope of the phenomenon. Of Boston's Jews in the years 1845 to 1861, 25 percent peddled at one time or another, while among those in Easton, Pennsylvania, the concentration moved from 46 percent in 1840 to 70 percent in 1845. In Iowa, in 1850, 125 Jews made their home and 100 peddled around the state. A non-exhaustive list of places where peddlers were the first Jews to appear and then settle would include Berkshire County, Massachusetts; Sioux City, Iowa; Chicago, Illinois; Chico, California; Monmouth County, New Jersey; Cincinnati, Ohio; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Rochester and Tupper Lake, New York. The list could go on for pages demonstrating the ubiquity of the phenomenon and also demonstrating the lack of a uniquely southern narrative.<sup>17</sup>

The South, then, was not the only region that supported such activities, although it may have continued to attract them for a

longer period of time. Yet in each one of these places and the many specific regions within them, peddlers were the first Jews (and sometimes the first white people) to penetrate these unknown spaces. In various lands the activities of the peddlers cleared the ground for the eventual formation of settled Jewish communities, while in others the peddlers—and the Jewish presence—disappeared leaving few traces.

The lack of a distinctive southern story needs to be set in the context of this phenomenon as not being a uniquely North American one either. The vast population transfer of Jews from central and eastern Europe westward moved along peddling routes, and the history of Jewish peddling in each new world has a history of its own. Each one stands as worthy of analysis. Jewish peddling in South and Central America followed a particular course no doubt different from that of Jewish peddling in South Africa or Canada. Furthermore, within any one of these continents or countries local variations also made for many different histories of Jewish peddling and Jewish migration. For example, Jewish peddlers in Quebec who sold to French-speaking Catholic customers who evinced hostility towards the idea of Canada as a modern, liberal, and British-oriented nation had a particular set of experiences that diverged from those of Jewish peddlers who cast their lot in the Anglophone provinces where Protestantism predominated and most women and men embraced their connections to Great Britain and its economic and political practices. Likewise in South Africa, Jewish peddlers sold at one time or another to the Afrikaner Boers and British, as well as to native customers, who had been colonized by both previously named groups. Each constituency had a different set of reactions to the peddlers as Jews, immigrants primarily from Lithuania, and bearers of consumer goods. Each history needs to be explored and each stands on its own.

Young Jewish men who showed up in the American South to peddle their wares found a particular racial landscape, one in which the black-white divide created a set of social practices not replicated in New England or upstate New York, where differences of class rather than color structured political relationships that the peddlers had to know about and deal with. Further west,

the presence of Indians and Mexicans as customers forced Jewish peddlers fresh from Posen or Lithuania to confront yet another set of on-the-ground realities as they sought to accomplish the goals of the migration: earn money, settle down, marry or bring wives and children left behind in either Europe or some other large city, and get on with life.

*Interaction with Non-Jews*

Yet certain characteristics have been shared by all new world Jewish peddling histories regardless of continent or country or region within. First, unlike old-world peddling, the immigrant peddlers sold only to non-Jews. This perhaps obvious point had tremendous historical significance, not just for the peddlers themselves but for the development of Jewish communities in these places. The young Jewish man who decided to leave 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 when the day ended, or at times even when the sun set on Friday, or when Jewish holidays punctuated the calendar.

Rather, these peddlers spent the days of the week only among non-Jews, depending on their customers for a place to sleep and 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. This reality reflected the fact that the first of the peddlers, as pioneers, went to places where no Jew had been before. Those who immigrated later and entered the field took the place of the Jewish peddlers who had amassed enough savings to be able to own shops in town. While the later peddlers sold to non-Jews who had already become acquainted with Jews, they still did not share the road or their weekday time with other Jews, and the newcomer peddlers, like their predecessors, spent days on end with no other Jews around them.

