

Hasia R. Diner. *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 247 pp., ISBN: 9780300178647.

The subject of Jewish peddlers is very close to my heart, a primary reason being that my great-grandfather, Morris Miller, was himself a peddler, ultimately settling in Ayer,

Massachusetts (outside Boston). The Miller family lived in Ayer for a very long time as a result of his peddling activities. This kind of family background is quite commonplace in the story of Jews, Ashkenazi and Sephardi alike, over the past century or more – not only in the United States but also in Canada (well represented in this book), South and Central America, the Caribbean, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as in Great Britain and Scandinavia. Depending on where they went, peddlers were called by different names – such as *smous* in South Africa and *cuentanik* in Latin America. However, despite the diversity of lands to which these Jewish peddlers immigrated, the United States is the country to which most Jews from Eastern and Central Europe (plus the Mediterranean Basin) aspired to relocate, and it is in the United States where immigrant Jews were accepted and integrated most thoroughly.

All these Jewish peddler stories are covered in Hasia Diner's book, *Roads Taken*. Diner discusses how peddling became the occupation of choice for many Jews (particularly single males fresh off the immigrant boats) before moving on to more stable and lucrative occupations. While peddling very often took place in small towns and rural areas, the peddlers often (though not always) moved to bigger urban centres once they finished their peddling activities. Diner writes that peddlers cut through many barriers between different social groups that might be present in a given country, and also that peddlers were interested above all in selling their wares, so that sociocultural differences did not matter much to them. A good example of this is the American South, where the Jewish peddlers overlooked the tensions between whites and blacks. As a matter of fact, blacks preferred to buy their wares from the peddlers rather than from the non-Jewish white-owned stores. The peddlers and their clients managed to learn each other's culture, language, and religion; in fact, the peddlers had no option but to learn the dominant language of their new countries, such as English or Spanish. Their clients, in return, had the opportunity to learn about Judaism, including the concept of kosher food. This kind of interaction sometimes went sufficiently far for peddlers to marry local non-Jewish women, an action not always welcomed. Furthermore, in many cases (especially in poorer countries), it was through peddling that the masses were introduced to everyday consumer items.

The peddlers, however, experienced many difficulties and dangers along the way. They found themselves in lands in which the culture and geography were unfamiliar to them, and they faced loneliness away from their families, girlfriends, and wives. The only real time that they rested – i.e. remained in one place and be with their families or spouses – was on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. At times, they faced anti-Semitism – the most vicious incident taking place in Limerick, Ireland, in 1904 – as well as more general anti-foreigner agitation. More frequent dangers on the road included inclement weather (like blizzards and heat waves) and robbers (attracted to the value of the peddlers' goods). As a result of all these dangers and annoyances, some peddlers were killed, and some even took their own lives. Nonetheless, peddling proved to be a very attractive starter occupation for many immigrant Jews seeking a way to eventual prosperity for themselves and especially for their descendants. This book is recommended especially for readers wanting to know about the lifestyles of the peddlers who founded many Jewish communities in North America and worldwide.

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