



Roads Taken

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

HASIA R. DINER

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To Hannah and Abraham

To Anh

To Emmanuel

Welcome to my world!

*You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here, I believe that much
unseen is also here*

—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”

Contents

Preface

Acknowledgments

Road Maps: An Introduction

1 Road Warriors: The Migration and the Peddlers

2 Road Runners: Jewish Peddlers in Their New Worlds

3 Along the Road: Jewish Peddlers and Their New-World Customers

4 Road Rage: Jewish Peddlers and the Perils of the Road

5 The End of the Road: Life After Peddling

Legacies of the Road: A Conclusion

Notes

Index

Illustrations follow page

Preface

Roads Taken tells a story about a mass of ordinary people who in their ordinariness made history. The immigrant Jewish peddlers and the non-Jewish women to whom they sold come across here as actors in a vast historical drama which transformed both the Jewish people and the countries to which they immigrated by means of this prosaic, indeed pedestrian, occupation. A nearly ubiquitous figure on multiple continents around the “new world,” the itinerant Jew, weighed down by a pack on his back or sitting behind a horse—no doubt as exhausted as himself—went house to house, farmstead to farmstead, mining camp to mining camp, and plantation to plantation, selling consumer goods to customers, one by one. These peddlers, newcomers from Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and North Africa, envisioned their peddling as a transitional phase in their lives, one that linked their lives in their old homes they had just left and settling down in some new place.

Roads Taken may take as its subject a not particularly heroic or glorious chapter in history, but it allows its subject, peddling, to do some heavy work. It challenges the overwhelming tendency in Jewish history to emphasize antipathy to the Jews as the most powerful engine, which drove a number of developments. The migrations to all these new lands cannot be explained fully by the conventional and worn-out explanation of anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish violence, or pogroms. Rather, the beckoning of newly opened territory for commerce in widely scattered places more powerfully pulled them out of their old homes than did persecution push them out.

“My” Jewish peddlers did not fall back on this classic Jewish occupation because the hostility of the larger world precluded engaging in other pursuits. They opted for it because they calculated that it provided them with the shortest and most efficient path to fulfilling the goals of their migration, namely economic advancement, marriage, family reunification, and achieving what they considered a good life. They did not turn to other Jews for credit because banks and other lending institutions harbored negative views of Jews. While bank presidents in fact might have not liked Jews, the Jewish peddlers had no interest in going to non-Jewish credit sources. They preferred to turn only to other Jews.

The experiences of the peddlers also chips away at some of the prevalent ideas in the scholarship and Jewish collective memory about peddlers. Jewish peddlers did not lack skill. Although they did not run machinery, make tools from iron, or build furniture, they knew or learned languages, developed accounting systems, and figured out where the best opportunities existed. They developed interpersonal communication skills, mastering the art of how to approach a variety of customers. The peddlers had to sharpen what the twenty-first century has defined as their “people skills.”

So, too, new-world Jewish peddlers had more in common with one another than they differed based on where they came from. The notion that “German” and “eastern European” Jews underwent essentially different experiences falls by the wayside in the face of their shared peddler histories. The division of world Jewry into Ashkenazic—that is, European—and Sephardic, or Spanish-derived halves fades on recognizing how peddling brought both to the Americas, the British Isles, and southern Africa. While they may have formed separate synagogues and communal bodies in Atlanta and in Havana, their new-world experiences took their shape from the fact that both took their first footsteps in these places as peddlers.

Finally, *Roads Taken* asks scholars of the many places to which Jews went through the aegis

peddling, to think about Jewish history as crucial to the histories of the United States, Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Wales, Jamaica, Argentina, Australia, Ireland, and so on. The experience of Jews in these places merits more than a paragraph or two, at the most, nor should it be considered to have been independent of or tangential to local and national developments. Rather, despite the relatively small number of Jews who may have migrated to these countries, and the various regions within, Jews furthered colonial developments and the exploitation of land for European expansion. The material goods that Jews brought to the women and men who did the basic work of the society—farming for themselves or laboring on the plantations of others, mining, logging, fishing—made a profound difference in their lives. The peddlers, young Jewish men drawn from the far reaches of Europe and the Islamic world, including the Ottoman Empire and North Africa, clothed, furnished, and decorated the homes of the people whose labor made possible the development of so many national treasures. The peddlers participated in a process which broke down class barriers in the places where they sold and they spread the gospel of consumption as a matter of individual choice and personal enhancement. In many places they blunted the social isolation of farmers and their families living in remote regions, starving for company and news of the outside world. The story of the peddlers does not stand outside of the story of those countries and its people. Rather, the immigrant Jewish peddlers' story forms an integral element of these histories.¹

In *Roads Taken* I look at the entirety of the new world, obviously offering only a bird's-eye view. But despite my global focus, much of my attention centers on the United States. Of the Jews who made up the foot soldiers of the great Jewish migration, more than 80 percent came to America. Of the 20 percent who did not, many wanted to, and some eventually did. The United States, more than any other place, matters in this history of peddling and the history of Jewish migration in the modern period. It offered Jewish immigrants a bundle of rights, political and economic, which could not be matched anywhere in the new world. The level of civic integration and religious innovation exhibited by the former peddlers who chose America had no new-world equivalent. Indeed, the experience of Jewish immigrant peddlers in America provides ringing endorsement of American exceptionalism, a concept much discredited by American historians, but one that reclaims its vitality when we investigate the experiences of the Jews.