*Jewish Fellowship*

This then meant that new world Jewish peddlers, unlike their counterparts in the old world, did not travel as far, and they organized their selling lives when they could in such a way as to get back to Jewish enclaves for the Sabbath. The life histories of many of these immigrant peddlers repeatedly noted that their lives marched according to a kind of weekly rhythm. They went 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, which in terms of Jewish migration history must be thought of as a *new world*, "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 of choice for peddler, came to be known within the Jewish community as "Wochers," that is, "weekly people."<sup>18</sup> In Ireland, to which several thousand Lithuanian Jews immigrated after the 1880s and where nearly all the men peddled at one time or another, Jews described themselves and were described by their customers as "weekly men," the ones who showed up week after week at the farmhouse doors, ready to collect payment for previously purchased goods and to show the woman of the home some new "things" to buy.<sup>19</sup> In Mississippi, as in many southern Jewish communities, former peddlers-turned-shopkeepers provided the space for those still on the road and needing a Sabbath resting place. In Natchez, the Millstein house became the place where, "many of the peddlers who came home . . . after a week's work would gather . . . for the Sabbath."<sup>20</sup>

These spots of Jewish life scattered through the hinterlands, where peddlers spent their weekends and holidays, reflected the densely Jewish underpinnings to the migration and settlement. In these places peddlers ready to upgrade and settle met young Jewish women, daughters, and female relatives of Jewish merchants. The outlines of congregations began to take shape as numbers

grew, however minimally. Indeed, before congregations formed, 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 has been told as well about Woodville, Mississippi. It likewise could be and has been told about Australia, Ireland, South Africa, and Canada.<sup>21</sup>

The 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 also socializing. In the country stores owned by former peddlers, those who relaxed, like Edward Cohen's grandfather featured in Cohen's family memoir, spent Saturday night in New Orleans, where "he'd rest, drink whiskey with the Alsatian [*sic*] peddlers and play poker all night."<sup>22</sup>

Moise Cohen's recollection that he, a Rumanian Jew, found fellowship with a pack of Alsatian Jewish peddlers pointed out yet another implication for Jewish history of peddling around the modern world. It provided a common experience for young Jewish men drawn from many different European homes. Bavarian, Bohemian, Lithuanian, Polish, Galician, and Prussian Jewish men peddled alongside Alsations, Rumanians, and others in numerous countries. This experience, despite its centrifugality, actually served as a unifying force, representing a step on the road toward creating new Jewish identities based not on where people came from but where they had gone. The histories of fathers as peddlers and peddling's impact on family life became important experiences that immigrant Jews in their many, newest diaspora homes shared with each other.

The connection between peddling and the creation of Jewish life in the hinterlands played itself out in other ways. For one, Jewish peddlers who traveled to the larger cities, characterized as they were with substantial and institutionally rich Jewish communities, stocked up on matzo at the same time that they settled with creditors and replenished their supply of wares to sell when they went back on the road. In places like New York, Baltimore,

Cincinnati, and Philadelphia, Jewish peddlers loaded up with Jewish goods that they then brought back to Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, and the like. Perhaps even more dramatically, peddlers functioned as leaders of Jewish communities. No example more intriguing exists than that of Charles Wessolowsky, an immigrant peddler from Gollub, a town in the former Polish province of Posen, who, in the late 1870s, functioned as a kind of circuit rabbi throughout the American South, particularly Georgia, selling wares at the same time that he buried the deceased, performed marriages of Jewish couples, and consecrated synagogues and cemeteries.<sup>23</sup> So too Bernard Nordlinger, an Alsatian-born Jewish peddler who sold in the territory around Macon, Georgia, struck the small group of Jews living there as Judaically knowledgeable and they asked him to become their rabbi.<sup>24</sup>

*"Between-People" in Rural Economies*

The reality that Jewish peddlers spent most of their time, while peddling, with non-Jews forced them into a quick encounter with difference and put them nearly immediately on the path towards learning new languages, cultures, and social realities. Wherever they went and lived in these liminal situations, they functioned as "between-people." They had no choice but to develop relationships with the people to whom they sold and to whom, perhaps more importantly, they wanted to sell. By definition they had to learn their potential customers' languages, literally and figuratively, and had to ingratiate themselves with the women—most often 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. They had to acquire knowledge of local social and political relationships, to figure out who and where the most likely customers lived, what topics to avoid, and what aspirations to play upon.

Yet, simultaneously, 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.

