

BEING AMERICAN

The Many Jewish Roots of Everyday American Life

JONATHAN SAPIR

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HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

A Note from the Author

Every Jewish family plays the same game. Somebody on television does something wonderful, and a voice from the couch says: you know he's one of us. A singer, a pitcher, the man who invented the thing in your hand. We call them MOTs, Members of the Tribe, and we are always on the lookout for another one.

This is a whole bookful of them. Checked.

I didn't set out to write an illustrated book. After October 2023 I wanted to do something useful for my community, and the thing I know is history. I studied Jewish history at the Hebrew University, and I have lived in America since 1985. So I spent two years researching Jewish contributions to America. The result ran to six hundred pages, covered eighty corners of American life, and read like an encyclopedia.

Somewhere along the way I realized that a list was the wrong way to tell it, and that the voice from the couch had the right idea. It is not that these people handed something to America. It is that so much of what America is, the jeans, the songs, the shot, the Saturday night, started at one of their kitchen tables, and nobody remembers. So I started over. I took the most surprising and joyful of those stories and paired each one with a painting, to make a book a family could flip through on a Sunday afternoon, grandparents and grandchildren together, finding out where the everyday things came from and saying, every few pages, you know he's one of us.

That is why it is called Being American. Not what Jewish Americans gave America, but how much of everyday American life grew from Jewish roots.

I hope you enjoy the walk as much as I enjoyed finding the way.

Jonathan Sapir, Chicago

LOOK AROUND THE ROOM

Introduction

Take a look around. The jeans you have on. The ***Superman*** pajamas in the kids' drawer, the ***Barbie*** under the bed, the bagel on the counter. The ***EpiPen*** in the school nurse's drawer, Saturday night TV. Hum a few bars of ***White Christmas***, or call somebody's nerve chutzpah, and you are already deep in the story this book tells.

A great many of the things that feel most plainly American were made by people who had arrived a generation or two earlier from the far side of the world with nothing, or by their children. They did not set out to make something Jewish. They set out to make something that would sell in Cincinnati. What they made became the furniture of the country, and the country stopped noticing where it came from. Nobody thinks of a pair of ***Levi's*** as a Jewish contribution. They think of it as America.

That is the point. A contribution is something you hand over from outside. These are roots: stories that went underground, into the kitchen, the medicine cabinet and the toy box, until nobody remembered where they started. Some pages dig up a forgotten origin, like the shopping cart. Some take a thing everybody knows, like Superman, and put it back where it came from. A few things were made in Israel, and the page says how they got into your car or your phone. The test for every page is the same: is it part of an ordinary American day?

When this book says "roots," it means the spark: the founder, the inventor, the creative force behind something new. Many had partners, and the book names them. A name in bold belongs to someone Jewish; a name in plain type is not claimed. The spark was Jewish, and what grew from it belongs to every American.

Two things this book does not claim. It does not claim these people built the republic; most of them came later, through a door at the bottom of Manhattan, and what they helped build was the modern country, the one you live in. And it does not claim anyone it could not check: a person is here if a mother or father was Jewish, or the person converted, and the record says so. That is the book's rule, not a religious ruling.

Why it happened is the next page. The short answer is that the door was open.

The pictures take you back to the moment the root took hold: the drawing board in a Cleveland bedroom, the kitchen table, the basement lab. Look for the one bright thing in each picture. Read the book in any order; every page stands on its own.

These aren't distant achievements to admire. They're part of the fabric of American life. For Jewish children, they're also an inheritance and a reason to be proud. It's a book for parents and grandparents to share, to start conversations, and to come back to again and again.

So this is not a scorecard. It is a walk through your own house, pointing at things you already own.



THE JOBS, THE CITY AND THE DOOR

Why It Happened

How did so much of one country come out of one small crowd of immigrants? Three plain reasons, and none of them is magic.

The first is that the old jobs were shut. In the Europe they left, and for a good while in the America they came to, the law firms, the big banks, the universities and the old companies had a sign on the door, sometimes written down and usually not. So they went where there was no door yet. Nobody was guarding the movies in 1910; a storefront, a bedsheet and a projector cost less than a horse. Nobody was guarding comic books, or the record business, or ready-made suits, or paperbacks, or television. A new industry has no old boys. Anyone can be the first one in, and a lot of them were.

The second is the city. They landed in New York and Chicago and stayed there, packed into a few square miles with a sewing machine in every window and a cousin on every block who knew somebody. A crowded neighborhood is a poor place to sleep and a wonderful place to start something. You can find a partner, a lender, a customer and a rival before lunch.

The third is the door. America let them in, let them try, let them fail, and let them keep what they made. For most of them, nobody had done that before. The years when the door closed are at the back of this book, and they are part of the story too.

That is the short version. No special gift, no secret recipe. A people shut out of the old rooms, living on top of each other in the new ones, in a country that mostly left them alone to work. Then look at what came out.

FROM THE ALARM CLOCK TO THE LIGHTS OUT

An American Day



MORNING Jeans 105 · Bagel 94 · Coffee 101 · EpiPen 151 · Yogurt 99



DAYTIME Spreadsheet 181 · Google 183 · Salesforce 178 · Waze 171 · Shopping cart 121 · WhatsApp 185



EVENING Slow cooker 234 · Sitcom 37 · Sportscaster 87 · Bedtime story 71 · Facebook 184

Morning, daytime and evening: an ordinary American day is full of things with a story behind them. The number beside each one is the page where its story is told. Start anywhere.



PART I

American Mythology

Every country has its gods. America's wear capes and carry shields and say What's up, Doc, and a good many of them were invented in the 1930s and 40s by young men from Cleveland and the Bronx who couldn't get other jobs. This part is about the heroes on the lunchbox, the rabbit on Saturday morning, the doll, the soldier, the reindeer, the words on the statue in the harbor and the songs on the radio in December, and the people who dreamed them up.



