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# The History of the Toy and Games Industries Seen through a Jewish Lens

## An Interview with Stephen Jacobs

Stephen Jacobs is coauthor of the Game Design and Development degree program at the School of Interactive Games and Media and a founding associate director of MAGIC Center and MAGIC Spell Studios at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. His work on the Jewish history of toys and games has been presented at the Association of Jewish Studies and the Third Annual Judaica Collectors conferences in 2016, in two blog posts for The Strong in 2022, and in a panel at the Ninth Annual International Toy Research Conference in 2023. He has been a scholar-in-residence with The Strong for seventeen years, consulting on exhibit design, acquisitions, and conferences.

***American Journal of Play:*** Much of your research and teaching has focused on interactive games and media. What inspired you to explore the history of Jewish toy and game designers, entrepreneurs, and inventors?

**Stephen Jacobs:** In 2014 my friend Rabbi S. Robert (Rob) Morais was working with the Shalom Street Children's Museum in Detroit, and he asked me to help him create the first museum exhibit on play and toys in Jewish secular and religious life. It was called *Across the Board: From Dreidel to XBOX* and opened in 2015. Rob now leads Temple Anshe Hesed in Erie, Pennsylvania. There's some synchronicity in Rob's now being in Erie, as the town was also home to a Louis Marx & Company toy factory from 1933 to 1975.

When Rob and I started working together, I told him, "Just like there were a handful of famous Jewish major league ball players, there are a handful of successful Jewish-founded toy companies like Madame Alexander Doll Company, Lionel trains, Mattel, Inc., and Hasbro. We should do a mini hall of fame as part of the exhibit."

While doing my initial research for *Across the Board*, I visited the toy association's hall of fame website (before it became a physical exhibit at The

Strong) to review the biographies of those companies' founders. As I looked through the list of inductees, it struck me that many of them could have Jewish backgrounds. Sometimes I thought so based on their names, other times on biographical information, such as their having left Europe for the U.S.A. or Palestine during or after the Nazi era. After further research, it became clear that roughly one third of those inducted into the hall came from Jewish backgrounds.

The Strong includes a collection of pinball games. I was already aware of the significant Jewish leadership from the Gottlieb and Stern companies and learned of the Gensberg family members who founded Chicago Coin and Genco Corporation. I also looked into the history of German toys and games, because Germany was the leader in the Western industry during the 1800s and early 1900s, and I became aware of the Jewish players in the history there. Soon, I had a list of over one hundred Jewish designers, entrepreneurs, and inventors who represented more than two hundred years of toy and game making.

I showed these findings to my colleagues at The Strong, who knew of some but nowhere near all the companies I'd listed. They were surprised, but after some work, they and the curators at Germany's Nuremberg Toy Museum confirmed my initial research. I then went to my high school friend, Arthur Kiron, the archivist of the Judaica collections at the University of Pennsylvania. He told me he had seen nothing in the Jewish academic world covering the Jewish history of the industry. It seemed to me that here was a story worth telling.

**AJP:** There's a rich literature about Jewish writers, artists, and business people in the film, television, and comic book industries. Why do we not know as much about Jewish toy and game makers?

**Jacobs:** Much of the period between the 1800s to today has been colored by waves of antisemitism, both in Europe and the United States, so there has been a reluctance by those in the industry to discuss it. Institutionalized antisemitism in America began to weaken after World War II because of revelations about the Nazi death camps, the 1947 Academy Award-winning film *A Gentleman's Agreement*, and other high-impact factors. Even so, Jewish studies and Jewish history tend not to overemphasize the history of Jewish business successes, with perhaps the exception of film and television. For example, it's been only a couple of decades since we saw the Jewish history of the comic book industry celebrated.

Even with the much more public and much earlier knowledge of Jewish leadership in Hollywood, Neal Gabler's fantastic book, *An Empire of Their Own*, didn't come out until 1988. With the opening of the Film Academy Museum in 2021 through this year, there's been controversy over the representation of Jewish leadership in that industry, so it's challenging.

As I've discussed this over the years, some Jewish founders in the toy and games industry or their families have been excited to discuss it, while others have been very hesitant. And during the last decade, with the growing turmoil in the Middle East, antisemitism is on the rise again worldwide.

**AJP:** Identity can be a complex blend of factors such as birth, culture, and religion. For your research, how have you decided who to identify as Jewish?

**Jacobs:** It's been a mix of information found in autobiographies and biographies, my interviews with founders and families, articles in magazines and newspapers contemporary with the history of those founders, online publications of synagogue newsletters, charitable foundations and institutions created by founders, and obituaries. In the case of European companies or families who immigrated to the United States and elsewhere, it was often clear they were fleeing the Russian pogroms of the early 1900s or Germany during the rise of Hitler and elsewhere in Europe during the war years. I usually look for several sources that identify an individual as Jewish.

**AJP:** What do we know about the earliest toy makers? How and where did Jewish people first get involved with making toys and games?

**Jacobs:** I look mainly at the time period since the Industrial Revolution and primarily at Germany and the United States, because these countries were the undisputed leaders since the 1800s. That's not to say there weren't many toy and game companies across Europe with Jewish founders or designers, but I chose this focus to provide a story of mainstream impact.