The road functions as the central metaphor of this book, providing its intellectual core as well as its title and those of its chapters. That metaphor takes readers on a journey back to the points where and when Jewish peddlers got on the road, and down political, communal, and personal paths to where those roads took them. It evokes life on the road, with each vignette or narrative, each story about an individual or a place, a paving stone on the path toward the ultimate goal, which for the peddler meant crossing the road and getting off of it for good. The roads here connected Jewish peddlers to the homes of potential customers and led them to hubs of Jewish life.

Whom do I consider to be a peddler and whom not? The peddlers here went out on the road and crossed the thresholds of their customers' homes. The pushcart vendors who plied their goods in New York, London, Buenos Aires, Montreal, Johannesburg, and elsewhere are not here. They have a story that cries out to be told, but not in this book. They did not perform the one act which unites all the peddlers of this book. They did not go into their customers' domestic spaces. They carried on their business in the city streets, not going through the intensive process of cross-cultural engagement that on-the-road peddlers did, the ones who had to knock on the door, enter the abodes of those to whom they wanted to sell. These street merchants either stood in one place so that potential customers could come to them or they walked up and down the streets and alleyways singing out the nature of their wares. Women and men, adults and children rushed out to them and bought, and that constituted the

entirety of their face-to-face engagement. They faced their own challenges, different from those of the on-the-road peddlers. In some places, at various times, urban peddlers did knock on doors of houses and apartment buildings and did cross over into their customers' spaces. These men, referred to often in Yiddish as *kloppers*—literally, knockers—do, however, fit in this narrative, inasmuch as they traversed the boundary that separated seller and buyer.

Traveling salesmen also had an experience that put them in a different category from peddlers, and therefore their histories do not appear here.² Employees of a company, they carried a fixed set of goods to sell, and they had to follow a set record-keeping procedure. They could not, unlike the peddlers of this book, improvise; nor could they decide, based on either their own sense or the requests of customers, to offer new products. From the point of view of research, corporate archives of companies like Fuller Brush or the Singer Sewing Machine Company document the activities of the traveling salesman. Drummers also worked for manufacturers or distributors, and they sold not house by house, farm by farm, but rather store to store. They sold to shopkeepers, and therefore the drummers did not come into competition with the local business community. The Jewish peddlers who journeyed all over the new world worked for themselves, and no formal archives document their histories. Their stories emerged only as needles in the proverbial haystack.

Roads Taken tells the story of the male Jewish peddlers who trudged on and got off the road, but their story cannot be told without that of women, Jewish and non-Jewish. My narrative makes much of Jewish women, particularly those whom the peddlers married and whom they left in order to go out on the road. Men's peddling enabled Jewish women to take up communal roles they had not had before, and while they may have considered this a burden rather than an opportunity, as a new-world reality, the men's absence on a weekly basis allowed women to play key roles in shaping the modern Jewish experience. *Roads Taken* puts the Jewish male peddlers on center stage, but it makes clear that without the actions and aspirations of their female customers their journeys would have been roads that led nowhere. Without the cooperation of the millions of women around the world to whom the Jewish peddlers wanted to sell, and without their ability to control some of their families' money, the peddlers would, in Israel Abrahams's words, have had to stay at home. While I take men to be my primary subjects, my narrative validates one of the central contentions of the field of women's history as it emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. Leaving women out of the analysis, women's historians have contended, renders the narrative not only thinner and monochromatic but also wrong. You cannot study the activities of men independent of those of women.

I make no claim that this book is exhaustive. In national archives, the local historical societies of North, South, and Central America, in the British Isles and Ireland, in Sweden and elsewhere in Scandinavia, in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Namibia, and in the official censuses of all those places, the details of the Jewish peddlers' experiences can be found. I saw some of the holdings and know how rich they are. Yet however many years I put into this project and regardless of the number of libraries and other repositories I went to, I know that the material I found, a fraction of which appears in these pages, represents the small tip of a veritable mountain range of what could be mined. Jewish peddler history is global history, but a global history made up of thousands of local histories, and no one can see everything. Indeed no one could actually say what everything means.

So this telling of the peddlers' tale involves posing a question which glides over time and space perhaps promiscuously. How did the nature of the occupation of peddling, its ubiquitous knocking on the door of someone's home whose language the peddler did not know and whose culture he could not comprehend, help shape three phenomena of historic proportion: the great Jewish migration that lies at the heart of Jewish modernity, the integration of the Jews into the lands to which they went and

which they sold and then settled, and a new iteration of Jewish life?

This larger question raises numerous more. What did it mean for a woman to open the door of her home to a strange man, someone she had no reason to trust? What did it mean to the immigrant Jewish peddler to be moving in and out and about some strange new world? Did he define it as fundamentally hostile or as something within his power to comprehend and triumph over? How, given the scattered nature of the sources and the peripatetic nature of the peddlers' lives, particularly during the years they peddled, can we write with accuracy about their experiences? How reliably do memoirs, autobiographies, oral histories, family narratives, and the like record the details of life on the road? How can censuses, tax records, license applications, and police investigations be taken to have been accurate, given the fundamentally peripatetic nature of these men's lives?

This book tells the history of no single place or time. Rather, using the concepts of trade and migration, *Roads Taken* 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. Regardless of geography or chronology, the roads along which the Jewish peddlers traveled out of the old world and into the new, shaped them, shaped Jewish history, and shaped the societies whose women and men in invited the peddlers into their homes.

Acknowledgments

The longer one works on a project, the more debts one incurs. The longer one works on a project, however, the more friends one makes, and the more one gets a chance to witness and enjoy the generosity of others, people who have made their time and resources available. I offer these few pages to them.