THE BOY FROM CLEVELAND WHO COULD FLY

Superman

In 1938 two sons of Jewish immigrants from Cleveland, **Jerry Siegel** and **Joe Shuster**, sold a comic strip about a man in a cape for a hundred and thirty dollars, and American mythology got its first superhero. Every hero since with a cape, a secret identity and a day job is measured against him. Faster than a speeding bullet, truth, justice and the American way, and kryptonite, the word for the one thing that can beat you, all came from him within a few years, on the radio and in the cartoons.

They had started in 1933, two shy high-school boys drawing in Siegel's bedroom. They gave their hero a dying planet, Krypton, parents who put their baby in a little ship to save him, and a passing motorist who took him to an orphanage, where he grew up to save everybody else; the Kansas farm came later. Many readers see Moses in it, the baby in a basket on the Nile. For four years every publisher turned him down. Then a new company put him in ***Action Comics*** No. 1, and it sold out.

Inside three years he had a radio show and a cartoon. The comic book became an industry, built on him. In 1978 he got the big movie, and the poster promised you would believe a man could fly. Under the S is the oldest American story there is: an orphan from far away, raised on a farm, who passes for ordinary and turns out to be the best of us.

Siegel and Shuster had signed away the rights with the check. In 1975, before the movie, Warner gave them a pension and their names on every ***Superman*** story since. The pajamas are still in the drawer.



THE ONE WITHOUT POWERS

Batman

In 1939 two young men from the Bronx, **Bob Kane**, born Robert Kahn, and **Bill Finger**, a shoe salesman who wanted to write, made the hero with no powers: a rich man with a grudge, a cape and a very good car, who cannot fly and so needs the belt, the cave and the money. He has been played by more actors than any hero going, and every child since has had an opinion on whether he could beat ***Superman***. Finger did most of the inventing. Kane got the credit.

DC Comics wanted another *Superman*, and Kane went home for the weekend and sketched a man in red tights with stiff bat wings. Finger turned the wings into a scalloped cape and the red to gray, pulled a cowl over the face, and gave the man a name, ***Bruce Wayne***, after Robert the Bruce, and a city, ***Gotham***, which he found flipping through the phone book and spotting *Gotham* Jewelers. **Finger** wrote the ***Batmobile***, created ***Robin*** with **Jerry Robinson**, and is credited with helping create the ***Joker***, whose face he clipped from a photograph of the actor Conrad Veidt in *The Man Who Laughs*.

The 1966 television show, with its Pow and Biff on the screen, made camp a household word. In 1989 Tim Burton made him dark again and the movies have not stopped since; a costume and a grudge can be handed to any actor. Kane's contract gave him sole credit, and he kept it. Finger died in 1974 with his name on nothing.

In 2015, after his granddaughter took up the case, Finger's name went on the title card of every film. It was a settlement, not a verdict, and fans still argue about who invented ***Batman***.



WITH GREAT POWER

Spider-Man

In 1962 the first teenager in a mask who was nobody's sidekick was co-created by **Stan Lee**, born **Stanley Lieber** on West 98th Street to Romanian Jewish immigrants, and the artist Steve Ditko: a boy from Queens who swings between skyscrapers and still has homework, a sick aunt and rent to pay. Superheroes have had rent to pay ever since. The caption on the last page of his first story, that with great power there must also come great responsibility, has been on a million T-shirts, and the 2002 film opened bigger than any film had before it.

Lee had been writing comics since he was eighteen, and in 1961, about to quit, was told by his wife to write one the way he wanted. With **Jack Kirby** he made the ***Fantastic Four***, a family that argued. Then came the spider. The publisher hated it; people don't like spiders, he said. So it went into ***Amazing Fantasy*** No. 15, a comic being cancelled anyway, so nobody cared what went in. Ditko drew him thin and nervous and covered the whole face, because the one under it was so obviously a boy's.

The sales report came back and the publisher wanted to know where the spider kid had got to; by March 1963 he had his own comic. Because the mask covers everything, any kid of any color could be the one inside it, and the line about power and responsibility is an old idea, older than comics: if you can, you must.

Lee wrote the ***Hulk***, ***Thor***, ***Iron Man***, ***Doctor Strange*** and the ***X-Men*** in the same three years, turned the letters page into a club, and spent thirty years popping up in the movies for two seconds at a time.



THE HOUSE OF IDEAS

Marvel

In 1939 **Martin Goodman**, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, added a comics line called ***Timely*** to his pulp-magazine business, and the few rooms in midtown Manhattan where it was kept going because comics were cheap to make became ***Marvel***, the biggest movie franchise there has ever been. The house style, heroes with problems, took over the comic book and then the multiplex. Nearly forty films later, the side business has eaten the business.

Goodman published whatever sold. ***Marvel Comics*** No. 1 brought in the ***Human Torch*** and the ***Sub-Mariner*** and sold about eight hundred thousand copies. He hired his wife's cousin, a teenager named **Stan Lee**, to fill the inkwells. In 1961, hearing on a golf course that a rival's superhero team was selling, he told Lee to make one. Lee and **Jack Kirby** made the ***Fantastic Four***, and Kirby drew the Thing, the orange brick of a man with the soft heart, as himself: a tough kid from the Lower East Side.

One young artist remembered walking into the office on his first day and finding Lee standing on his desk, acting out how a *Marvel* comic should be done. The ***X-Men*** arrived in 1963, teenagers born different, feared by the world and saving it anyway, at a school run by a bald man in a wheelchair. They flopped, came back in 1975 with a new team, and by the 1980s every kid who did not fit in had found them.

Goodman sold the company in 1968. It went bankrupt in 1996. **Avi Arad** and **Ike Perlmutter**, two Israeli-born men from the toy business, bought it out of bankruptcy and in 2008, borrowing against the characters themselves, made ***Iron Man*** on their own. Disney paid four billion dollars the next year.



A PUNCH BEFORE PEARL HARBOR

Captain America

In December 1940, a year before Pearl Harbor, **Joe Simon**, a tailor's son from Rochester, and **Jack Kirby**, from the Lower East Side, put a hero in the stars and stripes on a comic-book cover punching Adolf Hitler on the jaw. It sold close to a million copies. The skinny kid turned down by the Army who volunteers for an experiment and comes out strong has been the most decent man in the Marvel universe ever since, and the round striped shield has been the most recognizable thing on a lunchbox.

