

The Merchants and Peddlars of 19th Century Maine

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Jewish immigrants typically worked as merchants and peddlars. They created their businesses based on fulfilling the demands of people that needed goods and keeping a steady stream of supply. The 19th century was a time of economic change. Trends of making one's own clothes shifted with an emphasis on the ready-to-wear clothing being provided by factories. Merchants and peddlars were some of the first to bring these ready-made items to those living in Maine. To make a living in Maine, merchants and peddlars provided a service that was easy, reliable and convenient. The keys to success included meeting their clients, gaining good reputations, relying on fellow Jews and family members, and continuing to keep their mobility. Contributing to a revolution in commerce, the merchants and peddlars of the 19th century are similar to the Amazon.com that has graced the markets of present day.

One of the most important factors in economic success is knowing the customer. Amazon comes to know its customers through algorithms and search functions. For merchants and peddlars of the 19th century, getting to know a customer was a two way street. After arriving in their chosen city to settle, the first step to success for merchants and peddlars was to get to know their customer and clientele base. Haiman Philip Spitz, a clothing merchant, arrived in Bangor in 1848. He wrote in his autobiography, "They [Gentiles] generally asked to what church you belonged; they would patronize church members."¹ Spitz did not belong to a church or any equivalent organization. To get to know his future patrons, he attended Odd Fellow and Mason

¹ Haiman Philip Spitz, *Haiman Philip Spitz: An Autobiography*, (1886; SC-11863, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati), 18. Accessible at www.americanjewisharchives.org

meetings. He remarked that “business improved” after he had introduced himself to the Gentile citizens in town.² Spitz’s story demonstrates how important it was for merchants and peddlers to get to know their customers because without introducing himself, Spitz and his business would have gone unnoticed, and his business would have failed immediately if he had not made an effort to gain the business of his fellow Bangorians.

Just like Amazon, the businesses of merchants and peddlers relied on their ability to provide goods to their customers. As traveling salesmen, however, they were limited in how much they could carry each week. It was extremely important that peddlers noticed the sorts of goods the families they visited needed and wanted. Peddlers were often invited into the homes of their clients. While inside, they met their clients’ families, and took inventory of what types of goods they could possibly need within the following week.³ This ensured that the peddler would pack the goods that he expected his clients to desire next time, and nearly guaranteed him a sale. At first, the peddler would bring general goods to the doors of his patrons, but as he sold items and articles of clothing, he tailored the goods in his pack to the tastes of the ladies he met with once a week. Like Amazon’s ability to guess what a customer might like to buy next based on prior purchases, the peddler was able to adapt his selling style and the goods he carried to exactly what he knew his clients needed and wanted, which packed the promise of another sale the following week.

Getting to know his clients did not only benefit the peddler in this way, but he also became a household figure. He was invited into the homes of his clients, which allowed his clients to learn about the Old World from which he came, and to learn more about his different

² Spitz 18.

³ Hasia R. Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015), 85.

cultural habits.⁴ Farm families often invited the peddler to eat dinner with them and to sleep in their barn, which gave them increased interactions with the new American who was selling them goods at their door. This increased interaction allowed clients to understand and begin to trust the peddler. Increased interaction among users is also an important aspect of Amazon's business model. As a customer continues to return to patronize the business, they gain more trust that the company is not going to defraud them, and eventually Amazon became a household name. Similarly, after months and years of selling to the same families, the peddler was no longer a stranger but an extension of the household.⁵ Having a close relationship with the families, peddlers could sell their wares more easily. The clients trusted them to come by with goods for them to buy once a week, and the peddler was expected to bring them something they wanted to buy. This allowed him to succeed because the clients trusted him enough to buy goods from him, but when the peddler had earned enough money to open his own store, he could easily assume that those clients would come to patronize him once more. One Maine peddler who exemplifies this phenomenon is Myer Sharraffiski, an Eastern European immigrant. A non-Jewish Mainer recounted the sight of seeing him in front of a nice hotel in Wayne in 1887.

Oh look! There's Myer Sharraffiski, the little pack-peddler. He won't call here. The Howards, proprietors of the hotel, would object: their guests are hardly the type to patronize him. He's Russian—very polite and speaks English well, considering the time he's been in the country. How the children are crowding around! Just a few pennies will buy trinkets. He often gives to those who haven't any. (A few years later Myer drove through town in a shiny new vehicle filled

⁴ Diner 86.