As always, funding must come first, and I begin with Alex Goren and the Goldstein-Goren Foundation, which created its center at New York University for the study of American Jewish history, which in turn provided generous assistance in multiple forms for this book. The book actually began at Princeton University's Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, directed by Tony Grafton. I had set out to write something on the Jews of Ireland, and everywhere I turned in that aborted research project I confronted the reality that so many of the Lithuanian Jewish men who immigrated there in the late nineteenth century came as peddlers. That piqued my interest in the occupation and its connection to Jewish migrations. I benefited tremendously from a year's fellowship at New York University's Humanities Institute, ably led by Jane Tylus and administered by Asya Berger. They and my fellow fellows provided a wonderful springboard for my ideas and valuable release time from teaching and committee work. Finally, I am grateful to the Guggenheim Foundation for a year's fellowship. I had applied previously for a Guggenheim and somehow never got it. But maybe the fact that Meyer Guggenheim got his start in America as an immigrant on-the-road peddler pushed my application to the top of the pile.

Rightly, librarians and archivists come next. If the money bought me the time to research and write, these repositories provided the material that made this all possible. The archivists and librarians at the Center for Jewish History, including YIVO, the American Jewish Historical Society, the Leo Baeck Institute, and the American Sephardi Federation, know that they serve as the custodians of probably the greatest repository of materials in modern Jewish history, and they all helped me tremendously. The fact that Jewish immigrant peddlers showed up in all their separate libraries and archives bears witness to the connectedness between those institutions, lineages which transcend geography and institutional histories. Kevin Proffitt and his team at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati surely know how to treat researchers well, and they extended themselves for me, once again. The staff at New York University's Bobst Library, particularly Evelyn Ehrlich, did more than their job when it came to working with me on this project and indeed on all the ones that came before it.

Over the course of the years that I worked on this book I went to numerous archives around the United States and the bigger world, and I will name some here. Others can be gleaned from the footnotes. In Ireland I spent days on end at the Irish Jewish Museum, crowded with boxes galore full of rich material, watched over by the late Asher Siev. I found Jewish peddlers in the archives of Trinity College, the Limerick City Archives, and the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, as well as the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem and the State Library of Victoria, which houses the papers of the Australian Jewish Historical Society of Victoria. I am in debt to the staffs of all those places.

Closer to home the Baker Library at Harvard University, the Maine Historical Society, the Bangor Public Library, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Emory University, Tulane University, the Oregon Jewish Museum, the Jewish Museum of Maryland, the New-York Historical Society, the

Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston, the South Carolina State Archives, the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society, the Upper Midwest Jewish Archives at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, the Urbana (Illinois) Free Library, and the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta all allowed me access to their holdings, which in turn led me to the worlds that the peddlers and their customers made. I want to give particular thanks to a few of the specific individuals who could not have been more generous, and they include Jeanne Abrams at the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society, Deborah Weiner at the Jewish Museum of Maryland, Bill Barry at the Maine Historical Society, and Dale Rosengarten at the College of Charleston.

I went to some of these archives and libraries in conjunction with lectures I gave, some of them about peddlers and peddling, and I frankly cannot list all the names of the colleges, universities, and Jewish community centers which brought me to speak. My attentive audiences concurred with me that the peddlers had made history, and in fact nearly every time I spoke, whether in Fairfield, Connecticut, or Melbourne, Australia, numerous individuals got up and shared with me details of their family peddling stories, providing me with even more details. Their tales and their excitement about the project influenced me tremendously. Sometimes, in fact, before or after the talk, someone handed me a document, a photograph, a memoir, or a beloved grandfather's peddler license, material I would never have seen if I had merely stuck to the archives. I thank each and every one of them for their gifts and for their enthusiasm, a reaction that led me to consider even more strongly that the very ordinary immigrants whose stories I tell in this book functioned as actors in a great historic drama.

On the publishing end of this project, special thanks to my agent, Don Fehr, and to Jennifer Bank and Heather Gold at Yale University Press. They articulated real enthusiasm for the project and showed great faith in me.

One of the best parts of working on this book involved spending time with two wonderful women, both former students (and current friends) who approached me and asked if they could help as research assistants. I had to tell them that I had no money to pay them, but if they still wanted to work on the book, I had plenty for them to do. Jerri Sherman and Harriet Yassky did vast amounts of work in a variety of libraries, and they allowed me to see a range of documents that far exceeded what I could have done on my own. They were both meticulous in their research as they combed journals and magazines. Harriet went with me on several out-of-town archival expeditions, and evenings spent with her in the hours after the libraries closed made my time in Baltimore and Cincinnati pure fun. I thank them from the bottom of my heart and want them to know how much I appreciate what they did. They should, however, beware. I might ask them again.

The longest list comes next and is probably the one that will be most incomplete. These are the names of many scholars and colleagues who over the years let me ramble on and on about “my” peddlers and who provided me with pointed questions, great insights, and unbounded enthusiasm. They include, first, nearly all of my colleagues in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, particularly Gennady Estraiikh, my Yiddish reading partner. From the History Department at NYU, I want to shout out in particular to Barbra Weinstein, who alerted me to the fact that Jewish peddlers sold to workers in the Amazon rubber plantations, and to Lauren Benton and Andrew Needham, who never failed to ask me how the peddlers were coming along. Our conversations taught me much. Beyond NYU, Mitchell Hart provided a constant ear and sent me references galore. Tony Michels, Diane Vecchio, Ira Berlin, Tavolia Glymph, Steven Zipperstein, Louis Schmiegel, Leonard Rogoff, Sarah Stein, Ann Kirchner, Mark Bauman, Riva Krut, Lee Shai Weissbach, Antonio Heike, Stuart Rakoff, Eric Goldstein, Josh Teplitzky, Natalia Aleksion, and Stephen Whitfield, as well as Paula Eisenstein Baker, Jonathan Karp, Adam Teller, Milton Shain, Marsha Rozenblit, David

