

Introduction

The Rag Race

Why have Jews prospered so dramatically in the United States? Their ascent has been exceptional. Other ethnic groups have succeeded in America, but none quite like the Jews.¹ So what was the alchemy that transmuted them from economically abased immigrants to among America's most successful citizens? Were they successful because they were Jews or because of the particular circumstances they encountered in the United States? And can their recipe for success be distilled and reproduced by the nation's newest immigrants?

Most of those who address these questions today tread gingerly on turf first turned by an earlier generation more comfortable with racial and religious essentialism and determinism.² Instead of heredity, scholars are now more inclined to point to social and cultural capital—kinship networks, hard-won commercial expertise, attitudes toward education and commerce, supportive institutions, and group solidarity—as key to explaining the economic success of Jews.³ Shying from earlier claims that Jews possess immutable and innate features derived from the primordial past (that *gelt* was in their genes) most historians and sociologists now assume that these traits and tendencies were acquired over time, like protective cladding against the dread chill of an inhospitable climate (the view that *gelt* is in their jeans).⁴ Restrictions that had long kept Jews on the fringes of the formal economy in the medieval and early modern periods, so one version of this argument goes, compelled them to develop skills and a *mentalité* that stood them in good stead in America. Others emphasize adaptations of more recent origin. Jews who flocked to America's shores in the nineteenth century from central Europe, for example, had been exposed to public education and bourgeois values before their departure

as a consequence of the tortuous process of Jewish emancipation in that region. Certainly the average Jew who migrated to the United States from German-speaking lands was more likely to be literate and numerate than the majority of his or her fellow travelers, and significantly more so than immigrants from Ireland.⁵ Eastern European Jewish immigrants—much like their central European counterparts who preceded them to the New World—carried cultural cargo shaped by the distinct circumstances of the *shtetl*. This broad approach, which focuses in large part on the cultural and social baggage that immigrants toted across the Atlantic, is not without its critics. One recent study has cautioned against the assumption that immigrants from Russia were well prepared for labor in a modern industrial economy.⁶ And others have more broadly questioned the relationship between cultural characteristics and economic performance.⁷

This book does not discount the significance of culture—the baggage immigrants carried—in determining the trajectory of Jewish immigrants in America. However, it places its emphasis elsewhere. It argues that the Jews who flocked to the United States during a century of mass migration that stretched from 1820 to 1924 were aided appreciably by their association with a particular corner of the American economy that they turned into a home of their own. Why does this emphasis matter? If their cultural heritage was, above all else, responsible for speeding their upward path, what precise field Jews clustered in, and the particular historical contingencies they encountered in America, would be of lesser importance. Their experience could then offer few lessons applicable to other immigrant groups not blessed with a similar cultural inheritance. In contrast, if economic niches play a significant role in shaping economic outcomes—filling the sails of some, blowing others toward the shoals—the experience of Jews is more instructive.

Ironically, in our present age when ethnic economic niches have proliferated, our eyes have been dulled to their importance and complexity. A rotating cast of ethnic entrepreneurs make cameos in the life of our cities as taxi drivers, umbrella sellers, movers, restaurateurs, and the occupants of myriad other corners of urban commerce. Bemused tourists and curious locals are not the only observers to have noticed these clusters of immigrant entrepreneurship. Yet while sociologists have intensively studied ethnic economies and immigrant niches, historians have been slower to consider their significance.⁸ In recent years, however, several historians

have begun to outline how, why, and to what effect Jews have clustered together in the modern economy.⁹

This book argues that for Jews in the United States, the rag trade proved to be a particularly good fit. From humble beginnings Jews rode the coat-tails of the clothing trade from the margins of economic life in the nineteenth century to a position of unusual promise and prominence in the twentieth. As we will see, the intimate relationship that developed between Jews and the clothing trade had long-term consequences for both: the economic ascent of Jews in America cannot be fully comprehended without understanding the business of stitching and selling garments, and the garment industry cannot be fully understood without following the thread of Jewish involvement in the *shmatte* (rag) business.¹⁰

But how can we know that the nature of the clothing trade per se played an instrumental role in the economic success of Jews in the United States? One way to assess its influence is through comparison, an approach that others have profitably pursued before.¹¹ Such analogies will always be imperfect. No other nation attracted nearly as many Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as did the United States. And no matter how close in culture and custom, no two countries present immigrants with exactly the same opportunities and challenges. But what if we compared the history of Jewish involvement in the clothing trade in America with a parallel setting where Jews in the identical industry started the century at a considerable advantage? If ethnic culture functioned independently of other factors, we would expect to see Jews in this setting advancing at roughly the same rate as, if not faster than, those in America, in the garment industry and in their overall economic standing.