Some of the history of making these primarily wooden toys in Germany can go as far back as the Middle Ages. Until the early to mid-1800s, we knew this work was centered around small artisans or family cottage industries, sometimes using a network of workers doing piecework by hand. Some of these artisans, families, or networks were likely Jewish, but that's not what I look at. I'm sure it is a worthy subject for another scholar of Jewish history to dig into.

As industrialization came to Germany, Sonneberg, Brandenburg, Furth, and especially Nuremberg experienced a lot of growth and became toy and game manufacturing hubs. The accelerated adoption of the German

traditions of Sinter Klaus and Christmas gift giving across the Western world drove part of this boom. Another driver was the evolution of childhood from the time most children worked to support their families to a more significant focus on education and play. This was driven partly by the German kindergarten movement starting in 1840. Finally, price drops and production increases that came with industrialization all moved Germany and the Western world in the development of the toy industry. By the time of Hitler's rise in Germany in the 1930s, there were 165 toy and game companies in Nuremberg alone.

Marginalized people, as Jews have been throughout history, can find opportunities and grow businesses when one or more of several conditions occur. These conditions include the emergence of a new technology or market that causes a boom environment or societal changes that lower barriers and increase the acceptance of people from nonmajority backgrounds. Since medieval times, Jewish individuals in Germany and Europe in general had lived through waves of tolerance, acceptance, and persecution. In the Germany of the 1850s till the early 1930s the Jewish community enjoyed an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance. At roughly the same time these societal and industrial changes created a boom environment in the toy industry in Germany. In the end, the rise of Hitler brought an end to this period.

**AJP:** Can you tell us more about the most significant European Jewish toy makers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

**Jacobs:** There were several leading German Jewish toy companies. I'll talk primarily about three of the most prominent German toy and game companies: Gebruder Bing (Bing Brothers), Ernst Paul Lehman Patentwerk, and J. W. Spear and Sons. The founders of all three companies began careers as housewares wholesalers and manufacturers, and all three businesses evolved into significant toy and game companies.

Gebruder Bing, founded in 1864, was recognized as the world's largest toy and game company from the late 1800s to the 1920s. It was founded by brothers Ignaz and Adolf Bing, though Ignaz would later buy his brother out. The company started as a household goods wholesaler when it was first established and then began manufacturing its own. It produced toy trains, steam engines, and other mechanical toys in the 1880s. In 1907 it added a plush toy line, starting with a stuffed bear. At its peak, Bing's toy factory employed about five thousand workers (sources vary between four

thousand and six thousand, with five thousand being the most consistent number). Today, the most collectible toys the company makes are trains, steam engines, and plush animals.

Jacob Wolf Spier, the founder of J. W. Spear and Söhne (Sons) was born in 1832 and left Germany in the 1850s to find his fortune in the United States. There he married, had children, and had his last name changed to the Americanized spelling when he became a citizen. He kept that spelling when he returned to Germany in 1861. Spear joined or founded several trading and manufacturing firms before starting the company that would become J. W. Spear and Sons in Furth in 1883. It began by making a wide range of products, including games, and then shifted its focus entirely to toys, games, and jigsaw puzzles.

Unfortunately, while in Furth, the company had a terrible run of bad luck. At the time, most of the items it produced were paper-based products. The lacquered paper and cardboard used in many of its products were highly flammable. J. W. Spear and Söhne suffered two major factory fires in 1892 and 1893. Not only did it suffer its loss of raw materials, saleable inventory, and damage to the factory, but the company was also sued by the owners of neighboring buildings that suffered fire damage. The final straw was a nuisance lawsuit from a business rival who attacked Jacob's character. This proved too much for Spear, who suffered from depression, and he hanged himself in his factory.

Despite this, Spear's sons continued the company's operations, moving the firm to Nuremberg in 1898. In this period, two generations of Spears grew the business into a powerhouse, even weathering World War I, expanding into picture books and arts and crafts. It created a British subsidiary in 1932, as did other German companies, to avoid Britain's high import duties on foreign goods.

As with the other founders I mentioned, Ernst Paul Lehmann was involved in several businesses, some in which he imported or manufactured general housewares and some in which he began making toys. In these earlier businesses, Lehman saw a number of his creations copied and sold by other companies. At the time, German laws about patents and trademarks offered fewer protections compared to those of the United States and other European countries. These laws changed in the 1870s, so the name of his new company, Ernst Paul Lehmann Patentwerk (EPL), communicated his intention to protect his creations. Lehman was constantly inventing and

refining, and the motorized and otherwise mechanical tin toys he produced were on the leading edge of the trade at the time. Some were straightforward model cars, airplanes, animals, and insects that moved via wind-up spring motors or other systems. Others were more whimsical: Carts and riders were pulled by ostriches and zebras, a walking man was pulled in circles by his two dogs. In a clever political toy commenting on the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, four men representing the United States, England, Germany, and France tossed a person representing China resting in a blanket into the air. In 1936 Ernst Paul Lehmann passed away, having transferred the company to his cousin Johannes Richter years before.

Many images of the toys these three companies produced can be found all over the Internet, and one collector of EPL toys has a magnificently photographed website, <https://lehmann-toycollection.com>. (I should note that antique toy and game depictions of people from non-White backgrounds here—and from most toy and game companies of the time—would not be acceptable today but represent their periods.)