⁵ Diner 81.

with merchandise—a boon to busy stay-at-home housewives. A few years later still, the Sharraf. Bros. were doing a thriving business in a shiny store in Livermore Falls. Now, instead of Myer going to people, they came to him, remembering his courtesy and kindness of earlier years.)⁶

Myer Sharraffiski's story demonstrates how important getting to know one's clients was in succeeding. After earning enough money to own his own store, Sharraffiski's ability to maintain a strong clientele was no less important than when he was a peddler. Even though he moved away from where he started as a peddler, those that had gotten to know him traveled to patronize his store instead of buying from someone else. As a peddler, he offered a reliable service and gained a great reputation that allowed him to thrive as a merchant as well.

Not only was getting to know one's customer important when maintaining a successful business in 19th century Maine, it was imperative to keeping strong bonds and continuing to satisfy customers. In doing so, peddlers and merchants gained excellent reputations and remained successful. One merchant in particular who exemplified this trend was William Engel, a wholesale peddler, who was described in shorthand by an R. G. Dun credit reporter in 1881 as a "smart steady frugal thrifty hon. + successful German... Came here in 66 + has steadily prospered."⁷ Described in terms relating to how he deals in business, it is clear that Engel had an excellent business reputation; he would not have steadily prospered if he did not. Having a good reputation was important because it meant clients were happy with his service and could indicate the influence of referrals. Those with good experiences would not be afraid to recommend a particular merchant to friends and family. Having a good reputation would have an avalanche effect that led to higher sales,

⁶ David M. Freidenreich, "Making It in Maine: Stories of Jewish Life in Small-Town America," *Maine History* 49:1 (2015): 12.

⁷ *R. G. Dun Company Collection*, Maine, vol. 23, pp. 470 (unpublished; Baker Library, Harvard Business School).

the ability to open another thriving business, and eventually, in Engel's case, being elected as the mayor of Bangor.

For peddlers and merchants, reputations were incredibly important for not only economic upward mobility but also for keeping clients satisfied with their services. Peddlers and customers engaged in a tango when they made a sale, "choreographed by desire and availability and the common interest of both to exchange items for cash, at a price acceptable to both."⁸ Peddlers arrived at the home of their customers carrying a new furnishing, piece of cloth, buttons or decoration that would entice their customer to desire it, while the customer knew that the peddler had something she wanted, but she would try her hardest to bargain the price down. The peddler knew that one false move could ruin his reputation and career in that particular area. No matter what, he needed to remain polite, understanding and courteous to his customer so he could woo her into buying his goods. If he was rude, pushy, or mean, he would gain a terrible reputation and no one in town would patronize him, leaving him with the only option of starting anew elsewhere. As reported in the *Bath Independent*, a peddler slammed the door in a woman's face out of frustration, causing all of the glass to break from it.⁹ The police caught him and forced him to pay for the damages. Although the newspaper did not give out the peddler's name, he was still vulnerable to gossip. Indeed, "the customer poorly treated by the immigrant Jewish peddler had the power to besmirch his reputation, and without that reputation he failed."¹⁰ The contrast between this story and that of William Engel highlights the difference between success and failure. Having a good reputation meant that one could stay wherever he wanted and having a bad one meant closing up shop and moving away. For William Engel, he could stay in Bangor and move up the economic

⁸ Diner 85.

⁹ *Bath Independent*, March 28, 1908, p. 5.

¹⁰ Diner 90.

and social hierarchies of Bangor, but for this unnamed peddler, he needed to start from scratch somewhere else.

However important a good reputation was for the success of merchants and peddlers in Maine, it was not always as easy to get as one might have hoped. Myer Sharraffiski was not allowed to sell in the fancy hotel that he peddled near because it was believed that the guests were too good for the goods he was selling. The *Bath Independent* article that talked about the incident between the unknown peddler and his female customer also said, “Hebrew pack peddlers aren’t quite as plenty in Bath as they used to be, but they can be as troublesome.”¹¹ Life as a Jewish merchant or peddler in Maine was not easy. Many communities, “under pressure from local businessmen, did what they could to impede the peddlers’ roads.”¹² Whether not allowing them to sell inside of a nice hotel or disparaging the Jews who sold from the packs on their backs, Gentile communities made making a living difficult for Jewish merchants and peddlers. Another example comes from Bath where “two Jew peddlers of eye glasses ... [were fined] for selling without licenses.” The article continues, “Bath people in want of proper glasses it would seem ought to know enough by this time to let foreign peddlers alone and go to Mr. Worthley.”¹³ Jewish merchants and peddlers competed with local business owners for sales, and from this article, it is clear that two such peddlers were in direct competition with Mr. Worthley. The commentary at the end of the article demonstrates the discrimination that Jewish merchants and peddlers encountered within the economic realm of their businesses. Their business was seen as dirty in the case of Myer Sharraffiski, troublesome in the case of the unknown peddler, or improper in the case of the eye glass peddlers. All of these cases demonstrate the obstacles that

¹¹ *Bath Independent*, March 28, 1908 p. 5.