Sorkin, Tobias Brinkman, Gur Alroey, Jerry Muller, and David Friedenreich, all listened and reacted. ~~Derek Penstar, Sander Gilman, and Sarah Stein wrote letters on my behalf, and without their labors the~~ process of birthing this book would have been delayed. Donna Gabaccia generously offered to read a draft of the cumbersome and bulky first manuscript, as did Diane Ashton, and I thank them heartily. Similarly, several of my students worked with me on this undertaking in various research and editorial capacities, and they include Amy Weiss, Shira Klein, Allan Amanik, and Yigal Sklarin. Three other individuals, one a high school student, Isabelle Singer, another a college student, Hannah Blume, and yet another a midcareer professional between jobs, Yehuda (Jason) Arenstein, emerged, as it were, out of the blue and asked to help me with my research, just for the experience, and they did fine work for me. No doubt I left off some very important names, and I am so sorry about that.

Marion Kaplan, however, deserves a paragraph of her own. She listened and listened as the project evolved. She asked probing questions, and in the end invested a great deal of time reading the manuscript, marking it up with queries and comments, and revealed that even I—the great enemy of the passive formulation—allowed a few of them to creep in. She blurs the line between professional associate and deep personal friend.

Three other individuals fall into two discrete categories, making it difficult for me to know where to include them. Should I thank them for their scholarly contributions to this book or for their emotional ones? I consider Eugene Sheppard, my son-in-law, and my husband, Steve Diner, to be both scholars whose ideas and insights shaped my work and, obviously, beloved family members. Steve once again read the manuscript, edited it with a vicious red pencil, trimming it, removing repetitions, and finding many—hopefully all—logical inconsistencies which plagued the early drafts. Eli Diner, with his sharp intellect, wide reading, and fine historical training, also played a part in making this book, from penetrating questions to editorial assistance and everything in between.

They, like my other immediate family members—my children Shira and Matan and the former newcomers to the Diner family circle to whom I dedicated this book—make life meaningful. On some imaginary scale which might be invoked to judge the relative value of writing another book versus being part of this family, the latter far outweighs the former. But having said that, I am thrilled to have had a chance to produce *Roads Taken*, which let me do what I love, namely, to take something fairly obvious and to invest it with historical meaning.

Roads Taken

Road Maps

An Introduction

“The Jewish peddler of recent centuries,” wrote Israel Abrahams, a distinguished British Jewish scholar, “was no coward; had he lacked courage he must have remained at home.” Abrahams’s few words—delivered in 1896 as a rebuke to Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, a French Catholic historian and writer who had recently claimed that Jews shunned “arduous physical undertakings” because they tended to be “averse to dangerous occupations”—not only revealed an element in the strategy Jews employed in their quest for rights and respectability at the end of the nineteenth century, but it focused attention on the most humble and, literally, most pedestrian segment of world Jewry, the peddler making his way on the new world’s many roads.¹

Abrahams could have seized on other, more heroic images of contemporary Jews to prove their willingness to assume physical challenges, citing perhaps the Jewish men who had donned the military uniforms of their respective countries—France, Germany, England, and the United States, among others—and gone off to war. He also might have marshaled images of the groups of young Jews, men and women, embarking for Palestine, ready to conquer the soil and transform themselves into healthy tillers of the land. Willing to tackle the challenges of a hostile environment, these pioneers surely presented a stirring example of Jews who needed to be courageous. But instead Abrahams personified his claim of Jewish noble action in the figure of the more mundane, and much maligned, peddler “of recent centuries.”

Those Jews, men who did not remain at home but rather went out to a variety of new worlds, launched their migrations by means of an occupation long associated with Jews. Whether the peddler was moving along the roads and plying his itinerant trade in Alsace or in Bavaria, in Lithuania or Galicia, in Morocco or Rhodes, places from which Jews emigrated, or in New York’s Adirondack mountains, the cotton plantations of Georgia both in the ante- and postbellum eras, the foothills of the Andes in Peru, the Transvaal of southern Africa, the Swedish borderlands, the Irish Midlands, the vast prairies of Manitoba, the mining towns of Wales, or, for that matter, the mining camps of New South Wales, a smattering of the places to which Jews migrated, peddling mattered. This occupation, linked with the Jews for centuries, had shaped Jewish life before migration, but, as Abrahams pointed out, it also served as the engine which fostered the great Jewish migration, a mass movement which gave modern Jewish history much of its shape. Peddling also changed the multitude of places to which the Jews went, altering the material lives of men and women around the world.

That vast movement of people spanned nearly a century and a half, from the end of the eighteenth century, as the first batches of Jews left Poland and Morocco, making their way to the small provincial towns of England, through the 1920s, when for the most part large-scale Jewish migration ground to a halt in the face of restrictive legislation.² In that span of time, the long nineteenth century, more than three million Jews, about one-third of world Jewry, left their countries of origin, crossed some national border, in most cases got themselves across an ocean, or two, and set off on unfamiliar roads in a wide array of unfamiliar places which together constituted their new world.³

Their journeys altered the map of world Jewry. One Jewish writer in the second decade of the twentieth century declaimed that this migration had “only one parallel in the whole of Jewish history.”

namely, those in the times of Jesus Christ, when multitudes of Jews were uprooted from Palestine and planted along the coast of the Mediterranean.” The newest dispersion of the Jews brought them to lands and continents unknown when they commenced.⁴