The clothing trade in England offers exactly this point of comparison. Already in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Jews were well entrenched in London in a trade that began to grow explosively in scale and importance. By the middle of the century a handful had achieved a prominence as clothiers that was unimaginable to their counterparts in the United States. Yet for all their early advantages, Jews in England were outstripped by their American peers by 1881. The particular circumstances of Jewish involvement in the clothing industry in the United States conspired to push them ahead in the intervening years. Although the scale and density of Jewish settlement in the United States relative to that in England during the period of eastern European mass migration perforce

makes comparison more problematic after 1881, historical differences in how Jews entered and experienced the clothing trade before that date created a cascade of consequences for immigrant newcomers who followed them into the business. Historical divergences within the same industry on different sides of the Atlantic before 1881, in other words, contributed to very real differences in the social and economic outcomes for Jews in the United States and England in the twentieth century.

So What Was So Special about the Clothing Trade?

Given the arguments in this book about the importance of one particular economic niche to the Jewish experience, it pays close attention to how the garment industry changed over time and what these changes meant for Jews. The trajectory of the garment business, the most common occupation for Jewish immigrants, became interlaced with the trajectory of Jews, threading through their economic ascent across generations like a slip stitch. Jews first entered this business by historical happenstance rather than by prescience about its future potential, but the early foothold they established proved to be of decisive importance. As the clothing trade expanded and diversified, becoming one of the most significant consumer industries in the United States, this hitherto humble niche showered unanticipated opportunities on generations of Jewish immigrants and their children. When the clothing trade moved into the van of economic change, it became a vehicle for the dramatic ascent of Jews.

The nature of this niche mattered. From our present vantage point it is difficult to detect why it was once special, when many of its daring experiments in production, distribution, and retailing on a mass scale have long since become commonplace. Some of its inspired improvisations—grand emporia and mail-order catalogues, to name just two innovative ways of marketing new products and conducting business more efficiently—distract our attention from several structural features, largely hidden to outside observers, that proved congenial to Jews. The industry was simultaneously illuminated by the guttering candlelight of the past and the blazing gas lights of the future. Its resistance to change proved as important for Jewish history as did the room and rewards it offered to innovators involved in marketing and distribution. Counterintuitively, the garment industry remained a vital Jewish ethnic niche across decades and

successive waves of immigration not because it was quick to modernize its methods of production but precisely because it was in large part slow to do so. Even as enterprising Jewish clothiers worked out new ways of carrying ever-larger quantities of clothing to an ever-larger market, the persistence of a labor-intensive mode of manufacturing supplied jobs to recently arrived Jewish immigrants. Since the production system in New York City favored small firms—entrepreneurs with relatively little money could corral a handful of workers to begin stitching clothing for them—there was opportunity for enterprise even among those who had only recently arrived in America. The uneven development of the clothing trade, characterized by continuous innovation among retailers and wholesalers and by gradual change among manufacturers, ensured a depth of Jewish participation that was unseen in other fields. A variety of other structural features intrinsic to the growth of the clothing industry in the United States—such as the emergence of new and underserved markets and the instability and unpredictability of demand within them—accentuated the advantages enjoyed by small Jewish firms.

En masse, Jews entered—and later escaped—an occupation that provided, relative to many of the potential alternatives for immigrants, a solid preparation for economic life in the twentieth century. First, it was an enabling occupation that supplied many of its occupants with rough-and-ready schooling in skills essential for rapid advancement in a modern economy, particularly sensitivity to the whims and wants of the market and practice in petty entrepreneurship. Second, by clustering in the clothing trade, Jews set the wheels of opportunity turning in a certain direction. In America the internal logic of the industry dictated that the fastest path to advancement lay in self-employment rather than in wage labor. Jews were shepherded toward an entrepreneurial path of economic development that was distinct from that of several contemporary immigrant groups that flocked to other fields. In part as a result, an unusually high percentage of Jewish immigrants and their children became proprietors of small businesses in the United States, a development of enormous consequence. In England, where the internal logic of the industry was somewhat different, Jews pursued proprietorship at a markedly lower rate and were slower to leave the working class.¹² Even within the garment industry, however, the opportunities available for entrepreneurial activity shifted over time. Jewish immigrants to America who took up tailoring