**AJP:** What impact did the world wars in Europe have on these and other Jewish toy and game makers?

**Jacobs:** From the beginning of World War I through the end of World War II, times were tough for toy and game makers everywhere. During the wars, most companies with manufacturing capabilities were called upon to switch their facilities to manufacturing war materials such as weapons, clothing, food, and everything needed to supply the armed forces. Trained workers were scarce, and women, children, and those who could not meet the draft's physical requirements were put to work. For consumers, money was scarce to buy manufactured goods. Still, the creation of toys and games didn't come to a standstill, and sometimes ingenuity was required to keep things going.

Ten years after World War I, the Great Depression, which affected the Western world as a whole, not just the United States, hit all manufacturers of nonessential goods and contributed to the start of World War II. With the focus on war production, several new industrial processes and consumer products were essentially frozen in time. Some very early television sets went into production and sales before the combination of the economic depression and the needs of war production stalled their emergence as a mass consumer product for a new medium. Television wouldn't begin to feature in the living rooms of most American homes until the 1950s.

Similarly, the evolution of modern plastics and the machines to injection-mold them saw significant production delays until the war ended in 1945. Television programming and advertising and plastic as a cheap and flexible manufacturing material were all crucial to the toy and game industries' growth after the war.

Also, after World War I, things had become specifically more difficult for the German toy and game businesses. Even before the start of the Great Depression, the newly formed Toy Manufacturers of America (one of the first trade associations in the United States established in 1916) successfully called for the U.S. Congress to enact postwar economic measures in 1922 against importing German and Japanese toys to protect America's emerging industry. Then the worldwide economic depression began in 1929. As Hitler and Nazism grew in power during the the Great Depression, the period of tolerance and growth for Jews in Germany came to an end. Many Jewish-owned companies experienced the rise of National Socialism (during which many closed and fled to other countries) and Aryanization, the German government's practice of seizing Jewish-owned businesses of all types and awarding them to Nazi party members, some of whom had little or no business experience. *Games We Play: The History of J. W. Spear and Sons*, written by researchers working with the the Nuremberg Toy Museum, identified twenty-nine toy and game businesses that were Aryanized.

For Gebruder Bing, the economic pressures on the company by the early 1930s were too great, and the company went bankrupt in 1932. Some of its equipment was sold off, and other nontoy lines of business were spun out. The family members left Germany during Hitler's rise to power. In the last decade, an attempt was made to revive the brand, but it is unclear whether the new company remains in business.

In 1938 J. W. Spear and Söhne was Aryanized. It and some of the other Aryanized toy and game companies continued to make toys and games, but a number of these toys and games were remade as tools of propaganda. Many members of the Spear family were able to leave Germany as the Nazis rose to power. Their emigration was possible, in part, because of the existence of the British subsidiary they had created to avoid the taxes and tariffs on German goods. However, not all family members were able to get out, and at least six died in concentration camps during the war. Spear's Nuremberg factory was destroyed in the war by Great Britain's Royal Air Force.

After the war, Spear Games rebooted, rebuilt, and grew. In 1954 the company acquired the rights to the board game Scrabble for the United Kingdom and Australia and became primarily responsible for starting the Scrabble tournaments that still run today. The company was acquired by Mattel, Inc. in 1994. Nuremberg's Haus des Spiels (House of Games) became the home of the Spear Games Archives in 2017, housing more than fifteen hundred games and related business documents. Located just a few blocks from the Nuremberg Toy Museum, Haus des Spiels also hosts events for the public and the independent game developer community in the city.

The Ernst Paul Lehmann Patentwerk fared better during World War II than the other two German toy companies. In addition to being a great inventor, designer, and businessman, Richter must have been a fantastic negotiator. Somehow, Richter kept the company and even prevented its factories from shifting to war production. The company continued to produce toys throughout World War II and sold them to wholesalers and retailers in countries approved by the Nazi government.

After the war, Richter and his company had a different story. Brandenburg, where EPL was located, became part of Russian-occupied East Germany. In 1948 Richter, as a successful capitalist, was denounced as a war criminal and racketeer, and the company was nationalized. It became VEB Mechanische Spielwaren, arguably East Germany's best-known tin toy company. Richter escaped to Nuremberg in West Germany and began a smaller toy company in 1950, but he died in 1956.

**AJP:** Who were the earliest Jewish toy and game makers in the United States? What role did they play in the beginnings of the American toy industry?

**Jacobs:** First, it's essential to understand that the U.S. toy industry ran decades behind Europe's. For most of the 1800s, children from wealthy parents might have had toys purchased from overseas or in one of the department stores that began to emerge in major cities just at the turn of the twentieth century. Less privileged children generally played with handmade items like peg-based solitaire checkers, hand-sewn cloth, or corn husk dolls with painted or embroidered faces, kites, and other classic playthings. Toys and tabletop games as we know them today weren't as big a part of childhood until later in the 1800s and early 1900s. Kids outside big cities generally pursued play and hobbies like fishing, boating, hunting, and other activities. One work offering a snapshot of childhood in the late nineteenth century is *The American Boy's Handy Book: What to Do and How to Do It*. Orig-

nally published in the 1880s and reprinted many times since, only about 20 percent of the book covers making toys or playing games. In general, it and its sister publication for girls look more like boy scout handbooks, though they predate the formation of the scouts by roughly thirty years.