¹² Diner 125.

¹³ *Bath Independent*, December 25, 1897 p. 3.

Jews faced while selling their goods. They lost sales from being barred to sell in certain locations, they had to work double time to gain good reputations despite media portrayals of their fellow Jews, and they needed to sell in an environment where local Maine businessmen saw them as a threat to their own livelihood.

Overcoming obstacles, keeping great customer relations, and satisfying needs were not the only factors that led to success in Maine. Although being able to understand product and customer demands was important, having a steady supply of goods to offer was just as critical. Amazon does this automatically. Their warehouses are consistently stocked with goods for anyone to buy. One way for merchants and peddlars to keep their stores fully stocked was to rely on family and ethnic connections. Jews supported each other through their business interactions. Jewish merchants “relied on Jewish peddlars to get goods to customers who lived beyond easy access to the physical store. Jewish wholesalers needed the shopkeepers and peddlars...to move their products.”¹⁴ Merchants bought their stock from Jewish wholesalers, but they relied much more heavily on Jewish peddlars since they could not reach all of the customers that patronized them. This system worked incredibly well for both parties. Merchants gained new sales from the peddlars who bought goods to sell to the customers who could not reach the store. For peddlars, they had a job straight out of the gate when arriving in America, where they could work for themselves and create their own schedule. Plus, they were able to make a profit on the sales that they made as a peddler by selling the goods for more than they paid at the merchant’s store. In this fashion, succeeding in Maine was all about finding connections that would allow one to move up the ladder while providing a convenient service of delivering goods to the doors of Mainers.

¹⁴ Diner 6.

Another way in which merchant and peddlers relied on each other was in mortgaging their stocks to one another during hard times. As a multi-billion dollar corporation, Amazon has the ability to sustain itself during slow economic times. For small shops, getting fast cash could make the difference between staying in business a few more months or a few more years. Peter Spitz mortgaged his stock to two of his fellow Bangor Jewish merchants: Hannah Silber for \$2500 and Jacob Gunst for \$4000.¹⁵ Mortgaging stock was a way of gaining quick money through the ethnic economic support system. That money could be used to buy more stock to sell that would allow him to repay those that had helped him. For Peter Spitz, this help allowed him to stay open for another two years. In the less fortunate case of Jacob Gunst, a credit reporter noted, “Oct 12/55 Jacob Gunst has mtgd his stk to various individuals in his Jewish connexions. Aug 56 Stock now selling at auction, by mortgage.”¹⁶ Gunst mortgaged his stock to gain financial help during a tough time, however, despite the help, his business began to fail. Although the support structure was there to help, it did not always work. Mortgaging stock was a way of maintaining a line of credit that allowed them to keep their shelves stocked, no matter for how long or short a time that was.

In order for the Jewish ethnic enclave to work to the highest degree, Jews needed to trust each other; indeed, “as in all ethnic niches, a culture of trust within the group underlay these business transactions.”¹⁷ They trusted that they would get their money back from mortgaged stock or would receive help when they needed it as well. Augustus Silber, the son of Hannah Silber, of Bangor, Maine, demonstrates the ways in which such system could be abused. An R. G. Dun creditor reported:

¹⁵ Dun, Maine, vol. 22, p. 71.

¹⁶ Dun, Maine, vol. 22, p. 123.

¹⁷ Diner 6.

Nov 16/57 The 'NY Mirror' of Saturday says 'Augustus Silver' a [Dry Goods] dealer at Bangor Me was brought to this city yesterday by Officer Campbell on a requisition granted by the Governor of Maine. He stands indicted in this City for obtaining 1700\$ worth of goods from [illeg] Mills + Ray Liberty St. Besides this it is alleged that the prisoner is a regular confidence man, having obtained goods the same way to the value of 60 or 70 [thousand] \$ in this city, + about the same [amount] in Boston. 'Silvy' pleads honest intentions + declares his purchases to have been 'all right.' He is held to bail, to answer. The above relates to 'Augs. Silber' of this firm.¹⁸

What this report says is that Augustus Silber was arrested as a con man who bought goods on credit and never paid for them. Although the identity of his specific targets is unknown, the Jewish ethnic enclave would be vulnerable to these types of actions. The support of Jews was based on trust and the support structure was designed to give help to those who needed it. With the basis of support rooted in trust, it could have been very easy for a confidence man to take advantage of the ethnic enclave.

