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Roads Taken

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

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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 their 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, they, 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 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, fellow Jews and often former peddlers who had set themselves up in strategic regional locations, 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 traders 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 these 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 peddlers' 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.¹¹

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 nexus 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 Jews, 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 Pedlars 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 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 peddlers' 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 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 they 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 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 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

stuff 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 gipsy, 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. Arabs, 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 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,