Some of the new places, such as England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and Sweden, do not properly fit the “new world” category. Europeans did not have to “discover” them in their colonial expansion of the world, and their indigenous population did not have to be subdued, enslaved, or displaced.⁵ But for the Jews, the British Isles and Scandinavia constituted new lands. Hardly any Jews lived there, and the Jewish immigrant peddlers came as strangers, strikingly different in religion and language from the core populations. They earned their bread through occupations, namely commercial ones, that distinguished them from almost everyone else. Their experiences as peddlers differed little from those of Jews who went to, for example, Northern Rhodesia or New Zealand. There too, peddling defined Jewish settlement patterns and enabled the distribution of material goods.⁶

The great Jewish migration of the modern era created new Jewish communities all over the colonized world, with the United States as the most significant and the largest, by far. It left an indelible mark on Jewish history, creating new enclaves of Jews, women and men who, while sharing much with those who remained at home, forged new identities and modes of living. How they lived and constructed their Jewishness, influenced deeply by their time on the road, reflected much about their destination societies, including the political and cultural opportunities open to them as Jewish newcomers.

Peddling does not, by any measure, provide the only way to understand Jewish modernity, but it surely contributed to it. The experiences of these Jewish peddlers, their lives on and off their roads, the relationships which developed with their customers and their own transformations, present a dramatic, albeit quotidian narrative. Ordinary men, they made strategic decisions that affected not just themselves but their families and communities back home and helped, one by one, to alter the places to which they went. They faced dangers. They lived with loneliness, week in and week out on the road. For most, the tribulations paid off, and they fulfilled the goals of the migration.⁷

This tale starts with millions of young Jewish men, who by themselves and in groups of brothers, cousins, and friends, decided that circumstances in their familiar homes held out few options, feelings sharpened by information trickling into their communities about possibilities elsewhere. Letters and remittances sent from abroad by their kin and friends who had already left convinced them that other places around in the world offered so much more. Acting upon the discontent they felt and the knowledge they had acquired, they resolved to go far away and, in those new places, to take to the roads as peddlers. The peddlers’ story brings us into their homes and intimate lives as they negotiated with parents, wives, and sweethearts over the details and implications of leaving home and going off, probably for years, to barely known faraway lands, to be separated from each other by thousands of miles, across bodies of salt water, for some period of time, or maybe even forever.

The plot line of the peddlers’ story, no matter which region they left and regardless of where they went, tracks their strategies as they, speakers of Yiddish or Ladino, as well as Polish, German, Ukrainian, Greek, Arabic, and Russian, immersed themselves, by necessity almost immediately, in the worlds of their customers, who communicated in English, French, Spanish, Mayan, Gaelic, Afrikaans, Cherokee, Swedish, Welsh, and a Babel of other languages. Into the dwelling places of those who spoke these unfamiliar tongues the newly arrived Jewish immigrants had to go and sell. The customers not only communicated in unfamiliar words but practiced cultures unknown to the central and eastern European Jews and the Jews of the Muslim world who now found themselves in Scotland, Quebec, Chile, Mexico, the Cape colony, Sweden, or South Dakota. To sell their wares, the peddlers

had no choice but to acquire literally and figuratively new languages, to learn the details of the cultural systems in which they found themselves.

The peddler's story, whether or not his specific name has survived in some written source, whether he or his daughter or son someday became famous, repeated itself, by the millions, all over the world. In this new-world Jewish story the newcomer, laden with a pack of goods on his back, walked the roads and knocked on doors of farmsteads in remote regions or in working-class homes of settled neighborhoods on the edges of cities. Often lonely and miserable, enduring stifling heat and biting cold, battling the elements, he began his new-world road trip by striding through mining and logging camps, and into laborers' homes on cotton, sugar, coffee, and rubber plantations.

In a way it did not matter where he went. The Jewish peddler experience proved remarkably consistent around the world and across time. He knocked, introduced himself to, almost always, a woman who opened the door. He asked her to look in his bag, or box, or pack. He had to figure out how to ingratiate himself to her, as every sale mattered, and to do so he had to guess what she might want, what message to deploy in talking with her, and how best to charm her into buying this or that. In this little drama played out on multiple continents, in multiple languages, he proffered a range of goods which represented a new, higher, and actually better, standard of living. He did not carry food or fuel, life's basic necessities. Rather, from the depths of his pack he brought out for display sheets and pillowcases, pictures and picture frames, clothing and cloth, needles, threads, buttons, lace, bedspreads and tablecloths, eyeglasses, suspenders. The list went on and on, as this paradigmatic peddler moved up the ladder and managed to acquire a horse and wagon. Then the goods got bigger and heavier, stoves and bathtubs, still representing a cosmopolitan standard of consumption associated with cities, modernity, and the lifestyles of the better-off classes. The Jewish immigrant peddler educated the farmers, miners, loggers, plantation laborers, millworkers, and working-class families to crave these finer things in life, goods associated with their social betters. The peddler brought these goods within reach of the more humble women whose homes they entered.

Few of the women to whom they sold, or their husbands, had had any previous contact with exposure to Jews. They probably knew about the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible and those who Christian theology had betrayed Jesus, crucified him, and continuously rejected his divinity. But until that first knock on the door, Jews did not exist as flesh-and-blood human beings. The young man who spoke a few halting heavily accented words in the local language became for the customers the bearer of Judaism, the exemplars of the Jewish people. As they went about the task of selling their jumble of goods, the peddlers exposed people to Jews as real people, the men who often slept in their homes, ate at their tables, chatted with them, with increasing fluency about the weather, religion, politics, family, whatever. Jewish peddlers immersed themselves in the new and previously unknown culture, and conversely the customers came to know Jews on an intensely personal basis. Each customer's home in each new-world setting functioned as a lived-learning laboratory in cultural contact, with the peddler teaching the customers about both cosmopolitan consumption and the Jewish tradition, and the customers teaching the Jewish peddler the basics of local life. Both the peddler and the customer benefited and changed through this exchange.