were fortunate in their timing. Other groups that followed them into the trade later in the twentieth century found that it was a less supple springboard than it had been.¹³ Third, the ethnic economy that Jews fashioned around clothing provided a point of access into a variety of related fields, including scrap metal, military contracting, property development, entertainment, and consumer goods. And as the garment industry expanded, it supported an ever-larger collection of lawyers, accountants, advertisers, designers, and other experts who were often immigrants or the children of immigrants themselves.

The clothing trade was certainly not the only pathway to prosperity. Indeed, it shared several features with other niches that attracted clusters of Jewish entrepreneurs. Such fields, generally in the commercial realm, tended to advantage those who created dense networks that interconnected producers, distributors, and purveyors. In several cases these fields were new, expanding at breakneck speed, or socially *déclassé*—therefore somewhat more open to those who were less intimidated by these considerations—as well as suitable for a proliferation of smaller enterprises. Few alternatives were more important for Jews in the mid-nineteenth century than the dry-goods business. For Jews the clothing business was joined at the hip to the dry-goods trade. Jewish peddlers were as likely to carry fancy goods (yard goods and trimmings) and notions (buttons, thread, and needles) as they were to tote clothing. Jewish garment manufacturers could access inexpensive cloth sold by kinsmen who were wholesalers and importers of dry goods. Some dabbled in both clothing and fabric or moved between the two. But even though Jews clustered (and prospered) in several other areas of the American economy, no single sector became so closely intertwined with such a large swath of the Jewish community over such a broad period of time as did the garment industry. Unlike dry goods, for example, the manufacturing side of the garment industry became as important to Jews as did retailing and wholesaling.

It would be erroneous, however, to assume that this special relationship between Jews and the clothing trade alone guaranteed Jewish success in the United States. Things need not have turned out as they did. The garment industry might have developed in a less amenable manner. And the favorable characteristics of the trade did not provide a predetermined or inevitable path to prosperity. Instead, as this book demonstrates, many

Jews were well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that this field presented, but when they succeeded, they did so through resourcefulness, skill, and good fortune. Their luck was in part the offspring of their own energies, but hard work and perseverance did not guarantee success. Plenty failed or suffered reverses despite their best efforts.

Even as the garment industry positioned Jews well for the future, it also pushed them into a walk-on role in the modernization of capitalism. As manufacturers began to churn out ever-larger quantities of ready-made garments in the second half of the nineteenth century, the producers and purveyors of clothing played a pivotal role in refashioning Americans into mass consumers. Stylish new clothing, once out of the reach of all but the well-to-do (and those who were willing to steal from them), now heralded a consumer revolution. Through innovations in manufacturing, distribution, and marketing, those who made and sold garments introduced practices that transformed patterns of production and habits of consumption. The Jewish peddlers, clothiers, and manufacturers who became prime purveyors of inexpensive fashions were the precursors of Jews who, in later generations, thrived by keeping their finger on the popular pulse in a variety of consumer industries. Given the centrality of Jews to these changes in the garment industry, the most important role they played in the expansion of capitalism in the United States came not in the realm of investment banking but in the bottom-up changes wrought by garment makers and salespeople who competed to sell their stock in an expanding and evolving marketplace and in the labor activism of those who stitched and sewed much of America's clothing. The predominance of Jews in this one sector provided their community—both its commercial pioneers and its activists—with a prominence and role in the general economy beyond what their numbers would otherwise have given them. In few other areas of the modern economy were Jews so central. And few other occupations left as important a legacy for modern Jewish history in the New World.

From Castoffs to Center Stage

The garment industry did not possess a Jewish essence, nor was Jewish involvement in the field driven by any particularistic agenda. Prior to the 1920s, Jews in the United States were not pushed or penned into this field by antisemitic pressures. Yet by neither design nor intention, key sectors of

the business of manufacturing and selling new clothing came to be dominated by Jews. Their success in the garment business, therefore, presents a conundrum. How and why did Jews corner parts of the clothing trade? This book offers several intertwined explanations, but it focuses on three themes: the fortuitous positioning of Jews in marginal occupations, primarily secondhand dealing and peddling; fundamental changes in the way clothing was manufactured, distributed, and sold in the nineteenth century; and ethnic connections among Jews that eased the entry of newcomers into the field and could provide mutual benefit to those who sought to do business in new and challenging markets.