Simon and Kirby had read the newspapers and made up their minds before the country did. Simon thought of calling him Super American, then dropped it because there were too many Supers around. The boy partner was named ***Bucky***, after a star of Simon's high school basketball team. When the first issue came out, threatening letters came in, a crowd gathered outside the office, the police stood guard, and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia telephoned to say the city was behind them.

A rival publisher complained that the first shield looked like its own hero's, so the round one came in with the second issue. Both men went to the war they had drawn. Simon joined the Coast Guard; Kirby was drafted, and in Europe the Army sent him ahead of the line to draw maps of the towns, because he could draw. The character faded after the war and came back in 1964, frozen in ice and thawed out, which is how the movies found him: a man from 1945 who still means it.

The country caught up with them a year later.



WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Looney Tunes

From 1936 to the 1980s the sound of Saturday morning in America came out of one man's throat. **Mel Blanc**, born in San Francisco, voiced ***Bugs Bunny***, ***Daffy Duck***, ***Porky Pig***, ***Tweety***, ***Sylvester***, ***Foghorn Leghorn***, ***Yosemite Sam***, ***Speedy Gonzales*** and the ***Tasmanian Devil***, the man of a thousand voices, as he was billed, and half the voices a grown American can still do on request are his, the lisp and the stutter and the rabbit. By 1945 ***Bugs Bunny***, wisecracking and a little Brooklyn, was the most popular cartoon character in America, and soldiers painted him on their planes.

Blanc was a radio actor who spent 1935 being turned away from the ***Warner Bros.*** cartoon studio by a man who said they had all the voices they needed. In 1936 the man was out sick one day; the studio's sound editor Treg Brown gave him the audition, and Blanc was in the door by December. The studio, which made ***Looney Tunes*** from 1930, was run by **Leon Schlesinger**, who could not draw and did not care, and its directors included **Friz Freleng**, from Kansas City, who would win five Oscars, and Tex Avery and Chuck Jones, who shaped the characters.

Blanc became *Porky Pig* first, then ***Daffy***, then, in ***A Wild Hare*** in 1940, a rabbit who leaned on a tree, chewed a carrot and asked What's up, Doc? Avery said it was just something people said back home in Texas. Blanc hated carrots and spat them out between takes, because nothing else made the right crunch. When Schlesinger refused him a raise, he asked for a screen credit instead, and Voice Characterization by Mel Blanc ran from 1944, and on every cartoon he voiced by 1946. On television he was ***Barney Rubble*** too.

His gravestone says That's all, folks.



THE DOLL WITH NO PAST

Barbie

In March 1959 **Ruth Handler**, the tenth child of Polish Jewish immigrants in Denver and a founder of ***Mattel***, brought a doll in a striped swimsuit to the New York Toy Fair with a first name and nothing else: no accent, no past, a girl from nowhere who could be anything. The toy buyers hated her. About three hundred and fifty thousand sold the first year, and then came the ***Dreamhouse***, the car and the careers, astronaut in 1965, surgeon, president, and the argument about whether the doll is a liberator or a cage.

Ruth and her husband **Elliot** had started *Mattel* in a garage. She noticed that their daughter **Barbara** ignored the baby dolls and played for hours with paper dolls of grown women, and thought a girl might want a doll that was what she would become rather than what she would look after. On a trip to Switzerland in 1956 she found a German doll named Lilli, a joke gift for men, bought three, and had the engineers make her over. She named the doll for her daughter and, later, the boyfriend for her son.

A full name and a hometown, Willows, Wisconsin, were invented later for the novels. In 2023 a film about her made more money than any film about a toy ever had, and argued the question again. Ruth's answer was that a girl could be anything; the shadow in the pink, the measurements, the blankness, the price of the *Dreamhouse*, is the other half. Both are true. Somewhere right now a girl is lining up her dolls and deciding which one is the doctor.

Later in life Ruth Handler started a second company, making breast forms for women after surgery, and sold those herself too.



NOT A DOLL

G.I. Joe

In 1964 ***Hasbro***, the Providence toy company of the **Hassenfeld** family, Jewish immigrants from Poland, put out a twelve-inch soldier a boy could dress and pose, and gave the world two new words. Everyone in the business believed boys would never play with a doll, so **Don Levine**, the company's creative director, and **Stan Weston**, the agent who brought him the idea, called it an action figure instead. ***G.I. Joe*** was the first. Every Star Wars trooper, wrestler and Ninja Turtle since is one too.

Hassenfeld Brothers had started in 1923 selling textile remnants, moved on to pencil boxes and school supplies, and by the 1950s was in toys; ***Mr. Potato Head***, in 1952, is often called the first toy advertised on television. In 1963 Weston walked in with the soldier idea and Levine, who had served in Korea, built it: twenty-one moving parts, a uniform for each service, and a scar on the right cheek so nobody else could copy him.

Merrill Hassenfeld, the president, forbade the word doll in the building. The figure went on sale in 1964 with no face on the box, just the name, and by the next Christmas he was most of what *Hasbro* sold. When the Vietnam years made soldiers hard to sell, ***Joe*** became an adventurer with a beard and a kung-fu grip. In 1982 he came back at three and three-quarter inches with a cartoon that ended every episode with a line a generation can finish: knowing is half the battle.

Boys had always had toy soldiers, green and anonymous and a hundred to a bag. *Hasbro* gave them one with a name, a face and a story. He is still called *Joe*, which is what the Army called everybody.



THE MISFIT WHO LIT THE WAY

Rudolph

In 1939 **Robert May**, a copywriter at Montgomery Ward in Chicago, wrote a giveaway booklet about a reindeer with a shiny nose, laughed at and left out of the games, who on one foggy night turns out to be the only one who can do the job. Ten years later his brother-in-law **Johnny Marks**, a songwriter, turned it into a song. Gene Autry's record has sold more than twelve million copies, the 1964 stop-motion special is the one your children know, and ***Rudolph*** comes on in the supermarket every December and you know every word.