This trade created a cultural bridge between people who seemingly had so little else in common. The buying and selling of goods, conducted person to person, helped foster exchanges across otherwise deep divisions between people. The idea of trade as a positive force in forging human interactions has been a trope of liberal thinking since the eighteenth century. Tom Paine, in his revolutionary tract *The Rights of Man* (1791), declared it to be "a pacific system, operating cordialise mankind, by rendering nations as well as individuals, useful to each other."

However useful or pacific, trade in general and immigrant Jewish peddling in particular always involved conflicts and enmities. One place after another witnessed acts of violence and resounded with ugly words, directed at the immigrant Jewish peddler. All around the peddlers' world danger roared with them along the roads. Wherever they went they had to be prepared to dodge snarling dogs and flee jeering young pranksters who found it amusing to hurl insults, snowballs, and sharp-edged stones at the strange-looking men with funny accents, loaded down by their heavy packs. Stories in local newspapers reported on robberies, beatings, and murders of hopeful Jewish peddlers. Unarmed men walking or riding the roads with goods and cash, the Jews attracted the unwanted attention of lawless individuals who considered them easy marks. Politically, local merchants had no love for the peddlers. As competitors who went into the women's homes, selling goods on the spot, on the installment plan, and at lower prices than the owners of stores charged, the peddlers raised the ire of shopkeepers who wanted to capture the women's dollars, pounds, or pesos. The shopkeepers and their representatives pressed for political action, whether on the local or national level, to make life difficult for the peddlers. These actions in turn stimulated public debates about the Jewish peddlers and the danger they posed to the local order of things.

Their detractors argued that Jewish peddlers had other unfair advantages as well. They operated within a closed economic network, accessible only to Jews. They got goods and credit from Jewish shopkeepers, wholesalers, or owners of peddler warehouses. These in turn got their goods and the credit from Jewish wholesalers who sold on a larger scale and who themselves acquired stock and financial assistance from Jewish manufacturers and importers. In this worldwide story the individual peddler stood on the bottom rung of an integrated Jewish economy. Those at the higher rungs needed him to get those goods out directly to customers; he, in turn, needed those above him for the merchandise to sell. The peddlers functioned as the foot soldiers of a vast army of Jewish economic activity.

As in all ethnic niches, a culture of trust within the group underlay these business transactions. Because all players shared their Jewishness and all maintained connections to and through local Jewish communities, often sustained by family ties and common premigration hometowns, the peddlers, whether the peddlers or the suppliers, risked social exclusion and censure if they betrayed the confidence the others had placed in them. While disputes and conflicts flared within the Jewish niche with arguments breaking up partnerships or splitting peddlers from their suppliers, for the most part Jews from the peddlers on up to the highest levels adhered to unwritten but deeply felt contracts that underlay the intricately articulated Jewish economic system.⁸

One peddler recruited another. Jewish shopkeepers relied on Jewish peddlers to get goods to their customers who lived beyond easy access to the physical store. Jewish wholesalers needed the shopkeepers and the peddlers, while Jewish manufacturers, particularly in the clothing field, used wholesalers, warehouse owners, shopkeepers, and peddlers to move their products. Warehouse owners were fellow Jews and often former peddlers who had set themselves up in strategic regional locations and created larger or smaller entrepôts, nerve centers for this highly developed and ubiquitously replicated Jewish chain. Additionally, peddlers, once they graduated to distribution by horse and wagon, expanded their operation, buying up scrap, metal, paper, rags, and bones, and these items then ended up in the junkyards owned by Jews, former peddlers, now liberated from life on the road. Credit and money flowed along this circuit, an economic web which the Jews could call their own.⁹

Like other immigrants in a variety of countries around the world, Jewish peddlers fell into the category of middlemen, the stranger-trader, who linked the goods produced in the cities and imported from abroad to the millions of scattered potential customers who might want such items. These trade

influenced deeply the development of new modes of consumption, which involved more than just one set of players selling goods to another. Items purchased and their cost touched on matters of family and community, politics and power. Escalating standards of desire for material goods challenged the hegemony of religious, economic, or political elites who in the main expected the poor to remain satisfied with the little they had, fearing escalations in aspiration. Spending and consuming goods in emulation of the behavior of the better-off seemed, the elite feared, to lead the poor, the have-nots, to want to share the political rights of those above them also. John Brewer and Roy Porter, in probably the most important book on the history of consumption, began their analysis by declaring, “In the modern world the ultimate test of the viability of regimes rests in their capacity, in the literal sense ‘to deliver the goods.’” Material acquisition mattered, and those who delivered shaped history.¹⁰

Women, primarily poorer ones, decided which goods to buy, when, and how, and did so with their husbands absent. That too made these transactions politically fraught. That wives engaged in the business undertakings without their husbands’ knowledge and in concert with strangers, Jews who came in and then left, only heightened the historical gravitas of these commercial encounters, rendering them more than simply a purchase, say, of a tablecloth or a pair of glasses on credit. That women decided what to do with those goods, whether to use them or maybe pawn them when times got tough, also made consumption a crucial factor in gender and class politics.¹¹

The Jewish peddlers stood, or better, walked, between the producers and the consumers, carrying the metropolis on their backs to the hinterlands. Once they began to collect junk, they conveyed the detritus of the hinterlands to the cities. Always different from the resident populations in every way that mattered—religion, language, occupation, cultural, and social life—the Jewish peddler embodied all the characteristics of the middleman.