Francis, Field & Francis, also known as the Philadelphia Tin Toy Manufactory, was founded in 1838 and is generally cited as the first industrial-era toy company in the United States. Like the German companies I already mentioned, the Pennsylvania company imported or created and then sold a variety of household goods until, over time, toys became its main product. Its first manufactured toy was a horse-drawn fire engine. When F.A.O. Schwarz founded his retail toy bazar in Baltimore in 1862, it primarily featured high-end toys imported from Europe, partly due to the lack of equally sophisticated products produced in the United States.

The first Jewish American toy and game manufacturer I've found is playing card mogul Lewis I. Cohen, and classic playing card decks generally aren't the first items that come to mind when the average person thinks of the toy and game industry. Born in Philadelphia in 1800, Cohen was sent to England at fifteen to apprentice with his British cousins, who were stationers. When he returned to the United States and founded his own company, Cohen quickly made his mark in the stationery industry by being the first American to produce and sell lead pencils and to introduce steel pens. At the time, the primary writing instrument in America was a feathered quill pen.

Cohen began making playing cards in 1832. In 1835 he designed and developed a machine that printed four colors simultaneously. The playing card side of the business soon eclipsed the rest of his sales, and he shifted exclusively to making and selling decks of cards, retiring in 1845. In 1848 Cohen's son and nephews also formed card companies and eventually merged them into the New York Consolidated Card Company.

A more commonly known early U.S. toy company is Lionel trains. Lionel Cowen (who changed the spelling of his name from Cohen) was an independent electrical engineer who began his career as an apprentice at a concern that produced batteries and then worked at the Acme Electric Lamp company assembling lighting products. He filed his first patent in 1899 describing a battery accessory for photographic flashes. The patent helped him land a contract with the U.S. Navy to create detonators for underwater mines. Funds from the contract then allowed him to set up

business as the Lionel Manufacturing Company. Cowen created several electrical products independently or under contract for others.

Inspired by a stationary department store Christmas window display, he created a battery-powered train car for use as something that would be more eye-catching for passersby. He used the battery he had developed for an electric fan to drive the motor in his Electric Express in 1901. Consumers were not only drawn to the store by the dynamic display, they wanted to buy it for their homes. Cowen shifted direction and began manufacturing and marketing realistic-looking metal toy trains, cars, tracks, and accessories in 1902. Cohen changed the name of his company to Lionel Corporation, and over time it became one of the largest toy companies in America. At its peak in the 1950s, Lionel became the largest toy train company in the world, had its own TV show, and acquired the Kiddie City franchise of toy stores, renaming them Lionel Kiddie City.

Cowen and his son sold the company to a relative, the infamous political figure and lawyer Roy Cohn, in 1959. Since then, the brand and company have had several owners, and the company is currently based in Concord, North Carolina, far from its original Manhattan roots.

As I mentioned, by 1916 the toy industry in the United States had grown, and eighty American manufacturers banded together to form Toy Manufacturers of America (TMA), one of the first nationwide trade associations. Now known as The Toy Association, the organization represents more than nine hundred members, toy companies of all sizes and types, retailers, designers, and inventors. Its annual American International Toy Fair hosts over twenty-six thousand professionals. Cohen was one of the founding members, as was Leo Schlesinger of Leo Schlesinger & Co., who served as the first contact for the press when the association was formed. He and Cowen served as officers of the association board.

**AJP:** What role did Jewish women play in the emergence of the American toy industry? Are there any particularly prominent examples of female toy makers?

**Jacobs:** Bertha “Beatrice” Alexander Behrman, Lynn Pressman Raymond, and Ruth Handler are the first three who stand out.

Behrman was known professionally as Madame Alexander and founded Madame Alexander Dolls, first doing business in 1923. She ranked as a rare female corporate executive of the time and the only significant Jewish one in the toy and game industries in the 1920s.

In the early 1900s, some dolls were made with cloth bodies and heads (and sometimes extremities) or made of delicate and expensive porcelain, china, or celluloid. Often, especially with the porcelain dolls, it was more cost effective to rehabilitate them in a doll hospital than purchase new ones. Beatrice's stepfather owned and operated one of the first U.S. doll hospitals before World War I. When the war broke out, he couldn't get the needed replacement parts from Europe, especially from Germany. These shortages were risking the family business and income. Beatrice sewed a prototype Red Cross nurse doll and convinced the family to produce it commercially. The doll's popularity saved the family firm from bankruptcy.

After World War I, she founded Madame Alexander Dolls with her husband and designed a licensed doll of Scarlett O'Hara from the book and film *Gone with the Wind*. Alexander pioneered collectible dolls of characters from literature and cinema and of famous movie stars and politicians. In the 1950s and 1960s, Madame Alexander was the world's leading doll company. Throughout its history, the company thrived through innovation. Some of its creations included making the first plastic face mold for a doll in 1947 and debuting Cissy, an early girl's fashion doll, four years before the arrival of Mattel's Barbie. The Madame Alexander Doll Club had its charter sanctioned by the company in 1961, holding annual conventions across the United States since 1983. Several entities have owned Madame Alexander since its founder sold the company in 1988, two years before her death. The current owner is apparel and doll manufacturer Kahn Lucas, Inc.