May was broke, with a four-year-old daughter named Barbara, when the store asked him for a Christmas booklet. He had been picked on as a boy, and he wrote about an animal nobody wanted, and read the drafts to Barbara. He considered calling him Rollo, and then Reginald. Ward's gave away nearly two and a half million copies that Christmas, and in 1947 the company's president, Sewell Avery, handed May the copyright for nothing, which is not how companies usually behave.

Marks, from Mount Vernon, New York, wrote the song in 1949. Autry turned it down until his wife changed his mind, then sang it to the top of the charts. There is a reading in which the one with the odd nose, kept out of the games until the night the others need him, is a story the writer knew from somewhere. May never said so, and it may be only a story about a reindeer.



THE WORDS ON THE STATUE

The Poem

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. They are the most famous lines in America, written in 1883 by **Emma Lazarus**, from a Sephardic Jewish family that had been in New York since the 1700s, for a statue that was not meant as a welcome at all: a French sculptor had made her as a Roman goddess, Libertas, cold and classical. Lazarus gave the harbor a Mother of Exiles instead. From the day her plaque went inside the pedestal, the statue stopped being a monument and became a greeting. Every immigrant's grandchild can say the lines, presidents quote them, and arguments about who gets in still end up at that plaque.

The French paid for the statue, the Americans were slow paying for the pedestal, and the committee asked writers for poems to auction. Lazarus had spent the previous year on Ward's Island helping newcomers from Russia. Her sonnet begins by refusing the Colossus of Rhodes, a sun god straddling a harbor. Behind it is a commandment her people had read aloud every year: love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt; the Talmud counts the Torah saying it thirty-six times. She called it ***The New Colossus***.

The portfolio it went into sold at the auction for fifteen hundred dollars, and the poet James Russell Lowell wrote to tell her he liked her sonnet about the statue much better than he liked the statue. Then for twenty years the poem was all but forgotten. Lazarus died at thirty-eight, and a friend found the poem in a bookshop in 1901 and got the plaque placed in 1903.

A woman from New York turned a Roman goddess into the lady with the lamp.



THE OTHER NATIONAL ANTHEM

God Bless America

In 1918 **Irving Berlin**, born **Israel Beilin**, a cantor's son whose Jewish family had come from Russia when he was five, wrote ***God Bless America*** for an army camp show and cut it. Twenty years later he took it out of the trunk and gave it to Kate Smith to sing on the radio, and it never left. It is the other national anthem, sung at the seventh-inning stretch and on the Fourth of July, and on the evening of September 11, 2001, Congress sang it on the Capitol steps without being asked.

Berlin left home at thirteen to sing for pennies on the Bowery, and by 1911 had the biggest hit in the country. He never learned to read music and played only on the black keys, on pianos with a lever that changed the key for him. Drafted in 1918, a thirty-year-old sergeant at Camp Upton on Long Island, he wrote a soldier show called ***Yip Yip Yaphank***, sang ***Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning*** in it himself, and wrote the song for the finale. Then he cut it as too solemn for the show.

In 1938, with Europe going dark, he changed two lines and gave it to Kate Smith for Armistice Day. In 1940 it was the campaign song of both Franklin Roosevelt and his Republican opponent, Wendell Willkie. Berlin gave every royalty to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of New York. It is a prayer, written by a man who had arrived from Russia at five.

Asked what Berlin's place in American music was, **Jerome Kern** said he had none. He was American music.



