Minding the Store


Reviewed by JONATHAN D. SARNA

Twelve years have passed since Stephen Birmingham rocketed to the top of the best-seller list with his rousing account of the German Jewish elite. "Our Crowd" inaugurated a new literary subcategory: stranger-than-fiction tales of American Jews who rose to eminence. "Jealousies, tensions, snobberies, courtships, social disciplines, griefs, and absurdities"—to Birmingham, these were the factors that mattered. A number of successors have by now followed in his footsteps, each in turn claiming to have produced a book even better than the original model. The most recent, which boasts of being "Our Crowd on a national scale," is Leon Harris's Merchant Princes, subtitled "An Intimate History of Jewish Families Who Built Great Department Stores."

Although Harris includes in his "intimate history" some material on his own family of Texas merchants, most of Merchant Princes is devoted to the famous: the Kaufmanns, the Goldwaters, the Goldsmiths, the Riches (notice how many Jewish merchants bear appropriate names), the Strauses, the Filenes, the Gimbel, the Marcuses, and the Rosenwalds. Each of these families, in its own way, was innovative. Each could point to a patriarch whose arduous labors spun peddlers' rags into glittering gold. Each, while proud of its Jewish heritage, refused to be bound by it. In the end, each lost control of its empire, and watched helplessly as its stores were federated into larger and larger conglomerates.

HARRIS, in keeping with the rules of his genre, is short on whys and long on whats. He paints endlessly fascinating portraits of princes and princesses "moved by greed as well as generosity, by lechery as well as love." His lively vignettes are well chosen; his picturesque descriptions authentic; his scandalous revelations delicious. Merchant Princes, like "Our Crowd," is great fun to read.

Is every story true?

Throughout this book I have been much more interested in the revealing and probable anecdote than in tiresome facts of unquestionable accuracy. I willingly confess my feeling, as expressed by the Abbé Raynal about Benjamin Franklin, that he would rather recount some men's stories than other men's truths.

Harris is too modest. Unlike Stephen Birmingham, he has footnoted most of his anecdotes, and
the few doubtful stories are not
worth bothering to check. Does it
really matter whether Morton E.
Snellyburg did or did not keep
nickel cigars in his front pocket to
offer friends, and fine Havanas in
an inside pocket for himself? If he
didn't, somebody else did.

Harris is more, however, than an
old-fashioned muckraker. He
knows that the contributions of
American Jewish merchants to the
national life far exceed the sum of
their scandals (though scandals
there were aplenty). The great
department stores and mail-order
houses united Americans, made
them more equal, and held out to
everyone the dream of a better to-
tomorrow. Nor were the profits gen-
erated by these massive palaces of
merchandise simply squandered on
sex and self-indulgence. Philan-
thropic merchants patronized cul-
ture, and allocated millions for
charities of all kinds.

Yet it is not the desire to do
good that Harris sees as the motiva-
tion behind America's Jewish mer-
chants—nor is it money, or sex, or
even the goal of acceptance in
Christian society. Instead, he says,
the secret lay in the fun of it, "the
one thing they shared despite all
the talk of hard work and sacri-
cifice." Sales were fun; competition
was fun; publicity was fun. Every-
thing, indeed, was so much fun
that one wonders why the third
and fourth generations dropped
out to enter the professions. Could
it possibly be that "fun" was more
rationalization than motivation?

Harris is a great deal more per-
ceptive in the fascinating asides
which he sprinkles throughout
Merchant Princes. A glimpse into
Billie Scheible's elite whorehouse,
for example, reveals that Jews fre-
frequently the place for reasons that
went beyond variegated sex and
"the delightful company of
women." Brothels, it turns out,
"were in fact clubs where the rich,
Gentile and Jew together, and
those not rich but powerful . . .
much in a climate of easy convivial-
ity"—this, at a time when most
aboveboard elite social clubs
slammed the door in the face of
Jews, Negroes, and dogs. Did bro-
thels serve as underground salons,
where men who could not publicly
be seen together met and con-
versed? Did department stores serve
the same function?

The link between department
stores and sex is not quite so far-
fetched as it may seem. In other
asides, Harris compares the process
of merchandising to the act of se-
duction, and suggests that depart-
ment stores served as surrogate hus-
bands for rich, middle-aged women
whose spouses ignored them, and
whose children had left home:
"Neiman-Marcus offered a blessed
balm that combined cossetting, con-
cern, flattery, and attention." Inter-
restingly, another "Jewish" inven-
tion, psychoanalysis, served roughly
the same function. In both cases,
the prices charged for the therapy
were extravagantly high. Neverthe-
less—or perhaps consequently—pa-
tients proved thoroughly satisfied.

For a woman who was less well-
heeled, department stores served a
different function: employment.
Merchandising was one of the few
professions in which a woman
could rise—at least to the level of
buyer. Only the theater offered
greater independence, and then
only at the price of reputation. De-
partment stores, of course, did not
lack their scandals. With so many
men in positions of authority, scan-
dal was inevitable. But outwardly,
at least, the stores maintained a
veiler of respectability. They pro-
vided many an immigrant girl with
the funds necessary to support her
family.

Merchant Princes might have de-
voled more attention to immigrant
workers. It might also have wid-
ened its lens to offer a broader view
of how a department store operated
—or did not operate. Harris, how-
ever, specifically restricts his focus
to "storekeepers and their fami-
lies." Though qualified to deal
with all facets of merchandising, he
hesitates to break from the "Our
Crowd" mold.

One wonders why the Birmingham
model has proved so enduringly
successful. When "Our Crowd" ap-
peared, Marshall Sklare suggested
in a review in Commentary that
the interest generated by the book
was "in large part a consequence of
the fact that while Jews are not
thought to be 'legitimate' they are
not yet considered to be quite like
everyone else; their being 'dif-
ferent' makes their story that much
more intriguing." Twelve years
and a shelf full of books later, a
further possibility suggests itself:
nostalgia for a world gone by.

Immigrant Jews personified in
the best possible way the American
dream of rags to riches. They
provided living proof that the dream
could come true. Now, with more
and more people experiencing Downward mobility, there is a na-
tural fascination with early success-
ful pioneers. An equally natural, if
masochistic, interest attaches to the
failures, the children who unmade
the dream and brought about its
decay.

The Jewish experience, as re-
counted in "Our Crowd" and its
imitators, embodies an American
morality play writ small. The cur-
tain goes up on the noble, iron-
willed generation of immigrant
builders. It descends on the weak,
powerless, and morally debauched
generations of children, grandchil-
dren, and great-grandchildren. In
our day, we have witnessed Horatio
Alger played back in reverse. The
illustrious merchant princes are
dead. In their place, as Leon Har-
riss correctly observes, lies "the long
famous Jewish malaise, the once-
thought-to-be-atavistic sense of
exile and alienation."