The disruptive role played by the peddlers in part stemmed from the fact that as outsiders they could, at times, transgress conventional boundaries of etiquette. They could, in essence, claim ignorance of local rules as they sought to expand the scope of 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 offers a case in point. Morris Wittcowsky, author of one of the best peddler life histories, 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 and many others insisted on using the titles "Mr." and "Mrs." when addressing black customers.<sup>25</sup>

This should not be taken to imply that Jewish peddlers challenged prevailing social relationships or power relationships. In many ways their status as outsiders and the particular nature of their commercial transactions helped retain the status quo. During the era of plantation slavery, Jewish peddlers carrying second-hand clothing, sewn (or, better, re-sewn) by Jewish tailors on New York's Chatham Street, in the "slop shops" associated with that section of the city, sold to plantation owners for the use of their slaves.<sup>26</sup>

Peddlers could also break the rules because local people on farms, in mining camps, and on the fringes of cities not connected to downtown shopping districts reveled in the items the peddlers had for sale. This eager embrace of the peddler and his goods encompassed not just the poorer people and those, like African

Americans in the South, who enjoyed the fewest rights available but also those who represented the political and economic elite. The Jewish peddlers fit into existing stratified relationships in large measure because they did not fit in at all and defied the boundaries of the accepted and established order. The Jewish peddlers, because they did not have a stake in the social order, could cross lines.

Certainly at times and in most places the peddlers not only offered new goods, new standards of consumption, and cosmopolitan styles, but also invoked the ire of settled shopkeepers whom the peddlers could undersell. Local shopkeepers and farmwomen, by and large, shared religious, linguistic, and "ethnic" (for lack of a better term here) characteristics. These women who had only limited dollars, or pounds or pesos, for purchasing goods stood then between the Jewish peddlers and their non-Jewish compatriots, those storeowners who often had been drawn from the ranks of farm families and to whom they often shared family and kinship connections.

The peddler and the shopkeeper, in essence, both courted these relatively poor women, who thus gained power through their purchasing choices. The merchants of the place argued, directly and indirectly, that group loyalty demanded that the women buy from them. They pointed out that the Jewish peddler combined in one physical being foreignness, religious otherness, and an economic challenge to the local order. Yet the peddler offered credit, new goods, and direct access to those goods. Coming directly to the women's homes, showing them exactly how the curtains and the pictures would look, the peddler drew the women more intimately into the fantasies of consumption.

At times Jewish peddler/non-Jewish merchant competition 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

*"Our peaceful rural districts as they are  
liable to be infested if this Russian exodus  
of the persecuted Hebrews continues much longer."  
The Judge, American Humor Magazine, July 8, 1882.  
(Courtesy of the Antisemitic Literature Collection  
American Jewish Historical Society,  
New York and Newton Centre, Massachusetts.)*

before obtaining a license demonstrated one of the multiple ways in which the presence of foreign peddlers, Jews primarily, became politicized.<sup>27</sup> By 1891 enough Jewish peddlers had entered into the commercial life of Key West, Florida, to propel the city council to enact legislation that taxed immigrant peddlers at the rate of \$1,000 a head.<sup>28</sup>

How much the three notorious episodes of Civil War anti-Jewish action, that perpetrated by General Ulysses S. Grant on the Jews of the Department of the Tennessee (Paducah, Kentucky) and the others in Talbotton and Thomasville, Georgia, grew out of the peddling experience deserves some consideration. In all three cases the belief that the Jews as merchants profited from wartime exigencies inflamed prejudice and led to calls that the Jews be expelled. In all three places Jews had been peddlers moving in and out of town selling to farmers in the surrounding countryside. As such, in all three places the Jews came in and out of community surveillance, and local people suffering with shortages of goods of all kinds imagined the Jews, the shadowy peddlers, to be not only treacherous but benefiting from the suffering of others.

The peddlers, those who lived in the South during the Civil War and those who lived in all the new world places throughout this long period, in one way or another disrupted local social patterns and entered into local dramas that did not concern them but which they affected. As such, the halls of city and county councils, courthouses, state legislatures, and even national assemblies became places where the merits and demerits of Jewish peddling and Jewish migration were weighed.

On a personal level, memoirs and life histories of former Jewish peddlers, regardless of which new world they went to, described in painful details the experience of being spat upon, pelted with stones, and hounded by barking dogs as locals verbally hurled anti-Jewish slurs at them. Jewish communal bodies and defense organizations at times also had to deal with the issue of the peddlers and the shadows they cast on the process of acceptance and integration.

Yet non-Jewish women, as chief customers, continued to buy from the peddlers and, in the process, challenged the power of clergy and other local elites who implored them to shun the Jew, the peddler. Likewise, Jewish peddlers persevered with their routes, returning time and again to these locales to cultivate customers and abandoning these locales only when better opportunities beckoned elsewhere or when they had amassed enough savings to open a store and relinquish life on the road.