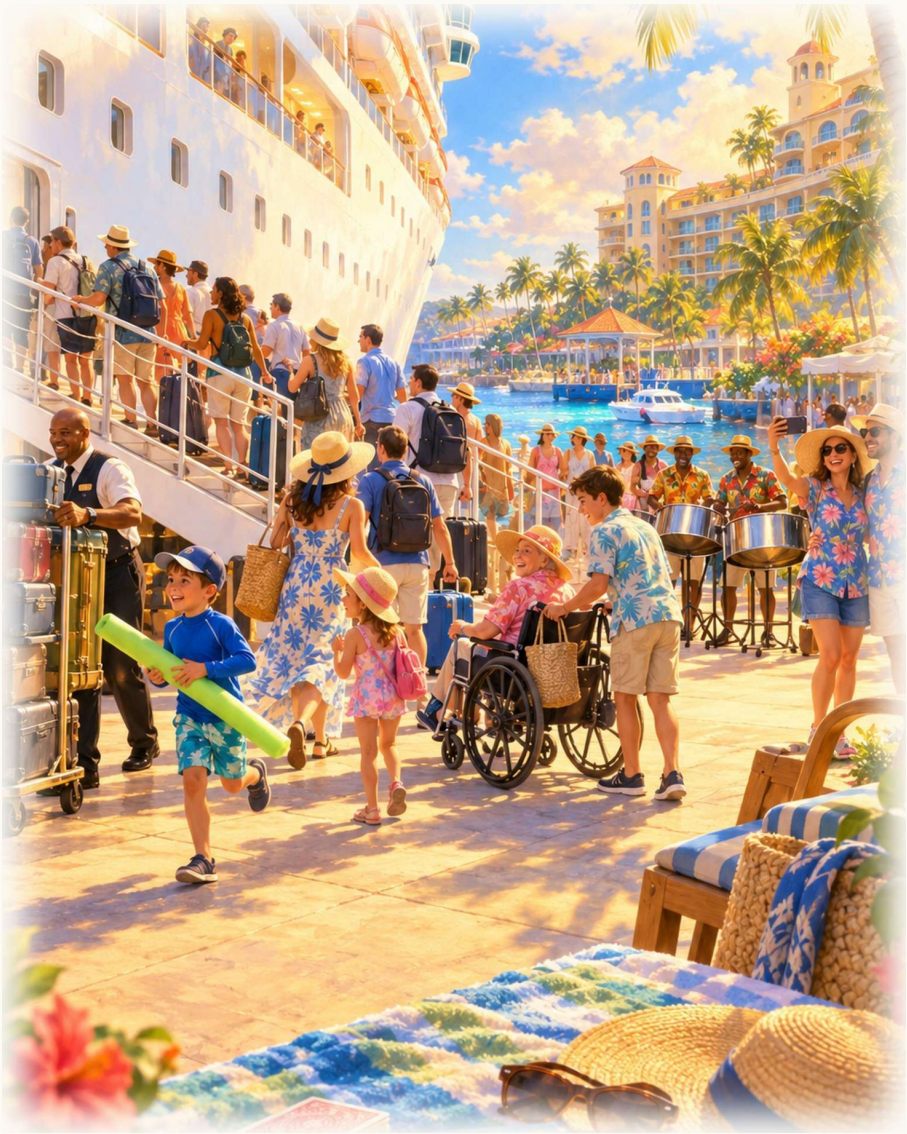
THE SONGS IN THE MALL IN DECEMBER

The Christmas Songs

Walk through a mall in December and count them: ***White Christmas***, ***Let It Snow***, ***Silver Bells***, ***The Christmas Song***, ***Santa Baby***, ***Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree***. Several of the best-known Christmas songs in America were written in the 1940s and 50s by Jewish songwriters who did not keep the holiday, **Irving Berlin**, **Sammy Cahn** and **Jule Styne**, **Mel Tormé**, **Jay Livingston** and **Ray Evans**, **Joan Javits**, **Johnny Marks**, and they gave it the part everybody shares: the snow, the bells, the tree, the drive home. Bing Crosby's record of *White Christmas* is the best-selling single of all time.

Berlin, who has his own page, wrote *White Christmas* in 1940; there is no manger in it, only snow, a card and a memory of home, which anybody can have. In July 1945, in the hottest week of the year, Cahn and Styne were sitting in Cahn's apartment in Los Angeles. Cahn suggested the beach. Styne said let's write a winter song instead, and by evening they had *Let It Snow*, which never mentions Christmas and is played nowhere but at Christmas. The same summer Tormé, nineteen, walked in on his writing partner trying to cool off by scribbling about chestnuts roasting on an open fire, and wrote *The Christmas Song* in forty minutes.

Livingston and Evans wrote *Silver Bells*, which began as Tinkle Bells until Livingston's wife asked whether they knew what tinkle meant. Javits wrote *Santa Baby* with two partners, and Eartha Kitt's 1953 record still comes on every year. Marks, who wrote the ***Rudolph*** song, wrote *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree*, which Brenda Lee recorded at thirteen. Nobody planned any of it. The songwriters worked in New York and Hollywood, where the music business was, and December was a market.



PART XVI

Leisure

The week off. The cruise ship, the casino, the hotel on the beach, the summer hotels in the mountains and the comedian on their stage, the deck of cards, the dance lesson, the joystick, the baseball card in the bicycle spokes. Americans turned the vacation into a mass product, and a few of the people who sold it, and a few who made the toys, are here. This part is about what you do when you're not working.



WHAT HAPPENS THERE

Las Vegas

In 1989 **Steve Wynn**, born Stephen Weinberg, opened the ***Mirage*** with a volcano out front, and ten years later **Sheldon Adelson**, the son of Jewish immigrants in Boston, opened the ***Venetian*** with canals and gondoliers. Between them they helped turn a gambling town in the desert into a resort, where the show, the restaurant and the art were the point and the tables paid for them, and into the convention capital of the country. Forty million people visit every year, and the fountain, the buffet, the gondola and the trade show all belong to the city they rebuilt.

Wynn had run his late father's bingo parlor in Maryland. He took over the Golden Nugget downtown, cleaned it up, and then bet everything on the *Mirage*, the first big new resort on the Strip in sixteen years; the volcano erupted every evening until the Mirage closed in 2024. In 1998 he opened the ***Bellagio***, with a lake and a fountain that dances to music, and hung Picassos and van Goghs in a gallery off the lobby.

Adelson, a cabdriver's son from Dorchester, had started the computer trade show ***COMDEX***, so he knew what a convention needs. He honeymooned in Venice with his wife, **Miriam**, in 1991, came home, tore down the old Sands, where Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack had played, and in 1999 opened the *Venetian* on the spot, with more meeting space than almost any hotel in the country; with its sister tower it now holds about seven thousand rooms. Plenty of Americans have seen a gondola on the way to a sales meeting.



THE FUN SHIP

The Cruise

In 1972 **Ted Arison**, an Israeli who had lost one shipping business already, bought a secondhand liner in Miami, renamed it the ***Mardi Gras***, and founded ***Carnival***. Where the old liners were for the rich, his ***Fun Ships*** were for everyone: cheap cabins, a casino, a buffet, a band by the pool. More than thirty million people take a cruise every year, most of them on a ship with a water slide, and the week at sea for the price of a week at home is **Arison**'s ***Carnival***, sold to a country that had thought ships were for other people. *Carnival* is now the biggest cruise company in the world.

Arison had served in the British Army's Jewish Brigade and the Israeli army, and had run a shipping business in Israel and lost it. In Miami, with almost nothing, he co-founded ***Norwegian Caribbean Line*** in 1966 with the Norwegian shipowner Knut Kloster, and fell out with him. On the *Mardi Gras*'s first voyage, with three hundred travel agents on board, it ran aground on a sandbar off Miami Beach and sat there a day while the newspapers made jokes. The agents had enjoyed themselves and sold the ship anyway.

The port of Miami on a Saturday, six ships loading at once, is the sandbar's revenge. He left the city two gifts. In 1987 he paid to start the ***New World Symphony***, a training orchestra led by **Michael Tilson Thomas**, and in 1988 brought the city its basketball team, the ***Miami Heat***, which his son **Micky** owns today. He went home to Israel and died in 1999.

Somewhere off Miami tonight a band is playing by the pool, for people who once thought ships were for other people.