Lynn Pressman Raymond had already been successful in advertising and retail when she first met Jack Pressman, head of the toy company J. Pressman and Company. Jack learned the ins and outs of the toy industry by working in the Harlem candy store his father Abraham had opened after fleeing the Russian pogroms at the turn of the twentieth century. Jack bought the toys for the store from wholesalers and manufacturers and sold the goods to its customers. After serving in the military during World War I in 1918 and 1919, he briefly worked as a toy salesman for one toy company, M. Gropper and Sons, and then the North American Toy Company as a partner. In 1924 North American became Jack Pressman and Company (JPC). JPC took off by releasing Hop Ching Checkers, later known as Chinese Checkers. The game was so popular that JPC had to acquire a marble manufacturing company to ensure the supply of Chinese Checkers. JPC

also sold marbles as a stand-alone product, earning Pressman the nickname The Marble King.

Lynn and Jack married in 1942, and Lynn's advertising and retail experience became crucial for the company's growth. At the end of the 1940s, Jack Pressman dissolved the partnership that had built Jack Pressman and Company and formed Pressman Toys with Lynn as vice president. Over the following decade, Lynn spearheaded the company's advertising and marketing and was responsible for several new toys and toy lines the company brought out. Throughout the 1950s, as Pressman Toys continued to grow, Jack's health declined due to a heart condition. Lynn's company responsibilities increased, and she became president after Jack died in 1959. She held that position for almost twenty years, ceding the top job to her son Jim in 1977. During her tenure as president, she advanced the company's product lines with both original and licensed toys and games, led its entry into the age of television advertising, and even produced trade ads that made no bones about her ability to lead Pressman in a male-dominated field. Pressman Toys' bank closed its accounts when Lynn took over as president because she was a woman, and the company had to find a new bank to move the business forward. In light of this history, it is worth noting that Jim and Jack were both inducted into the TTA's Toy Industry Hall of Fame, but Lynn has yet to be awarded that honor.

Ruth Marriana Mosko and Isadore "Izzy" Elliot Handler met at a B'nai B'rith dance for Jewish teenagers in 1929. They married in 1938, and soon after, Ruth encouraged her husband to use his middle name, Elliot, because she preferred it and was concerned that his recognizably Jewish first name might leave them vulnerable to antisemitism in their careers. The Handlers partnered with Elliot's friend Harold "Matt" Mattson to form Mattel in 1945, creating the company's title by blending the men's names. The company first made a miniature piano, which they lost money on, and Mattson soon became too ill to continue with the company, selling his shares to the Handlers. Ruth was the company's first president, becoming the industry's third female Jewish company leader.

Mattel went from producing plastic picture frames to plastic doll furniture. The Handlers bet the future of their company, as well as their own, on the decision to become the first sponsor of *The Mickey Mouse Club* television show at the cost of half a million dollars for a year, Mattel's entire net worth and roughly equivalent to five million in today's dollars. Television

was still a new medium at the time, and buying a year's worth of advertising was a real gamble. Product placement ads for a Mousegetar (a toy ukulele replica of the similar tenor guitar played by Jimmie Dodd, the first adult MC of the show) and a uke-a-doodle style Mousegetar Junior (a small toy uke with a music box inside, a product Mattel was selling before its affiliation with the show) put the company on a solid footing with sales at ten times their initial investment.

Ruth handled the business end, while Elliot was the primary creative designer. However, as anyone who watched the movie *Barbie* knows, the Barbie doll was Ruth's baby, named after her daughter, while Ken was named after her son.

Ruth and Elliot found a Bild Lili doll, a German product modeled on a cartoon character from a newspaper comic and sold primarily in bars and cigar shops as a novelty or gag gift. The Handlers seized the opportunity to merge the Bild Lili design with the paper doll model of multiple outfits, and a star was born. The company also developed a new line of model cars that improved on the miniature Matchbox toy cars called Hot Wheels. Along with many other toys, both lines made the company a leader in toys.

The Handlers left the company in 1975 under a cloud. Several suits by shareholders and investigations by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission centered on the filing of fraudulent financial reports. Ruth, who had breast cancer and a mastectomy in 1970, cited as her defense her reduced time at work during her illness and recovery and the confusion caused by chemotherapy treatments. After leaving Mattel, Ruth, frustrated with the lack of a suitable breast prosthesis on the market, formed Ruthton, Inc., to meet the need. First Lady Betty Ford, also a cancer survivor, even used Ruthton's Nearly Me product. Handler sold the company to Kimberly-Clark in 1991, and products using the Nearly Me name are still sold today. Ruth Handler died of colon cancer in 2022. Mattel threw husband Elliot's ninetieth birthday party in 2006, so they had let bygones be bygones. Elliot lived till the age of ninety-five.

**AJP:** Most middle-class kids in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s played with or were familiar with Marx toys. Who was Louis Marx, and how did he become such an influential figure in the toy industry?