Petty commerce, whether sedentary or ambulatory, had been the Jews’ *métier* for centuries. Peddling in particular had consumed the energies of millions of Jews, although new-world peddling differed markedly from that pursued in the old. Jewish peddlers in their premigration settings tended to follow that trade for a lifetime, and sons followed their fathers’ paths. In much of Europe Jewish peddlers sold to Jews as well as non-Jews, and the nature of Jewish settlement patterns meant that peddlers could lodge in the homes and inns of their fellow Jews. Most of the Jewish peddler’s customers knew Jews, and whatever they thought of the Jews and their religion, Jews functioned as known elements of the local scene. At times, and in a variety of places, Jewish women peddled as well as men, and perhaps most important, governments, whether in Europe or the Muslim world, limited the goods Jews could sell, and when, where, and to whom they could do so. None of these conditions prevailed in the Jews’ multiple destination sites.¹²

For sure, peddling before migration and after shared some common characteristics. Most profoundly, peddling in every environment involved life on the road, going home to home, beseeching customers to buy something, perhaps on the installment plan. Peddlers everywhere functioned in a dense Jewish economic web of relationships, with each peddler having a territory to operate in, usually referred to, perhaps sarcastically, as a *medinah*, or kingdom. The peddler received his *medinah*, whether in Alsace or Louisiana, Lithuania or Ireland, Turkey or Amazonia, from his wholesaler, the Jewish merchant above him on the pecking order who provided goods and credit.

Whether old-world and new-world peddling differed more than they resembled each other, the vast involvement of Jews in this field marked them as quite unlike most people around them. The next time between Jews and trade had attracted the attention of commentators for centuries. Voltaire, Marx, Kant, Keynes, and numerous others, positively sometimes, negatively for the most part, had much to say about the concentration of the Jews in trade. Both non-Jewish and Jewish notables and

intellectuals squirmed at the image of the Jews as peddlers and at the reality that so many of them passed through this occupation, not only in Europe but spreading out around the world to engage in this shameful undertaking. Worldwide Jewish philanthropic bodies and the great men who stood at their helm hoped to devise schemes to wean the Jews from peddling, to civilize the Jews, clean them up, and then, they hoped, lessen anti-Jewish prejudices.

Such efforts had little impact. Those who wanted Jews to become farmers, for example, failed to see not only how well most new-world customers interacted with the peddlers but how rapidly the peddlers moved from the road to settled circumstances. When the peddlers achieved the goals of their migration, as most did, they helped sustain the global web of Jewish commerce. When they got down from behind the horses which had pulled them on the road, the erstwhile peddlers opened up shops of one kind or another, or they became the proprietors of junk yards, pawn shops, peddler warehouses, and factories. They then outfitted the newest immigrants, who arrived and became the next cadre of peddlers to go out on the road. The newest newcomers, perforce, penetrated recently opened regions whose residents yearned for, or learned to yearn for, those material goods that enhanced life, recapitulating the experiences of the earlier Jewish peddlers.

Neither before nor after migration did Jews monopolize the peddling trade. Others traversed the roads as well.¹³ In the middle of the eighteenth century in Europe all sorts of peddlers crossed borders, selling as independent entrepreneurs or as agents for established, settled merchants. Like the Jewish peddlers, non-Jewish peddlers often followed fixed routes which linked specific places or regions to one another. Whether they carried a range of goods or specialized in a particular type, the expansion of peddling reflected the decline of traditional agriculture in the home regions and the opening up of newer hinterlands.¹⁴ Wherever peddlers went, wherever they came from, they brought new goods, providing customers with novelty and luxury. Laurence Fontaine, author of one of the few books to take peddling seriously, *The History of Peddlars in Europe*, described peddlers as “men from marginalized regions ... [who] travelled into the countryside to circulate the newest articles from the town.” Popular literature and folk tales depicted *all* peddlers as inherently dangerous, prone to trickery, and foisting unnecessary consumer items on unsuspecting rural naïfs.¹⁵

Like the Jewish peddlers in the new world whose stories will emerge in the pages that follow, non-Jewish peddlers in Europe, Christians selling among Christians, inspired fear and distrust among some elements of the population, particularly guild members and settled merchants who resented the competition posed by the peddlers. Local officials eager to maintain the peace sided with the peddler critics. Peddlers in England went by the title of “hawkers,” a word linked to the negative imagery of spying and thievery. In every region peddlers penetrated, repressive legislation flourished in an effort to keep them out. Their presence as fixtures of everyday life and the pervasive sense that society had to protect itself against them provided a lived backdrop to “stranger” theory developed by the early twentieth-century German sociologist Georg Simmel. “In the whole history of economic activity,” Simmel wrote, “the stranger makes his appearance everywhere as a trader and trader makes his appearance as a stranger. ... The trader must be a stranger.”¹⁶

Others peddled in the places from which Jews emigrated, and so too in the places to which the Jews immigrated. Like the Jews, non-Jews, both old-time residents and newcomers from abroad, sought their livelihoods on the road, looking for customers to sell to. For many young men, primarily in New England although not exclusively from New England in America's early national period, peddling proved an attractive threshold occupation. Coming from large farm families struggling to succeed on an increasingly depleted soil, these Yankee peddlers fanned out through their own home region, and also made their way to the South and the newly settled trans-Appalachian Midwest. They became the stu-

of literature, humor, and repressive legislation that sought to limit their access to potential customers.¹⁷ In England, the hawkers, sometimes also called “cheap jacks,” flooded the countryside coming into people's homes, enduring the reputation of being “part gypsy, part thief, part lawyer and part idiot.”¹⁸ Sweden's Vastergotland province allowed peddlers, known as *knallar*, to sell from the road. They traveled from farm to farm selling goods. Even though the itinerants shared the religion, language, and national identity of the population as a whole, local merchants and craftsmen pressured the government to legally restrict them to selling only certain goods, such as bowls, iron products, and cloth, and all these goods had to be made locally. They similarly restricted the *knallar* to selling only three times a year, on dates fixed by official policy.¹⁹