Another way in which merchants and peddlars relied upon each other was through familial connections. Family ties were not only another form of support structure but they also helped in creating success for other relatives. The support structure of families allowed businesses to succeed because relatives could always step in when someone could no longer handle the business. For one example, Moses Silber, a dry goods merchant in Bangor, passed away. Instead of allowing the store to go under, his wife and son (Augustus, later arrested as a con man) stepped up and handled the business until it failed on its own.¹⁹ In another case, Louis Kauffman fell ill and his brother Joseph stepped in to take care of the business while Louis

¹⁸ Dun, Maine, vol. 22, p. 139.

¹⁹ Dun, Maine, vol. 22, p. 106.

regained his health.²⁰ In both of these examples, family members took care of the business to help continue their success in Maine.

The line between business building and family building was often blurry. Julius Waterman migrated to Maine in 1868 where a Waterville merchant, Jacob Peavy, set him up in the Bangor branch of his clothing store.²¹ After a few years, Waterman bought the Bangor branch for himself and opened at least one other store located in Houlton. Waterman enjoyed huge successes, and was estimated to have a worth of \$5000-6000 in 1871.²² The mystery shrouding Waterman's story is whether a successful business relationship allowed him to build his family, or if his marriage allowed his business to succeed. The Dun credit reporter speculated, "In bus 10 or 12 yrs + alone since 1870. [Waterman is] married to a daughter of 'Peavey' of Waterville who possibly helps him some."²³ This reporter attributed some of Waterman's success to the generosity of his father-in-law. What is unknown is whether Peavy first helped Waterman because Waterman was going to marry his daughter or if Waterman married Peavy's daughter after having interacted with his business partner for so long. No matter the reasoning, there is no doubt that family ties allowed for a more successful merchant or peddler story.

One of the most important characteristics that allowed merchants and peddlers to succeed in Maine was their mobility. Much like Amazon's ability to deliver goods right to the doors of everyday people, peddlers had to remain highly mobile to allow for the same kind of door-to-door service. First, peddlers sold their goods according to a weekly cycle. They would head out on a Sunday, sell Monday thru Friday, return to their base on Friday afternoon, celebrate the

²⁰ Dun, Maine, vol. 3, p. 258.

²¹ Dun, Maine, vol. 22, p. 83.

²² Dun, Maine, vol. 22, p. 346.

²³ Dun, Maine, vol. 23, p. 363.

Sabbath, settle their debts on Saturday night, and start their week over again. This kind of mobility was incredibly important for merchants and peddlars because it allowed them to visit their customers once a week very consistently. For customers, this was a convenient service because taking a trip from the countryside to Bangor could easily take a full day. Those in the country did not need to worry about taking a multiple-day trek to the next city since they had someone selling them goods in the convenience of their own home. Being able to keep consistent rounds, peddlars visited their clients regularly, which almost guaranteed that one of the regulars would need or want something new the following week.

Although Amazon must base itself in a corporate headquarters to succeed as a centralized company, merchants and peddlars remained highly mobile in a way that benefitted their success. Jews were a unique demographic because they were never tied to a single place. What brought them to Maine was the promise of new markets where they could sell their goods and the vast economic prospects. Jews who moved to Maine were willing to take a chance, knowing that they could leave at any sign of economic downturn. For example, Haiman Philip Spitz arrived in Bangor in 1848 and there were six other Jewish families there at the time.²⁴ They all had moved to try their hand in a new place. Due to an economic panic, a downturn in the lumbering industry and other unknown factors, all of the Jewish business owners left before 1860. They left Bangor only to look for a new place to try to succeed. That same entrepreneurial spirit inspired the next group of Jews to migrate to Bangor in the 1860s to improve their own economic situation, a group that included Engel and Waterman. This group was much more successful and they set down roots in Bangor and continued to thrive economically. Even though moving away from

²⁴ Spitz 18.

Maine meant that those who had come did not succeed, they knew when they could never succeed and when to make room for the next group of Jews to come and settle in Maine.

Just as Amazon has revolutionized the online buying market, Jewish merchants and peddlers helped transform the commercial economy of Maine. By participating in the new trend of providing ready-made merchandise to Mainers, merchants and peddlers created their own jobs and worked for themselves. To make a living, they needed to cater to their customers' demands and keep their stores and packs stocked with the latest and greatest goods. Even though not all merchants and peddlers succeeded, the constant turnover of Jews to supply those goods, ensured that Mainers had access to the goods they needed and wanted, and Jews continued to make their living selling those goods.