**Jacobs:** Louis Marx broke into the toy industry as a sixteen-year-old after graduating early from high school. He worked as an office boy for the toy maker

Ferdinand Strauss, known for the first mass-manufactured mechanical toys in the United States. Marx rose to the position of director by the age of twenty. A disagreement with the owners about business strategy resulted in Marx's being fired. He and his brother Dave worked for a wooden toy company until another disagreement also ended that position.

Marx joined the army in World War I. After returning from the war, he and Dave bought the toy dies and machinery from the bankrupt Strauss factory and founded Louis Marx and Company in 1919. His practice of "skinning" the same tin toy in different ways began with the climbing monkey and the dancing minstrel toys originally sold by Strauss. A competitor called him "the Henry Ford of the toy business." When the new Marx toys hit the market, the company took off, and by 1926, Marx became a millionaire (the equivalent of almost seventeen million dollars today) just three years after starting his company.

*Time* magazine's 1955 profile of Marx (who shared the cover with Santa for that issue) relates a story in which Marx saw a street vendor from the Philippines whittling a yoyo on a trip to Los Angeles in 1928 and created his own version. Although this story goes against the version of yo-yo history that says Pedro Flores brought the toy to the United States and later sold his company to Donald F. Duncan, Marx sold over one hundred million yoyos by 1955. The Marx company also succeeded at selling play sets, sheet-metal enclosures decorated like Western forts, castles or "moon bases" with plastic people figures, animals, and vehicles. The slot and tab assembled sheet metal would not pass today's consumer safety regulations. Marx toys was the world's largest toy and game company in the 1950s. One of the last toys from Marx, and likely one of the best known to more recent generations, is the original Big Wheel tricycle, released in 1969. Marx sold his company to Quaker Oats in 1972 and passed away at the age of eighty-five in 1982.

**AJP:** Some saw the decades after World War II as a golden age for the U.S. toy industry. Can you tell us about the more significant Jewish toy and game manufacturers and designers and the playthings they created?

**Jacobs:** Several factors came together after World War II to shift the production of the toy and game industries to the United States.

For one, durable commercial plastics and injection molding had become readily available. These production methods made it more economical for companies to mass produce toys and to create designs that would have been

significantly more difficult or expensive to develop and sell. (Imagine classic toys and games like Mousetrap or Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots in wood or metal, for example.) Second, World War II had created a vast new workforce of eager entrepreneurs, many of whom had received technical or leadership experience in the military that would benefit them in the industry. By the war's end, the U.S. toy and game industry was well established and much more potent than before World War I. More companies were actively shifting focus, or being explicitly formed, for toys and games. Third, also contributing to the U.S. toy boom, many European toy companies were no longer in business or starting over from scratch, allowing U.S. companies to fill the vacuum. Last, the independent designers and inventors came into their own. While there had been some small independents before World War II, arguably, the most impactful and productive independents emerged at this time.

Hassenfeld Brothers (Now Hasbro) for example, originally a cloth remnants company that had added a school supplies line, made medical and air raid warden toy sets during World War II. Still, the company's shift to toys and games began when it acquired George Lerner's Mr. Potato Head from the cereal company Lerner had initially licensed it to. The original toy was simply plastic parts to be inserted into potatoes or other vegetables. No one was trying to stuff a plastic potato into a cereal box. Mr. Potato Head was the first toy advertised on television.

And one of the many successful, Jewish-owned companies that emerged in the postwar era was Remco, which started with founder Isaac Heller cornering the market on military surplus aviator's headphones to use the electronics as the core of walkie-talkies for kids.

Though Marvin Glass started his Chicago-based firm, Marvin Glass and Associates (MGA), in 1941, it didn't begin taking off until the war ended. MGA quickly became the world's leading toy and game design firm from the 1950s to the 1980s. He and his team produced hundreds of toy and game designs that were released as commercial products, and many are still popular today. MGA not only designed the Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots and Mousetrap I mentioned but also games like Ants in the Pants, Operation, and the Lite Brite play set. MGA also designed a few arcade video games, most notably *Tapper*, before closing in 1988.

Glass's business model for MGA was that it developed toy designs and prototypes, wrote production instructions and requirements, and licensed

the packages to toy and game companies for a 5 percent royalty on each unit sold. His model of being an idea factory included CIA-level security, which was rare in business back then. The MGA offices had blacked-out windows and surveillance cameras throughout the building. Employees who took meetings offsite had their briefcases handcuffed. His royalty-driven, secretive business model, rock-solid nondisclosure agreements, and contracts established business practices employed by independent designers, large and small, throughout the industry. Even today, at the annual toy association's ToyFair trade show, many booths on the show floor can only be accessed by appointment and have high walls to prevent unauthorized viewing of products. At one point, Glass had seventy-five designers and support staff working for him. MGA survived Glass's death by cancer in 1974 and an in-office murder-suicide when a disgruntled employee with a history of mental-health issues killed two of the company's partners and a designer as well as himself at the company's office in 1976.

Adolf Goldfarb (born in 1921, he would go by Eddy when Hitler rose to power in 1924) is currently playing around with 3-D printing in the shop he set up in the garage of his senior living community. He has designed more than eight hundred toys and games and holds more than three hundred patents.