When they settled, particularly in the towns that served the rural regions around which they had peddled, they became respected members of the community, sometimes (and with much national and regional variation) winning enough trust of the local non-Jewish populace to hold public office. But if not that, they set themselves up as modestly successful storekeepers who maintained friendly enough relations with customers, non-Jewish in the main, who bought much of what they needed from, as Stella Suberman called it, "the Jew Store."<sup>29</sup>

Jewish peddlers functioned between various classes of people divided by color, religion, language, and class. Each new world in which they sold had its own deep cleavages and hierarchies. Jews fit no fixed category by which they could be understood, and they had to learn to negotiate these divides in order to sell their goods at the best price and ensure their own personal safety. In the American South color mattered more than anything, and Jews as white people could take profound advantage of that reality. Perhaps the best statement available to historians describing this has come to us from the memoir of Oscar Straus, close confidant of Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. ambassador to Turkey, and the first Jew to hold a cabinet position. Straus' father Lazarus came to the United States in 1852 from Bavaria and began his American career as a peddler in Georgia. As the son looked back on his father's life he wrote, "The itinerant merchant . . . filled a real want, and his vocation was looked upon as quite dignified. Indeed he was treated by the owners of the plantations with a spirit of equality. . . . This gave to the white visitor a status of equality that probably otherwise he would not have enjoyed to such a degree, provided only, therefore, that the peddler proved himself an honourable, upright man, who conscientiously treated his customer with fairness and made no misrepresentations regarding his wares, he was treated as an honored guest by the plantation owners, certainly a spirit of true democracy."<sup>30</sup>

Straus correctly emphasized the importance of the Jewish peddlers' whiteness. By being defined by law as white, as being able to share in all of the privileges that went hand in hand with

*Lazarus Straus and his wife, Sara, in Talbotton, Georgia, 1856.  
This photograph was taken four years after Lazarus arrived  
in America and two years after Sara and the children  
joined him in Talbotton, seat of Talbot County.  
In 1852 Lazarus began as a pushcart peddler,  
first in Oglethorpe, Georgia, and, then, Talbotton.  
He peddled enough dry goods and "Yankee notions" that  
within two years he saved enough to send for Sara and their children.  
(Courtesy of the Straus Historical Society, Inc., Smithtown, New York.)*

that color, the Jewish peddler could sell to African American customers yet retain all the rights and honors that *ipso facto* accompanied whiteness. They could treat their black customers with respect but not fear that their own whiteness would be compromised. Their whiteness played a not insignificant role in making it possible for the immigrant Jewish peddler to begin

his American years in this lowly occupation and swiftly move out of it.

*The Brief Road from Migratory to Sedentary*

This final point on the differences between new world peddling and the pre- or non-migration peddling experience had tremendous historical significance. Jewish men who migrated to peddle (and peddled in order to migrate) did so for a relatively brief duration. Rather than being a life sentence as it had been in Europe, Jewish peddlers in their destination homes used peddling as a way to leave the occupation. They not only did not continue in it for decades, but sons did not pick up their fathers' packs or sit down behind their fathers' horses. Rather their peddling represented merely a stage in a Jewish immigrant man's life, one not passed on to subsequent generations. The actual biographies of countless peddlers in their migration destinations demonstrate the linear trajectory on 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. Illustrative are the Rich brothers of Atlanta, Georgia, immigrants from Kaschau, Hungary, the first of whom came to America in 1859. By 1867 he owned one of the most significant emporia in the city reborn from the ashes of the Civil War, a symbol almost of the commercial underpinnings of the New South. Like so many other Jewish peddling families, the Riches had migrated serially, with one brother bringing over another, broadening their selling base, pooling their earnings, and settling down when they had amongst themselves saved enough to open a store.<sup>31</sup>

Some former peddlers did not just move up the commercial hierarchy from itinerancy to modest storekeeping, but shot up meteorically to the highest echelons of business. Henry Lehman arrived in Mobile, Alabama, in the 1840s and loaded up with the kinds of items that farm families craved. He spent only one year selling from the road until he settled in Montgomery and opened a store selling crockery, seeds, tools, dry goods, and the like. Living behind the store, he squirreled away his earnings and ended

his career as one of Alabama's and the South's most successful cotton brokers. His experience resembled that of Oscar Straus, also a Bavarian immigrant, who took his place among the legions of young Jewish men who served the rural South. Both moved from the difficult life on the road to affluence and economic influence locally, regionally, and indeed nationally.<sup>32</sup>