To understand how this unlikely story of economic ascent began, we will start where Jews did in the clothing trade in England and America: among the scavengers and hawkers who struggled to make a living by collecting, patching, and reselling clothing cast off by others. In our present age of material plenty, garments are expendable, purchased in profusion, worn at whim, and entombed within a closet or cast off when fallen from favor or fashion. Rare is the garment that enjoys a full second life—resurrected as hand-me-downs, repurposed as “retro” or “vintage” by thrift-store shoppers, or distributed as charity—once it has been discarded by the original owner. Such affordable abundance and profligacy would have been almost unimaginable to consumers in an earlier age when workaday clothing was carefully husbanded, passing between owners until it was so worn that further patching and refashioning was impractical or impossible. Even then the threadbare fabric usually retained sufficient value to be collected and recycled. An entire economy, long since faded, existed to extract the maximum return from the latter lives of garments discarded by (or purloined from) their original owners. For much of the nineteenth century the collection and sale of castoff clothing in New York City and London was dominated by Jews.

For a time this occupation came to define Jews in the popular imagination. For writers, cartoonists, and popular poets, a sack of castoffs and stack of rumpled hats became convenient shorthand for Jews: they were the rag race. Those who created these often-mocking depictions could little anticipate how, in turn, the rag race—the business of buying, selling, stitching, and sewing clothing—would aid the transformation of Jewish life in the United States and England. Ragmen and street sellers raucously hawked and bartered in ways that seemed out of step with the



The Jewish “old clo’” man became a frequent figure of fun in depictions of urban life and a fixture in the popular imagination, appearing as stock characters in children’s books, in verse, and on the printed page. (Collection of the author)

new commercial norms of the middle class. Instead of setting a fixed price, they seemed to relish haggling. Instead of operating from fixed premises, they bought and sold wherever they could accost potential customers.¹⁴ To some journalists and writers who described the secondhand trade to a broader audience, Chatham Street in New York and Petticoat Lane in London served as stages for a morality play in which debates about the nature and boundaries of the developing capitalist system were acted out with

Jewish ragmen, auctioneers, pawnbrokers, labor brokers, and sweatshop owners as protagonists. Jews were not necessarily chosen for this purpose because they outnumbered other groups involved in these fields—often they did not—or because of the distinctiveness of their economic behavior, which was often no different from that of their competitors. Rather, to borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss’s felicitous phrase, they were singled out because they were “good to think [with].”¹⁵ Paradoxically, this intense focus on ragmen blinded observers to the inroads made by Jews elsewhere in the clothing business, as well as to the complexity of the secondhand trade itself. Few saw or understood that the used-clothing market was transformed by, and deeply embedded within, modernity. During the first decades of the nineteenth century it became increasingly elaborate and systematic. Rather than a relic of a time before mass manufacturing, it flourished in tight symbiosis with the production and marketing of ready-made clothing. Old and new clothes were twin elements of an interdependent economy. Although some people did move seamlessly from hawking secondhand clothing to selling new garments, the market for rags and cast-offs long remained viable. And, as we will see, both became commodities for speculation and export to distant markets.¹⁶

Nineteenth-century stereotypes built on a much-older association of Jews with the clothing trade. Although in medieval Europe tailoring and drapery guilds often tried to cut Jews out of the market, Jewish tailors sought to bypass restrictions—on occasion creating their own guilds or clustering in subfields, such as the making of hats, that were sometimes free of these constraints—and continued to sell to Jewish and Christian clients when they could. Those Jewish craftsmen who stitched sumptuous finery, however, were only the brocade on a far coarser and larger ethnic enterprise. The collection and sale of careworn clothing long allowed impecunious Jews to maintain a tenuous grip on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. In medieval and early modern Europe, rag traders, secondhand-clothing dealers, and peddlers often operated outside the confines of guild control, occupying a niche held in low esteem.¹⁷ The cost of fashionable fabric and the skilled labor of master and journeyman tailors meant that hand-sewn, made-to-measure garments were expensive. Tailors long resisted the methods of mass production. Those without the means to purchase hand-tailored jackets and pantaloons could make do with the preworn outfits proffered by peddlers and stall keepers in

secondhand markets. Jews still hawked all manner of inexpensive articles to farmers and villagers in the countryside of western and central Europe in the early nineteenth century, and in some areas the peddling of clothing remained a staple occupation for decades longer.¹⁸