These native insider traders fared no better and no worse than did later Jewish immigrant peddlers or than the peddlers of other backgrounds with whom the Jews shared the road. Other immigrants also came to the new world and took their first footsteps as peddlers. Irish and Scotch Irish peddlers also wended their way through Pennsylvania and the South for much of the nineteenth century, as did some German Gentiles, who seized on peddling as a reasonable economic strategy. Chinese peddlers made their way to and around Cuba in the early twentieth century.

But only for one immigrant group other than Jews did peddling constitute a way of life, a formative force in launching the migration, and a fundamental institution which both structured community life and provided the mechanism by which group members integrated into their new world home. Arab, and primarily Syrian (sometimes referred to as Syrian Lebanese), mostly Christians, made peddling part and parcel of their immigrant years. Their peddling journeys took them to many of the same places Jews went, including England, Australia, southern Africa, New England, the prairie states of the Middle West, the South, and throughout Latin America. Like Jewish immigrants, they built up an intricate, highly articulated ethnic economy with importers and wholesalers in the big cities connecting through smaller merchants and shopkeepers to the peddlers on the road. They too built up a system based on internal group credit and trust born of familial and communal intimacy.²⁰ Be it in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, or North Dakota, Syrian peddlers quickly learned the languages and cues of their customers' culture and used them to prosper, albeit for many (as with most Jews), modestly. Like the Jews, they, according to one observer of the Syrians in Mexico, “show great aptitude for learning Spanish.”²¹ Those who needed to, in Mexico, also mastered Mayan and various dialects which their customers spoke. As with the Jewish peddlers, immigrant Arab peddlers responded globally to changes in the destination places, calculating quickly when hearing the news about options in some new place, that those locales might be good places to go to try their hands (or feet) at peddling. Syrian immigrants, for example, began to show up in Brazil immediately upon the end of slavery in the 1888, and they took to the road carrying small household goods to the recently freed workers on the *fazenda*, or coffee plantations.²²

Jews alone did not take to the roads of the new world to transform their lives, nor did they by themselves change the material circumstances of the women and men who welcomed them into their homes, peered into their bags, and made a purchase or two. Others joined them, but each took to migration and peddling in distinctive ways. The ways they peddled, the routes they took, and the communal contexts of their days on the road reflected distinctive histories. Each has a story worth telling and this one focuses on the Jews. In the world history of peddling, from the end of the eighteenth century onward, they in particular seized upon this occupation, a familiar one, as a safe bet. They calculated that migrating to some new place, especially one where they already knew someone who could get them launched, and taking up the peddler's pack offered a reasonable chance at a better

safer, and more secure existence than what they would have endured had they stayed put.

Road Warriors

The Migration and the Peddlers

Of the world's approximately ten million Jews in the period from the end of the eighteenth into the early twentieth century, nearly five million left their homes, the communities of their birth, and went out into the world in search of new places to make a living. They moved mostly from rural areas and small cities, from places of low and declining productivity to regions shaped by the commercial and industrial revolutions, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century as they sought out environments throbbing with new opportunities. Of those five million Jewish women and men, half of world Jewry most crossed one or more national borders, millions making transoceanic voyages. That migration constituted a vast exodus out of Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and North Africa. Those who migrated, according to a pamphlet published decades later by the World Jewish Congress, should be considered in quasi-military terms. “Not the warrior, sword in hand,” but “the toiling man in search of work with tools as his only weapon,” the author wrote. He might well have added, “and with a pack on his back.”¹

Not all migrating Jews crossed bodies of salt water. Larger numbers abandoned the small towns and economically declining hinterlands for larger cities in their own or neighboring countries.² But in the very long nineteenth century, from the 1780s through the 1920s, the Jewish people also spread out to multiple lands on faraway continents. They went to places newly “discovered” and colonized by European powers. Some migrating Jews went to countries that needed no European discovery but had never supported visible Jewish populations. Yet as women and men in these lands started to aspire to higher levels of material consumption, they welcomed the arrival of the Jews, the peddlers. Only a small handful of Jews had lived in England, Ireland, and Sweden before the great migration, and the Jews who arrived in these places in those years made possible, for all intents and purposes, the first real encounters between the Jews and the autarkic population.³

The great Jewish migration constituted a mass human movement which might be seen as merely an extension of a process by which Jews in the seventeenth century began to move en masse from east to west. This reversed a long, drawn-out process that began in the eleventh century of moving from west to east, and also north to south: Jews from Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had made their way to Italy, the Balkans, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Within Europe and the Ottoman Empire Jews, partly due to peddling, had long moved around. Every place Jews lived, their communities mixed together the long settled and the new, native-born and foreign Jews.

But the great migration of the nineteenth century had a dynamism of its own that made it something to be considered in its own right. Peddling helped facilitate this new migration. Not that all came as peddlers, but so many did—countless numbers—that their presence and activities shaped the Jewish arrivals and their encounters with the native populations. For those Jewish immigrants who set up shops, for those who opened workshops to produce various kinds of consumer goods, clothing in particular, the peddlers among them functioned as the distributors of goods, the ones who got war-

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