A ROOM WITH EVERYTHING IN IT

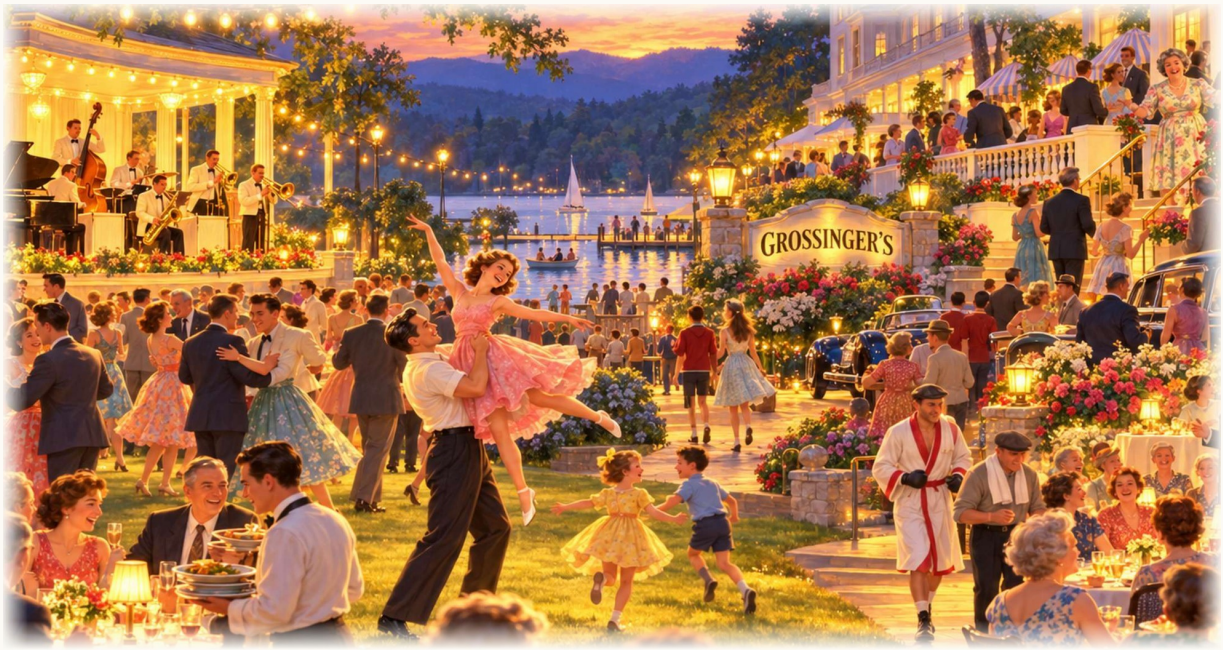
The Hotel

The little bottle of shampoo by the sink, the big cotton towel, the fat white bed: a good hotel feels like a small vacation, even on a business trip, and a few Jewish hotel men put it there on purpose. **Isadore Sharp**'s ***Four Seasons***, he said, was the first to put shampoo in the bathroom. The **Pritzkers** of Chicago took one airport motel and grew it into ***Hyatt***, the name over the door in cities across the country and around the world. **Barry Sternlicht** gave *Westin* the ***Heavenly Bed*** in 1999, and now most good hotel beds in America are white and fat and the one at home looks thin by comparison.

Sharp, the son of immigrants from Poland, grew up in Toronto working for his builder father, and in 1961 opened his first hotel, a motor hotel on Jarvis Street in a rough part of town, where the land was cheap. His rule: treat guests like company at home. The shampoo he credited to growing up with three sisters, and he gave guests big cotton towels when others worried they would be stolen.

In 1957 **Jay Pritzker** of Chicago, waiting for a plane in Los Angeles, noticed how busy the airport coffee shop was and bought it, with the motel next door, the ***Hyatt House***, for $2.2 million. Ten years later the family opened its first Hyatt Regency, in Atlanta, and the Regency name spread from there. Sternlicht ran ***Starwood***, launched ***W Hotels*** in 1998, and modeled the ten-layer *Heavenly Bed* on his own at home. The industry thought he was nuts. Guests started buying them to take home.

Sharp put the shampoo there because he grew up with three sisters. Sternlicht copied his own bed.



NOBODY PUTS BABY IN A CORNER

The Catskills

In 1914 **Jennie Grossinger**'s parents, Austrian Jewish immigrants, bought a failing farm in Sullivan County, ninety miles from New York, and took in boarders, and out of farmhouses like it came a whole style of American family vacation in the 1950s: the lake, the dining room the size of a hangar, the comedian in the nightclub, the dance lesson, the summer romance. You have seen it even if you never went, because ***Dirty Dancing*** was set there. Many of the comedians on the Stand-Up page, and **Danny Kaye** too, learned to work a room in the Catskills, and the rhythm of the American comedy routine was tuned in those dining rooms between the soup and the roast.

Jennie, who had left school at thirteen to sew buttonholes, ran the place for fifty years and turned it into ***Grossinger's***: a golf course, an ice rink, a nightclub, three meals a day of astonishing size, and a staff that included Rocky Marciano training for a title fight. In 1952 it became the first resort to make its own snow, so the guests could ski even when the winter would not cooperate. The ***Concord***, down the road, had the world's largest dining room and booked everyone.

In 1949 **Eddie Cantor** heard a young singer named **Eddie Fisher** at *Grossinger's* and put him on his radio show, and soon the whole country was listening. The hotels faded with the jet plane and air conditioning; the last, ***Kutsher's***, closed in 2013, and a casino stands where the *Concord* was. The all-inclusive resort with the buffet and the show, wherever you take it now, is, in good part, a Catskills hotel with a beach.

A failing farm took in boarders, and a whole style of family vacation came out of its dining room.