This attention to “old clo’” dealers is one of the ways this volume cuts, crimps, and reworks several pieces of the standard narrative of the economic history of Jews in England and the United States. The secondhand-garment trade has been largely absent from studies of Jewish labor and the immigrant experience. This is particularly the case in the United States.¹⁹ This lapse is partly the product of the lack of interest of historians of American economic life in secondhand markets. Only recently have some begun to unpick the complex threads of a staple business of the urban underclass and a source of affordable goods to fill their wardrobes, pantries, and living spaces.²⁰ Several scholars have now shown that even for the poor clothing was much more than just something to cover the body. An outfit, even a secondhand one, could serve as a marker of social status, a reflection of identity, and the object of aspiration. The neglect of Jewish secondhand dealers in particular has in part been a product of the stigma once associated with them and their wares. Though doing substantial business, those who earned a living in this trade were seen as marginal participants within the larger economy. Well beyond the nineteenth century the “old clo’” dealer was often a figure of fun and a source of embarrassment. His reputation was bespattered by the taint of criminality, the stain of poverty, and a whiff of the Old World. The trade was viewed by some people as a vestige of a best-forgotten past. More broadly, this reticence reflects the relative neglect of Jewish economic life in America as a subject of serious study.²¹

If the buying and selling of castoff clothing has frayed and largely been forgotten, the sweatshop has been double-stitched into popular and scholarly memory of Jewish immigration. This book leans heavily on this rich scholarship about Jewish involvement in the garment industry after 1881. Few of these works, however, consider how an earlier history shaped later developments within this ethnic niche.²² Hence, the bulk of this book deals with the period before 1880. For to begin a discussion of Jews and the clothing trade in America with the sweatshop is like presenting a stage play without its opening acts. Even though the upward mobility of eastern European Jewish immigrants and their children was far from pre-scripted, the role of earlier immigrants in opening the arena and designing

the props essential for the success of the later drama has not been fully recognized. In devoting considerable attention to the period prior to mass migration of eastern European Jews, this book argues that patterns established between the 1830s and 1870s persisted well after central European migrants had been supplanted by a new cast of characters. In doing so, it further unpicks the now threadbare stage curtain that was once seen to separate these two streams of immigrants. And in emphasizing structural and ethnic continuities within the clothing trade, it refocuses attention on the importance and influence of the niche itself on successive waves of Jewish immigrants.

Over the course of the nineteenth century an ethnic economy built on castoff and cut-price clothing was tapered and transformed into one centered on the mass manufacture of cheap clothing in Leeds, London, the Lower East Side of New York, and numerous other towns great and small. Whole sections of the menswear trade that had previously been foreclosed to Jews were transformed by a series of technological, commercial, and social changes. (For reasons discussed later in this book, change came more slowly in the manufacturing and marketing of womenswear.)²³ By dint of good fortune and fortuitous timing, Jews worked within the clothing trade in the United States and England at a time when it provided a broadening set of opportunities. Demand for clothing both old and new accelerated in the settlement colonies of the British Empire, on plantations in the American South, in boomtowns on the frontier, and among workers with disposable income in soot-stained industrial cities. Merchants and manufacturers began to jettison familiar patterns of doing business for new ways of making and marketing men's clothing. The trade began to shift decisively from skilled tailoring by artisans and the extensive reuse of castoff garments to its modern techniques of mass production, mass marketing, and mass consumption. Jews found themselves fortuitously positioned during the decisive decades when the clothing trade was upended. In effect, they had a hand in creating a new industry. In England a small cohort of Jews with expertise in the used-clothing trade discovered that their unglamorous vocation gave them a major advantage when they entered the nascent ready-made garment industry. In the United States a scattering of peddlers, clerks, and petty shopkeepers seeded the first significant crop of Jewish-owned manufacturing and wholesaling firms to sprout on American soil. For most Jews these changes produced only

modest success, but a few attained great prosperity. Still others found their livelihoods undercut by disruptive new methods and technologies.