The trajectory from unskilled but eager-to-learn peddler to respectable shopkeeper represented social reality. But it moved from being just fact to a powerful image in the Jews' quest for rights. Jews in the age of migration, in the many places to which they had migrated, made a point of defending themselves from negative stereotyping by showing how transitory the peddling experience had been. Just give Jews the chance to immigrate, this line of reasoning went, and they would both provide the essential services of the peddler and soon transform themselves into settled and responsible community members. This argument, like the new world peddling phenomenon, also had a global dimension. Israel Abraham offered his defense of the Jews and Jewish peddling at a time when Great Britain began debating what would in 1905 become the Aliens Act. In the United States, George Cohen, author of a 1924 book, *The Jews in the Making of America*, provided a similar way of thinking about peddlers, Jews, and Jewish mobility articulated in a decidedly American tone. In this book, published as part of the "The Racial Contribution Series" sponsored by the Knights of Columbus, Cohen intended, as did the other authors, to use history to dispel the anti-immigrant spirit that had captured the nation and which had in that same year culminated 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 not a negative but rather a 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 imparts to it during the course of its vicissitudes an adaptability and a readiness that are 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." In Cohen's sweeping analysis then, the Jewish peddlers, despite the mundane nature of their lives, exerted a profound impact on Jewish history.<sup>33</sup>

*The South in Global Perspective*

The history of every Jewish population center in the new world—the United States, Canada, England and the rest of the British Isles, South Africa, Australia, Mexico, Argentina, and elsewhere in South and Central America—cannot be disassociated from the global history of peddling. Common themes, common processes, and common concerns linked these places and made the history of any one place not all that different from the basic contours of another. These universals or commonalities connected the experience of being a Jewish peddler at the tip of the Cape of Good Hope with the experience of being a Jewish peddler in Newfoundland or the tip of Cape Horn with that of Alaska. Yet local stories of Jewish migration and Jewish peddling also deserve to be told to enrich and complicate modern Jewish history. In each place the local contours of attitudes towards consumption, allocations of power, distribution of resources, basic religious, ethnic, and racial cleavages in the society as well as ideas about foreigners shaped the ways in which Jewish peddlers as immigrants and Jewish immigrants as peddlers made their way.

From the vantage point of southern Jewish history, the focus on peddlers provides not only a way to talk about a large group of actors, the young Jewish immigrant men who traversed the roads of the South, but it helps put what has been considered to be a distinctive and idiosyncratic history into line with the broad outlines of modern Jewish history. Not an insignificant other story, southern Jewish history provides a locus to see the drama of European Jewish immigration, the impact of a particular kind of commerce, and how Jews benefited because they defied the standard categories by which societies organized themselves. Through the

experience of peddlers, southern Jewish history stops being an oddity or an anomaly. Rather when putting peddlers in the center-stage, the history of Jews in the South can stand for one of the paradigmatic modern Jewish experiences.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I. J. Schwartz, *Kentucky*, trans. Gertrude Dubrovsky (Tuscaloosa, 1990), 29–30, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Peddling itself, a phenomenon of significance well beyond Jewish history, has received some scholarly attention. Laurence Fontaine, *History of Pedlars in Europe*, trans. Vicki Whittaker (Durham, 1996) referred only in one place to Jewish peddlers, but his book offers an important impetus in historicizing this occupation and giving it the scholarly attention it deserves. There are a few studies of Arab peddling, particularly Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, IL, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London, 1896), 231–232.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy L. Green, ed., *Jewish Workers in the Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> The work of Rudolf Glanz stands out as particularly noteworthy. See for example his “Notes on Early Jewish Peddling in America,” *Jewish Social Studies* 7 (April, 1945); also, Lee M. Friedman, “The Problems of Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Peddlers,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 44 (September, 1954): 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.

<sup>6</sup> A notable exception is Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana, 1840–1875* (Tuscaloosa, 1988). Derek Penslar offers trenchant observations on Jewish historians’ discomfort with writing about Jews and business in *Shylock’s Children: Economics and Identity in Modern Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Green, *Jewish Workers*, 234.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Zosa Szajkowski, “Growth of the Jewish Population in France,” *Jewish Social Studies* 8 (1946): 307; David S. Landes, “The Jewish Merchant: Typology and Stereotypology in Germany,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 9 (1974): 13; Anna Maria Orla-Bukowska, “Shtetl Communities: Another Image,” *Polin* 8 (1994): 94.

