

Commentary

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Minding the Store

MERCHANT PRINCES: AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF JEWISH FAMILIES WHO BUILT GREAT DEPARTMENT STORES. By LEON HARRIS. *Harper & Row*. 411 pp. \$12.95.

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."

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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 Gimbels, 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. Snellenburg 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 tomorrow. Nor were the profits generated by these massive palaces of merchandise simply squandered on sex and self-indulgence. Philanthropic merchants patronized culture, and allocated millions for charities of all kinds.

YET it is not the desire to do good that Harris sees as the motivation behind America's Jewish merchants—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 sacrifice." Sales were fun; competition was fun; publicity was fun. Everything, 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 perceptive in the fascinating asides which he sprinkles throughout *Merchant Princes*. A glimpse into Billie Scheible's elite whorehouse, for example, reveals that Jews frequented 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 . . . met in a climate of easy conviviality"—this, at a time when most aboveboard elite social clubs slammed the door in the face of Jews, Negroes, and dogs. Did brothels serve as underground salons,

where men who could not publicly be seen together met and conversed? 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 seduction, and suggests that department stores served as surrogate husbands for rich, middle-aged women whose spouses ignored them, and whose children had left home: "Neiman-Marcus offered a blessed balm that combined cosseting, concern, flattery, and attention." Interestingly, another "Jewish" invention, psychoanalysis, served roughly the same function. In both cases, the prices charged for the therapy were extravagantly high. Nevertheless—or perhaps consequently—patients 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. Department stores, of course, did not lack their scandals. With so many men in positions of authority, scandal was inevitable. But outwardly, at least, the stores maintained a veneer of respectability. They provided many an immigrant girl with the funds necessary to support her family.

Merchant Princes might have devoted more attention to immigrant workers. It might also have widened its lens to offer a broader view of how a department store operated—or did not operate. Harris, however, specifically restricts his focus to "storekeepers and their families." 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*" appeared, 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 'different' 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 natural fascination with early successful 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 recounted in "*Our Crowd*" and its imitators, embodies an American morality play writ small. The curtain goes up on the noble, iron-willed generation of immigrant builders. It descends on the weak, powerless, and morally debauched generations of children, grandchildren, 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 Harris correctly observes, lies "the long famous Jewish malaise, the once-thought-to-be-atavistic sense of exile and alienation."