Although numerous Jewish men and women worked independently to advance their own interests, the action of these individuals had collective consequences. Immigrant entrepreneurs were often tied to their kinsmen and compatriots through elaborate ethnic networks. These networks did not persist as vestigial remnants of a preimmigrant past; rather, they flourished as dynamic commercial mechanisms. In theory the benefits of such relationships should have eroded substantially over time. Jewish migrants settled in the United States and the British Empire during a period of profound economic transformation that made markets more complex and business more impersonal. Whereas once family connections, acquaintance, and proximity provided the glue that most often bound parties together in commercial exchanges, now modern institutions—banks, insurance companies, credit bureaus, and forwarding agents—facilitated business between strangers. On the surface these changes diminished the advantages enjoyed by members of ethnic networks. If a credit bureau could establish the trustworthiness of a perfect stranger in a distant city, and formal market and legal mechanisms could protect an investment, what need was there to rely on kinsmen or compatriots? If the value of trusted intermediaries rose in environments with few such institutions, surely the opposite was true of settings where such mechanisms were in place? Anonymous commerce between willing buyers and sellers was potentially more efficient and cost-effective than relying only on goods and services acquired from relatives and coreligionists. To those who sought to turn a profit, surely it was “ultimately the exchange itself that mattered, not the identity of those with whom they did business”?²⁴

Jewish business networks flourished precisely because of the rapidity and scale of growth in the United States and the British Empire. Instead of serving as second-best mechanisms in an age of neutral markets, migrant business networks thrived in the interstices of an incompletely integrated and imperfect economic system that was expanding geographically and growing in complexity. Ethnic networks bridged city and countryside, metropole and colony, entrepôt and boomtown at a time when these were otherwise not seamlessly joined. These relationships were particularly advantageous in an industry where fashions changed quickly (thereby making the relay of speedy and reliable intelligence particularly

valuable) as well as in markets where there was a prolonged “information float” (a lengthy delay between dispatching and receiving messages because of geographical isolation) and in regions where credit was harder to come by.

Those who participated in these networks also benefited from the vertical integration and horizontal reach that these connections offered. Success could beget success: successful entrepreneurs invested their money and experience in new ventures. Yet this ethnic ecosystem was never exclusive, hermetic, and unchanging. Non-Jews were drawn in as partners, employers, employees, suppliers, and customers. Participants changed over time as the interests of employers and partners shifted. Nor was this ecosystem an Arcadian paradise of altruistic cooperation. As in any other such system there were commensals who benefited from belonging but added little of value to others, mutualists who took and contributed in equal measure, and freeloaders who exploited the fruits of the system. Participants in networks fought, fell out, and occasionally cheated each other. The ecosystem was also segmented. Some subgroups came to carve out areas for themselves by specializing in particular roles and then recruiting others of similar background to join them. The relationship between Jewish immigrants from different backgrounds was not necessarily one of cooperation and trust. But in the aggregate, there were benefits to participation.

Without question, culture played an important role in sustaining the sense of common cause that underpinned the ethnic ecosystem, as well as in conditioning Jewish responses to American-style capitalism. A variety of features found in the Jewish immigrant population—literacy and numeracy, familiarity with itinerant trading and petty storekeeping, an openness to commercial endeavor, and several other seeds carried in the cultural cargo of those who crossed the Atlantic—germinated when exposed to fructifying soil. Some migrants arrived with direct knowledge of tailoring and the business of buying and selling clothing. But many more cultivated existing skills and acquired new ones once they settled in America and England. Over time, Jewish peddlers, clerks, petty shopkeepers, and even tailors developed a working knowledge of merchandising and finance, a familiarity with the wants of the market, and a network of contacts for distribution and credit. They transmuted the cultural capital they had brought with them into capital of the very real kind. Inherited

cultural characteristics could also take on new meaning and importance in a fresh context. Among Jewish immigrants the business advantages of belonging to commercial networks were often intertwined with communal commitments. Cultural affinities bolstered economic interactions, and economic relationships enhanced a sense of cultural connectedness. Commercial relationships played an essential role in sustaining a sense of solidarity and common cause between Jewish communities dispersed over distance, and vice versa.²⁵

The economic networks that linked the people involved in the garment trade were buffeted by larger historical forces. At moments of crisis, some networks failed entirely, dragging their web of participants into bankruptcy. Others dissolved when they outlived their usefulness, and still others prospered by adapting quickly to new opportunities. The organic mutability of networks—their stagnation, responsiveness to stressors, and adaptation—was most visible during moments of dramatic change. This book focuses on the impact of several disruptive developments that reshaped markets and altered the dynamics of the clothing trade: colonization and frontier settlement, financial panic, and war. But it also focuses on the quieter but no less significant processes that transformed the garment industry: the emergence of a mass consumer society and technological change. These developments have rarely been considered key waypoints in the development of Jewish life in America and England. However, to Jews in the clothing trade, several of these changes were crucial, and they arrived tightly bundled together in the years between 1830 and 1890. These decisive decades are the focus of much of this book.