ONE PERSON, ONE MICROPHONE

Stand-Up

Around 1960 **Lenny Bruce**, a club comic from Long Island, threw out the joke book in the clubs of San Francisco and Los Angeles and talked about religion, race, sex and the police the way people talked at the kitchen table. **Mort Sahl** had begun talking instead of telling jokes a few years before; **Bruce** took it further, and the words that shocked the clubs then are on cable at eight now. A brick wall, a stool, a microphone and one person who is either about to be very funny or about to bomb: the comedy special you watched last night, whoever was on it, is **Bruce**'s nightclub with better lighting.

In Greenwich Village, **Joan Molinsky**, from Brooklyn, working as **Joan Rivers** at the *Bitter End* and the *Gaslight*, auditioned for *The Tonight Show* seven times in three years. On February 17, 1965, she finally got on, and Johnny Carson told her she was going to be a star. Can we talk? Rivers talked for fifty years. **Rodney Dangerfield**, born **Jacob Cohen**, got no respect, and in 1969 opened his own club in Manhattan so he would have somewhere to work.

Dangerfield's club is where **Jerry Seinfeld** and a generation after him taped their HBO specials, and Seinfeld turned the small observation about nothing in particular into a craft. **Billy Crystal**, **Jon Stewart**, **Sarah Silverman** and **Adam Sandler** came up the same way, and so did many of the writers of ***Saturday Night*** Live.



THE GAMES ON THE KITCHEN TABLE

Game Night

The spinner and the little plastic car, the rack of numbered tiles, the punching robots: many of the games on the kitchen table were invented by Jewish toy men who never stopped playing. **Reuben Klamer** made ***The Game of Life*** in 1960 with Bill Markham, and it has sold more than fifty million copies; a generation of American children learned what a mortgage was from a spinner. **Ephraim Hertzano**'s ***Rummikub*** was the best-selling game in America in 1977. **Charles Goren** made the bridge point count famous, and it is still what your grandmother taught you. And ***Marvin Glass & Associates*** of Chicago gave the toy aisle ***Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots*** and ***Lite-Brite***.

Klamer, from Canton, Ohio, was asked by *Milton Bradley* to make something for the company's hundredth anniversary; he found the founder's 1860 *Checkered Game of Life* in the archives and turned it into the spinner and the little cars full of pegs. Hertzano, a Romanian immigrant in Israel, invented *Rummikub* in the 1940s, and he and his family made the first sets by hand in their backyard and sold them door to door. Goren, known as Mr. Bridge, took the point count of Milton Work, which told anyone what their hand was worth, taught it to the country, and made the cover of *Time* in 1958.

Marvin Glass, founded in 1941, invented toys in secret in a locked building with barred windows and licensed them to the big companies. Klamer never stopped: he made a hula hoop with Art Linkletter's name on it, a walking toy dog called ***Gaylord***, and, when Gene Roddenberry asked him for a big gun for *Star Trek*, the phaser rifle.

Klamer's spinner is still turning, one little car full of pegs at a time.



THE PRESIDENT'S BEAR

The Teddy Bear

After Theodore Roosevelt's much-publicized bear hunt in November 1902, **Morris Michtom**, a Jewish immigrant from Russia who sold candy in Brooklyn, and his wife, **Rose**, set a little plush cub in their shop window with a sign that said "***Teddy's bear***," and the ***American teddy bear*** was born; it sold, and so did the next one. Generations of American children have slept next to one since: bald at the ears, missing an eye, too loved to throw away. The name is American, and much of the world uses it. The bears grew into the ***Ideal Novelty and Toy Company***, which later made the Shirley Temple doll and brought the Rubik's Cube to American stores.

Roosevelt had gone bear hunting in Mississippi. His guides cornered a bear and tied it to a tree, and the president refused to shoot it. The cartoonist Clifford Berryman drew the scene for *The Washington Post*, and the bear got smaller and cuter with each version. Rose sewed the cub at night, after the candy store on Tompkins Avenue closed. The family says they wrote to Roosevelt for permission. Independently, in Germany, Richard Steiff designed a jointed bear for his aunt Margarete's company in 1902, and it was shown at the Leipzig fair in 1903.

One of ***Ideal***'s first bears, made around 1903, was given to the Smithsonian in 1964 by the Roosevelt family, and it is still there. **Beatrice Alexander** grew up on the Lower East Side around her stepfather's doll hospital on Grand Street; in 1923 she borrowed $1,600 and started her own company, and as **Madame Alexander** she made dolls of the four March sisters, Scarlett O'Hara and the Dionne quintuplets, which grandmothers still hand down.

A president refused to shoot a bear, and a candy seller's wife sewed one. More than a century later, it is still on the bed.



THE FOOTPRINTS ON THE FLOOR

The Dance Studio

In 1920 **Arthur Murray**, born **Moses Teichman**, the son of an Austrian Jewish baker on the Lower East Side, drew dance steps as numbered footprints on paper, sold the diagrams for a dollar in the back pages of magazines, and five million people bought them. Then he put the footprints on the floors of real studios and franchised the studios, hundreds of them, in cities across America. Many of the weddings where the groom knew what to do, and many of the studios in strip malls with a sign that says ballroom, go back to a shy boy who was afraid to ask, and a couple that takes six lessons before the wedding is standing on his footprints, one, two, three.

Teichman was so awkward that he learned the waltz at a settlement house because it was the only way he could think of to talk to a girl. He got good, and changed his name when German names became unpopular in wartime. The footprints, numbered, let anyone learn the foxtrot by standing on them.

In 1942 Johnny Mercer wrote a song about him, *Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing in a Hurry*. In 1950 he and his wife, **Kathryn**, took the lessons to television, and for ten years America watched a man in a tuxedo teach a nervous couple the cha-cha on a Sunday night, on a show that ran at one time or another on all four networks. His slogan was on every bus: put a little fun in your life, try dancing. The studios are still there, with his name over the door.

A boy too shy to talk to a girl taught a country where to put its feet.



THE BROWN BOX

Video Games

In 1966 **Ralph Baer**, a television engineer who had come from Germany with his Jewish family in 1938, wrote a four-page memo proposing that people should be able to play games on their TV sets, and built the ***Brown Box***, which *Magnavox* sold in 1972 as the ***Odyssey***, the first home video game console. The controller in your child's hands, the console under the set and the argument about whose turn it is all run back to that memo. Baer also co-invented ***Simon***, the memory game with four colored buttons, in 1978, which is still beeping in toy aisles.