<sup>9</sup> Moses Shulvass, *From East to West: The Westward Migration of Jews from Eastern Europe During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Detroit, 1971), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (New York, 1973), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Walter J. Cahman, "Village and Small-Town Jews in Germany, A Typological Study," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 19 (1974): 112–114, 121; for other references see, Mordecai Kossover, "Inland Trade among Polish Jews in the 16th–17th Centuries," *YIVO Bletter* 15 (March–April, 1940): 182; one of the best sources on Alsatian Jewish peddling is Daniel Stauben, *Scenes of Jewish Life in Alsace* (London, 1979), originally published in the *Revue des deux Mondes* in the late 1850s.

<sup>12</sup> On non-Jewish peddlers, the key work is Fontaine, *History of Pedlars in Europe*. Fontaine confesses, "my apologies for placing so little emphasis in this book on the merchant migration of the Jewish communities. The work involved in putting the structure of these networks in some sort of perspective vis-à-vis the home communities is beyond the proposed scope of this volume." (230, n. 14).

<sup>13</sup> The book that comes closest to accomplishing this is Penslar's *Shylock's Children*.

<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of thinking about Jewish migration and peddling from the end of the eighteenth century onward, the Netherlands, despite being continental European, functioned as a new world setting. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, German, Bohemian, and Polish Jews came to the Netherlands to hawk their goods in towns, many of which did not allow Jews to reside there. Referred to as *smous*, a somewhat pejorative term, Ashkenazic Jews invoked the ire of merchants in Leiden and a number of other cities for their ability to sell goods door-to-door at low prices. For Jewish migrant peddling in the Netherlands, see several articles in J. C. H. Blom, R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, and I. Schöffer, *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands* (Portland, OR, 2002), 114, 117, 167, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Jewish immigrants, male and female, also made a living as urban peddlers, selling goods on the city streets. They, however, established different relationships with their customers. They, too, have not been studied, but it would seem that their impact on both Jewish history and on the local economies where they sold would have been less significant than that of the itinerant peddlers.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Bernard Goldman, ed., *Index: Michigan Jewish History, Volumes 1–39: 1960–1999* (West Bloomfield, MI, n.d.), 24; Alan S. Pine, Jean C. Hershenov, and Aaron H. Lefkowitz, *From Peddler to Suburbanite: The History of the Jews of Monmouth County, N.J.* (Deal Park, NJ, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Baltimore, 1992), 68.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Jacob, *Jewish Contributions to Civilization* (Philadelphia, 1919), 219.

<sup>19</sup> On Jewish peddling in Ireland and the use of the term "weekly men" see Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Year 1910* (London, 1972), 160–166.

<sup>20</sup> Leo E. Turitz and Evelyn Turitz, *Jews in Early Mississippi* (Jackson, MS, 1983), 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 89; Mississippi Historical Records Survey Project, Division of Professional and Service Projects, Work Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church and Synagogue Archives of Mississippi: Jewish Congregations and Organizations* (Jackson, MS, 1940).

<sup>22</sup> Edward Cohen, *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi* (Jackson, 1999), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Louis Schmier, *Reflections of Southern Jewry: the Letters of Charles Wessolowsky, 1878–1879* (Macon, 1982), 14.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard I. Nordlinger, "About my Grandfather, Bernard Nordlinger, Confederate Soldier and Unofficial Rabbi," *The [Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington] Record* 3 (1968): 26–27.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Leonard Rogoff, *Homelands: Southern Jewish Identity in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa, 2001), 95; see also, Louis Schmier, "For Him the 'Schwartzers' Couldn't Do Enough: A Jewish Peddler and his Black Customers Look at Each Other," in Maurianne Adams and John Bracey, eds., *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks and Jews in the United States* (Amherst, 1999), 223–236.

<sup>26</sup> See Diner, *Time for Gathering*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Rogoff, *Homelands*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Rachel Heimovics and Marcia Zerivitz, *Florida Jewish Heritage Trail* (Tallahassee, 2000) 40.

<sup>29</sup> Stella Suberman, *The Jew Store* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Oscar Straus, *Under Four Administrations: From Cleveland to Taft* (Boston, 1922), 6.

<sup>31</sup> Henry G. Baker, *Rich's of Atlanta: The Story of a Store since 1867* (Atlanta, 1953), 6–12.

<sup>32</sup> Roland Flade, *The Lehmans: From Rimpar to the New World, A Family History* (Würzburg, Germany, 1999), 45.

<sup>33</sup> George Cohen, *The Jews in the Making of America* (Boston, 1924), 243–244.