We will begin in London, at a moment of equipoise between old and new in the garment industry. To those who earned their livelihoods by buying and selling castoff clothing, the future appeared promising. The used-clothing markets in the East End of the city attracted a cacophonous throng of thousands of eager customers every weekend. A handful of clothing exchanges had recently opened their doors to local and foreign buyers, making the sale, purchase, and export of clothing more efficient. This early period is best understood as a prelude for what was to come, and for this reason chapter 1 provides a panoramic *tour d'horizon* of an economic world on the cusp of change. Chapter 2 compares early Jewish involvement in the clothing trade in England and in the United States. Whereas in England the secondhand trade appeared to provide an

advantageous platform for those who were inclined to experiment with new modes of producing and marketing clothing, in America collecting and reselling used clothing presented dimmer prospects for economic advancement. How, then, did Jews in the United States enter the business of making and selling new clothing? Chapter 3 shows that in America, peddling, clerking, and petty shopkeeping, rather than a familiarity with rags and tattered castoffs, were the keys to the kingdom of the clothing trade. Chapters 4 and 5 suggest that for all the efforts of Jews in America to catch up with their coreligionists across the Atlantic, they seemed, to outside observers at least, instead to be falling further behind when it came to the garment industry. Chapter 4 explores the early experiments in modern retailing and manufacturing of cheap ready-made clothing of Jewish entrepreneurs in England, who were well ahead of their counterparts in the United States. Chapter 5 examines the impact of the rapid growth of settler populations in South Africa, Canada, and especially Australia. New markets provided economies of scale for metropolitan producers and advantaged those—including a handful of Jews—who could integrate production, distribution, and retail. By 1850 it might appear that English Jews had an unassailable lead in the clothing industry over their kinsmen in America. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 explain how and why Jews in the United States were able to catch up with and then surpass those in England. Chapter 6 traces the evolution of Jewish involvement in the ready-made trade in the United States in the 1850s, paying particular attention to the many new opportunities presented by westward and southward expansion. Chapter 7 describes how the military economy created during the Civil War transformed the position of Jews in the US garment industry. Chapter 8 compares the expansive opportunities open to Jews involved in the clothing trade in America in the wake of the war with the more limited prospects of Jews in England. The conclusion explains why this earlier history matters for understanding Jewish economic mobility in the twentieth century. We will see that the garment industry became an enabling occupation for the shiploads of new immigrants who arrived in both England and America beginning in the 1880s, although it propelled them forward at different speeds. Building on the dynamic platform created by earlier generations of Jews, the eastern European newcomers who came to America advanced at a faster rate than those who settled into the ethnic niche established by Jews in England.

Such a future would have seemed unlikely—even fantastical—in 1843. A first-time visitor to London in that year might enter the metropolis feeling confident after having perused Cunningham’s authoritative guidebook, anticipating a day spent admiring the imposing sites of the imperial capital.²⁶ Little, though, could prepare the newcomer for the urban cacophony that awaited. Vendors and hawkers demanded notice for their “pine apples, a penny a slice,” “kearots,” and “sparrowgrass” (asparagus) and called out to attract customers’ attention: “Milk ho!” “Butcher!” and “Baker!” The old-clothes man, with his echoing chant of “old clo,” hoarsely competed for attention. Amid the parade of novelties, the figure of the Jewish collector of castoff clothing would have been familiar to any visitor from a provincial town, where Jewish peddlers were common both as itinerant collectors of castoffs and as familiar figures in folklore. And if our traveler came from abroad, she or he may well have encountered such men before, albeit announcing their trade in a different tongue. In this regard it would seem to make little difference whether our visitor arrived in London at the beginning, middle, or end of the nineteenth century or even a century earlier. The Jewish ragman, toting the sack that was the mark of his tattered fraternity, was seemingly a constant in a trade that appeared to many outsiders not to have changed at all since the distant past. This book argues otherwise.