Baer was at *Sanders Associates* in New Hampshire, which built radar for the Navy, when he wrote the memo. His boss gave him twenty-five hundred dollars and told him to keep it quiet. He built the box, covered in brown tape, with two colleagues. The *Odyssey* made no sound and kept no score; it came with plastic overlays that clung to the screen by static to turn the dots into a hockey rink or a haunted house, and a plastic rifle, built by *Nintendo*, for shooting at the screen.

Nolan Bushnell played the *Odyssey*'s tennis game at a demonstration in California and signed the guest book; a few months later *Atari* released *Pong*, *Magnavox* sued, and *Atari* paid to settle, the first video game company to pay for the patents on the first home console. The *Brown Box*, tape and all, now sits in the Smithsonian. After Baer died in 2014, at ninety-two, his home workshop in Manchester, New Hampshire, went to the Smithsonian too, where it is on permanent display.

Baer's box kept no score and made no sound, and the argument about whose turn it is started anyway.



THE TOY AISLE'S TWO FAMILIES

Hasbro and Mattel

Hot Wheels. ***Mr. Potato Head***. The ***Burp Gun***, and a doll named ***Ken***. A great deal of the toy aisle belongs to one of two companies, both started by Jewish families, and neither of them started with toys, and ***Barbie*** and ***G.I. Joe***, who have their own pages in this book, belong to one each. In 1952 ***Hasbro*** ran what is often called the first television commercial ever made for a toy, for *Mr. Potato Head*, and in 1955 ***Mattel*** bet the company on a year of commercials on *The Mickey Mouse Club*; toys have been sold to children on television ever since.

Henry, Hillel and Herman Hassenfeld, three brothers from Poland, started selling textile remnants in Providence in 1923, then pencil boxes; ***Hassenfeld Brothers*** became *Hasbro*. **Ruth and Elliot Handler** and a partner, Harold Matson, started *Mattel* in a Los Angeles garage in 1945 with picture frames, then dollhouse furniture made from the scraps.

Elliot had been making furniture and jewelry out of Lucite and Plexiglas, and he believed in plastic when most toys were still wood, tin, cast iron or stuffed cloth: heavy, costly and dull in color. *Mattel*'s first hit, the ***Uke-A-Doodle*** of 1947, was a plastic ukulele. Molded plastic let a toy company turn out bright, light, washable toys by the million, cheap enough for every baby-boom family.

The television bet was $500,000, about what the company was worth. It paid: *Mattel* shipped more than a million ***Burp Guns*** that year. In 1968 Elliot wanted a toy car that would beat every other toy car down a track; he saw the first one run and said those are hot wheels. Ken is named for the **Handlers**' son.

Hasbro put a potato on television in 1952. Three years later Mattel bet the whole company on the same idea.



THE STICK OF GUM IN THE PACK

The Baseball Card

In 1952 **Sy Berger**, a veteran born on the Lower East Side, sat down at his kitchen table in Brooklyn with scissors and cardboard and laid out the design of the ***Topps*** baseball card: a color portrait, a team logo, a facsimile signature, and on the back the player's height, weight, hometown and last season's numbers. Nearly every baseball card since has followed it, photo on the front, numbers on the back, and so, more or less, has every football, basketball and *Pokémon* card after it; a generation of boys learned to read a statistics table off the back of a *Topps* card. It is the card in the bicycle spokes and the Mantle that would have paid for college.

Topps was the **Shorin** brothers' gum company, and in 1951 they put a card in with the gum to compete with *Bowman*. Berger had come back from the war to the sales department, and did the layout with his colleague **Woody Gelman**. The 1952 set has 407 cards. He signed the players himself, in the clubhouses, for decades, often paying them in refrigerators, and worked at *Topps* for half a century.

In 1960, with cases of unsold 1952 cards taking up warehouse space, Berger said, he had them loaded onto a barge and dumped in the Atlantic, hundreds of Mickey Mantles among them. The set is the most famous of the modern era, and the survivors sell for millions: in August 2022 a near-perfect 1952 Mantle sold at auction for $12.6 million, at the time the most ever paid for any piece of sports memorabilia. The stick of pink gum, which nobody ate and everybody remembers, was dropped in 1992.

The photo on the front, the numbers on the back, the gum you didn't eat. A kitchen table in Brooklyn, 1952.



THE FELT, THE PINS, THE NAME ON THE RAIL

Pool and Bowling

In 1845 **John Moses Brunswick**, a Jewish carriage maker who had come from Switzerland as a teenager, saw a billiard table in Cincinnati, decided it was a better business than carriages, and built one, and then another. The green felt table in the basement, the rack of fifteen balls, the chalk on your fingers, the long carved bar in the old saloon down the street: a good part of American leisure was built under his name, and it is still on the rail of pool tables across the country and on the ball return at the bowling alley. The company's automatic pinsetter, which followed AMF's in the fifties, helped make the bowling boom: league night, the rented shoes, the birthday party in lane six.

Brunswick came off the boat in 1834, ran errands, and apprenticed to a carriage maker before opening a carriage shop of his own. His tables were furniture, carved and inlaid, and the saloons that bought them bought his bars too. He sent for his half-brothers, opened in Chicago, and merged with his two rivals into ***Brunswick-Balke-Collender***. By the end of the century the company was making bowling pins and balls too.

The pinsetter meant that nobody had to stand at the end of the lane and put the pins back by hand, and during the bowling boom the company's sales rose from thirty-three million dollars in 1954 to four hundred and twenty-two million in 1961. Along the way it pressed Duke Ellington's records, and in 1961 it bought the maker of Mercury outboard motors, so the boat on the lake may be Brunswick's too. Chalk a cue and break a rack, maybe on a table with his name on the rail.

He saw one billiard table in Cincinnati and decided carriages were the wrong business.