He began tinkering as a child and hoped to study physics in college but couldn't afford to. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy after Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. The navy sent him to the University of Houston for electrical engineering and then a secret radar lab, because the technology was new then. Eddy volunteered for submarine duty and spent much of his valuable free time on the USS *Batfish*, filling a notebook with designs, including one for an antenna for submarines to detect low-flying planes. The antenna design won him a commendation from the navy. Once home, he sent letters to companies in the toy business, which Marvin Glass answered.

Together, the two approached the head of a leading novelty and gag gift company, Irving Fishlove of H. Fishlove & Co. with Eddy's wind-up Yakkity Yak Talking Teeth, a toy which Eddy's mother-in-law had inspired. Fishlove bought it on the spot, paying twenty-five thousand dollars. Eddy got nine hundred dollars, and Glass kept the rest. Eddy resolved to work only for royalties (and himself) afterward. At the height of his business, Eddy's company filled three buildings he owned and employed thirty-nine people. Some of Eddy's most popular designs (aside from the teeth) include

the game KerPlunk! and the first line of battery-powered, four-wheel drive toy cars and trucks, Stompers, and Battling Tops. He designed video games for the Commodore 64 around Mattel's Barbie and Hot Wheels toy lines but returned to the analog world afterward. Eddy's daughter Barb released a documentary short on her dad in 2020 that can be seen on the *New York Times* website, and he appeared on the TV program *Sunday Morning* in December 2023.

**AJP:** The twentieth century also witnessed the growth of the coin-operated arcade and pinball game industries. What role did Jewish game manufacturers and designers play in this growth?

**Jacobs:** Arcade games are generally seen as residing outside the toy and games industry, because their business model is very different. For the most part, the games are played outside the home. When I was visiting ToyFair to do some of my early research, the general response from the people I talked to was, "Pinball, what are you talking about pinball for?" That said, there was cross-pollination between video game and pinball companies in the 1980s, and the early video game design philosophy borrows from pinball the idea that a game should be "easy to learn but hard to master." *Pinball Construction Set*, released by Electronic Arts in 1982, is generally considered to be the first user-created content video game. The *Space Cadet* virtual pinball game was bundled in versions of the Windows operating systems. Finally, the leading and most respected pinball company and the leading (and almost only) pinball company still in business were founded by Jewish leaders David Gottlieb and Gary Stern, whose father Sam also spent his career in pinball.

Most historians point to David Gottlieb and his Baffle Ball pinball game as the one that established the pinball industry. Gottlieb, a World War I vet, knocked around the United States selling and distributing film, vending machines, and slot machines. He decided to get into the design and manufacture of coin-operated amusements. He moved to Chicago, the heart of the coin-op manufacturing industry, and established D. Gottlieb & Company. There, he created Baffle Ball, released in 1931, which is generally recognized as the first widely successful pinball game. In its first six months, Gottlieb filled orders for seventy-five thousand Baffle Ball games, bringing in eight hundred thousand dollars during the Great Depression, roughly equivalent to eighteen million dollars today.

When you see pictures of it or the one in The Strong's *High Score* exhibit,

Baffle Ball looks nothing like a modern pinball machine. Baffle Ball and its contemporaries were devices small enough to fit on the countertop of a store or a bar, and they didn't have bumpers or flippers. It took sixteen years of innovation across several companies to evolve pinball to its modern form. Gottlieb's company released Humpty Dumpty, the first game with flippers, though it had six instead of two, and they faced in the opposite direction.

Gottlieb had a forty-six-year career and was generally considered the leader in the field, even by his competitors. Leading pinball historian (and the subject of the recent film *The Man Who Saved Pinball*) Roger Sharpe once asked Harry Williams, founder of Williams Electronics, about the pinball industry and his opinion of Gottlieb and his company. Williams said, "Gottlieb has always been consistent. . . . I would say their golden years are every year. For my money, every year." Gottlieb retired to Florida, where he often spent the day on his boat, *Flipper*, while other family members ran the business. In 1977 just a few years after his death, Columbia Pictures acquired the company.

Like Gottlieb, Sam Stern worked in sales in several different markets before landing on the coin-op, primarily pinball, business. His son Gary, a lawyer who grew up in the pinball industry, practiced for several years before the siren call of the silver ball brought him back to pinball. Father and son saw the pinball industry through highs and lows for over seventy-five years across numerous companies.

Sam was the most successful salesman for the pinball company Williams Electronics. As the story goes, in 1947, he walked into president Harry Williams's office and convinced Harry to sell him 49 percent of the company. In 1959 he arranged a buyout of the company by a third party, and three years later, he repurchased it, becoming sole owner and president. Williams Electronics also dabbled in the early video game arcade business, its most famous titles being *Defender*, *Joust*, and *Robotron: 2084*. After Williams was acquired by jukebox company Seeburg, Sam and his son Gary acquired Chicago Coin. Chicago Coin was the last of two pinball and arcade companies (the other being Genco) founded by members of the Gensberg family, the other Jewish pinball pioneers. These mergers and acquisitions were part of one of the many downs in the up-and-down history of pinball.

