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Jewish immigrants to both the U.S. and Britain found riches in the secondhand clothes trade.

Jewish merchants on New York's Lower East Side, ca. 1910.
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By Edward Kosner
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If you were a young Jewish immigrant from Central Europe to antebellum America, chances are good that you would wind up shouldering a bundle of cheap clothing for sale along the rutted dirt roads of the rural South or Midwest. The Lehman and Seligman brothers started that way en route to later grandeur as merchant bankers. Not all such lonely peddlers or their descendants ultimately struck it rich, especially on Wall Street, but enough of them did to create and dominate a great industry. They became cloak-and-suiters, and they wrote a compelling chapter in the success story of the Jews in America.

THE RAG RACE

By Adam D. Mendelsohn
NYU, 296 pages, $35

That's the saga that Adam Mendelsohn, a professor of Jewish studies at the College of Charleston, tells in "The Rag Race." Part social history, too much academic treatise, his book explores the question: What was it about the culture, religion, behavior and circumstances of these Jewish strangers that led them, literally, from rags to riches in an alien land?

He both clarifies the question and complicates the answer by comparing the story of the Jews in America with the parallel commercial history of their brethren in Great Britain. Both groups gained their footholds in a trade generally disdained by Christians: the collection and cleaning up (or "clobbering") of worn-out clothing and its resale to customers even further down the economic pecking order than the people who cast it off.

In the first decades of the 19th century, in both London's East End Jewish slums and on Chatham Street in New York's Lower East Side, raucous markets thrived where such clothing was hawked to bargain-hunting workers and their families or auctioned off to peddlers, who in turn flogged it in the hinterlands. The trade not only gave new life to threadbare jackets, trousers and shirts; it made a rich contribution to the English vocabulary.

The term "hand-me-down," Mr. Mendelsohn writes, derives from the practice of old-clothes dealers hanging their wares on tall wooden racks on the sidewalks. A customer would ask the seller to "hand-me-down" a pair of pants or patched jacket for closer inspection. "Slops" were originally rough uniforms worn by sailors or workmen. The adjective "shoddy" comes from cheap repurposed wool that was used as retrofitted insulation for flimsy jackets turned into winter wear.

Alas, such interesting glints are rare in Mr. Mendelsohn's pedestrian account. There are few direct quotations from letters or journals to animate these footsore pioneers of the rag trade. Instead the author offers a tediously detailed chronological account, concentrating on the years leading up to the Civil War. His explanation for why the immigrant Jews in America far outstripped those clustered in London turns out to be simple enough: Because England, Scotland and Wales occupy such a tight little island, British Jews in the garment trade never had to establish wide peddling networks that could later form the foundation of expanded business. Their only new markets were the British Empire's far-flung dominions and colonies, principally Australia and South Africa. But these outposts were long, dangerous ocean voyages from home, making ordering, financing and delivering goods hazardous.

The Jews in America came from the same Central European stock, but their experience was far different. Small and nimble workshops turning out new clothes in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Cincinnati stocked the peddlers who penetrated to the far reaches of the union, selling to slave master and slave alike, farmer and rancher. Then, in 1848, gold was discovered not far from Sacramento. California became El Dorado, not only for the few lucky prospectors among the thousands who thronged the mining camps but for the one-time peddlers who found gold in the miners' denim pockets. Kinship and past working relationships established the essential trust needed for these traders to do business a continent apart.

The South had been the prime market for New York clothing and other wares, which helped explain why there was so much sympathy for the Confederacy in Gotham when the Civil War broke out. Talk of ruin filled the sweatshops, but the war turned out to be a bonanza.

First the states of the North, for their militias, and then the federal government itself, for the consolidated Grand Army of the Republic, began placing mammoth rush orders for uniforms with New York clothing contractors. By the end of the war, Mr. Mendelsohn writes, the Quartermaster Department had acquired "astronomical quantities of clothing: over four million forage caps, six million pairs of trousers, eleven million shirts, and twenty million pairs of stockings." Much of this was left over after Appomattox and put up for auction—where it was bought for a pittance by many of the same Jews who had contracted to make it and then peddled back to the war's survivors.

The financial panics of the 1870s and 1880s devastated thousands of newly prosperous Jewish clothing manufacturers and merchants—as had antebellum upheavals—but war work put the Jewish-American clothing trade as a whole on a trajectory to undreamt of prosperity.

Good fortune struck again toward the turn of the new century. Eastern European Jews flooded New York and other East Coast cities in flight from the pogroms and other depredations that had been their fate for centuries in the old countries. Newly arrived, they became an instant source of cheap labor for the network of factories and smaller workshops run by their predecessors, now manufacturers, wholesalers, contractors, subcontractors and middle-man jobbers. Men's clothing had been the core of the Jewish garment industry, but now women's wear became the heart of the business, opening a vast new market that after World War I spread to Europe and beyond.

So, Mr. Mendelsohn concludes, a mix of ethnic bonds, patient toil, shrewd dealing and turns of fate—the California gold rush, the Civil War, the second wave of Eastern European immigration—propelled the Jews in America to success in the garment trade beyond the imagination of those in London and Leeds.

By focusing so intensely on the mid-19th century and devoting so many pages to Britain, the author shortchanges the general reader. Many aspects of what should be a fascinating story get scant mention or none at all. The saga of Levi Strauss, for instance, one of the few clothing firms to survive from the 19th to the 21st century, merits only a few lines. The great Chicago suit maker Hart Schaffner & Marx is listed, but Evan Picone and other fabled manufacturers go unmentioned. There's a bare sentence toward the end about Gimbels, Neiman Marcus and other Jewish-owned department stores that brought the output of Jewish cloak-and-suiters to a wider market.

In a sense, the designers Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein represent the apotheosis of the Jewish clothing ascendancy in the U.S. Lower-middle-class boys from the same Bronx neighborhood, they've made American fashion a global phenomenon and earned vast fortunes. They're not in Mr. Mendelsohn's book either, but they deserve to be.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News and the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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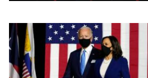
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