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Review:

Louis Bamberger: Department Store Innovator and Philanthropist, Linda B. Forgosh
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Louis Bamberger: Department Store Innovator and Philanthropist, Linda B. Forgosh (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016), ISBN 978-1-611-68981-5, pp. 296, \$29.95.

The rise of the department store in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and North America has justifiably received a great deal of recent historical attention, lying as it does at the intersection of many crucial developments in social, cultural, economic, gender, and urban history. Indeed, as various scholars have pointed out, above all in studies of British, French, German, and American retail, department stores played a key role in the creation of modern urban space, the emergence and spread of consumer culture, the emancipation of women – both in the workforce and as shoppers and flâneurs – and the modernization of business and economic life. The story of how a handful of entrepreneurs transformed the retail and commercial landscape by revolutionizing the distribution and marketing of consumer goods and how, in the process, they accumulated vast fortunes has also been told, in the American context first by Leon Harris in his book, *Merchant Princes* (1979), and, in a more scholarly vein, by William Leach in his study, *Land of Desire* (1993). Nevertheless, more work remains to be done and gaps in the literature persist, as scholars continue to ponder the over-representation of Jews, especially German Jews, among department store entrepreneurs and the place of the big stores in Jewish history, the history of antisemitism, and the development of modern consumer society.

Linda Forgosh's book on the department store proprietor Louis Bamberger, the first full-length biography of the iconic businessman and philanthropist, is a welcome addition to the field. Forgosh's study treats Bamberger and the retail empire he created as above all a New Jersey story, and her lively narrative brings to life early to mid-twentieth century Newark, a city whose recent troubles have largely occluded its important past as a manufacturing and retail centre, a hub of high culture, and a key site of Jewish acculturation. Basing her account on extensive primary-source research as well as the recollections of dozens of locals, Forgosh narrates Bamberger's path from his humble Baltimore origins in a store-owning family of German Jewish émigrés, through his retail innovations and enormous business success – from the store's opening in 1892 through its sale to Macy's in 1929 – to his participation in networks of elite

philanthropists, culminating in the partnership with Abraham Flexner and Albert Einstein and the opening of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1930. Throughout, the man himself remains something of a mystery. Spurning the limelight, Bamberger was fiercely protective of his privacy, often donating anonymously, and left little evidence to give the biographer access to his inner life. He never had children or married, associated primarily with family, especially his sister Carrie and her husband, and his business partner Felix Fuld, and disappeared in Europe from time to time to pursue private adventures, leading some authors to speculate about his sexuality.

Forgosh's study is a sharply written account bursting with interesting material. Nevertheless, the book is hampered by a tendency towards boosterism; her enthusiasm and admiration for her subject gushes through the pages. This is not to minimize Bamberger's business accomplishments, his extraordinary generosity, or the fairness and decency with which he seems to have treated his employees, but to suggest that the author's celebratory tone and lack of critical distance from her subject makes it more suited to a popular audience than academic readers. Historians of consumer culture might find themselves wanting a deeper, more contextualized discussion of Bamberger's vision and innovations, which, at first glance, seem strikingly similar to tactics adopted by many of the other major department concerns in the US and Europe. Was the department store categorically a good thing? Missing from this account is any sense of the ambivalence of the changes it helped bring about in terms of market segmentation along racial and social fault lines, the commercialization of life and culture, or the consolidation of retail in fewer hands.

While Forgosh devotes significant attention to Jewish institutions and Newark's Jewish high society, Jewish studies scholars might expect a more sustained analysis of her protagonist's Jewish identity. Indeed, the combination of his consistent indifference towards religion with his lifelong involvement with Jewish charities and organizations seems paradoxical and could use further elaboration. Intellectual historians, furthermore, might ask why a man with barely any formal education devoted so much of his fortune and energy to establishing what became the country's premier research institution in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences, a question Forgosh gestures at but scarcely addresses. Finally, for those interested in German and German Jewish history, Forgosh provides scant new historical or sociological insight into the

broader issue of explaining the remarkable success of German Jews – both in American emigration and in Germany – in creating retail empires and establishing themselves as a new commercial and cultural elite. Despite these flaws, Forgosh's engaging and sweeping study will have great appeal to readers interested in American Jewish history, urban history, and the history of New York and New Jersey. It ably evokes the glorious heyday of a now faded city and the man whose business acumen and philanthropic largesse helped make it possible.

Paul Lerner