Sam's son Gary joined his father as vice president of Williams Electronics and served in that role at Stern Electronics as well. Stern Electronics

closed in 1985, and Sam passed away in 1986. From 1986 to 1999, Gary ran the pinball divisions of video game companies Data East and Sega. In 1999 as the market for pinball continued to dwindle because video games took over the rapidly diminishing arcade business, Gary bought Sega's pinball wing and created Stern Pinball. Stern Pinball is the only major pinball company in the world and has survived highs and lows because of several of Gary's business innovations.

Most pinball manufacturers created their own games and intellectual property. David Gottlieb never made a licensed game; most manufacturers did so reluctantly. Stern Pinball's releases, generally three title machines annually, however, are built entirely around licensed properties. Stern pinball machines released in the last few years have included games featuring characters from comics (Marvel's X-Men and Venom), filmed novels (John Wick, James Bond, and Jaws), and music (Foo Fighters and Rush).

Recognizing the power of the pinball collectors' market and barcodes, Stern's releases come in multiple versions, generally a "pro," "premium," and "limited" edition. These editions come with increasing features and a higher price, respectively. Stern also runs a collectors' fan group, Stern Army, that holds authorized tournaments worldwide. Gary's business innovations have kept Stern a lively, viable company, even when the COVID-19 lockdown shuttered arcades, restaurants, and bars, places where pinball is most often found. These innovations have essentially kept pinball alive as well. While a few smaller companies release games once every few years, for the most part, as Stern goes, so does pinball.

Gary Stern stepped down from the company's day-to-day operations as CEO in 2022 but retained his position as chairman of the board.

**AJP:** Speaking of video games, how did Jewish designers and inventors help bring video games into homes?

**Jacobs:** While we could discuss many influential creators, I'd like to focus on a few from the beginning of the field who were foundational to in-home consoles and arcades. What if you could play a game on your TV?

This is the question defense industry engineer Ralph Baer asked himself during a morning commute to work in the 1950s when television was first becoming a central piece of the American home. Like many toy and game industry leaders, Baer was a World War II veteran who had initially been an asset to the Allies for his electronics knowledge but soon became even more valuable for his native expertise and fluency in the German language.

Baer, born in 1922, was primarily raised in Germany. In 1936, he was expelled from public school in Germany for being Jewish, because a new law restricted the number of Jewish students in public schools to 1.5 percent of the total enrollment. Baer's education continued in a private, all-Jewish school, but not for long. The continuing rise in antisemitism in the country forced his family to move to the Bronx in 1938.

After finishing public school in the United States, he pursued training in radio and television electronics before entering the workforce as an engineer. He was drafted as a combat engineer and joined the armed forces in the war years. His service eventually took him back to Germany, where he became an expert in German weaponry due to his technical skills and ability to read and translate manuals and training materials.

Once back from the war, Ralph worked for several defense industry firms, eventually joining Sanders Associates in Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1956. He supervised almost five hundred other engineers until he retired in 1987. Baer answered his own questions about games on TV, inventing the "brown box" as a side project with a few engineers. Magnavox licensed the Saunders Skunkworks project as the Maganox Odyssey, and it became the first home television video game console.

After the brown box, and while still at Sanders, Baer started a sideline as an independent electronic toy and game designer. His most famous invention was the memory game Simon, one of his partnerships with MGA. By the time he passed away, Baer had received more than 150 patents and numerous national and international engineering awards, including a National Medal of Technology and Innovation, presented to him by President George W. Bush. Baer Square in Manchester, New Hampshire, features a statue of Ralph sitting on a park bench with a video game controller in his hands, as if he were playing a game.

In the arcade era, not only did we see that some companies got into video games from a background in pinball, but several companies in the general coin-op industry did so as well. Most surprisingly, two critical early Japanese video game arcade companies previously in vending and photo machines had Jewish founders.

Taito was founded by Michael Kogan, whose family had fled Russia during the pogroms for Harbin in Manchuria, which, for a time, was a haven for European Jews in the same way Shanghai sheltered Jewish immigrants during World War II. Kogan was a serial entrepreneur, starting busi-

nesses in Manchuria and Japan in markets as diverse as wigs, clothing, and distilling. When he founded the Taito Trading Company in 1953, it initially did business by importing coin-op machines, jukeboxes, and vending machines. In 1973 the company released its first video game, a *Pong* knock-off called *Elepong*. While most of the video game-playing world doesn't remember *Elepong*, everyone knows about Taito's *Space Invaders*, the video game that brought the company international acclaim. Taito has had its ups and downs and gone through an acquisition and merger phase or two, but it still releases games for consoles. Michael Kogan passed away in 1984.

Sega has its roots in two coin-op businesses with entities in Japan. Irving Bromberg, his son Martin Bromley, and their friend James Humpert originally formed Standard Games to distribute coin-op arcade games to military bases in Hawaii. The company underwent several changes, with subsidiaries in several countries, until it became Service Games of Japan in 1953, which later became Nihon Goraku Bussan. Many of the various changes occurred in response to changes in laws concerning slot machines, which were one of the products of the different entities. By the time of the merger with Rosen Industries, they also included jukeboxes and other coin-operated amusements.

Rosen Industries was started by David Rosen, an American officer in the U.S. Air Force stationed in Japan. Rosen also started Rosen Enterprises Ltd. after the Korean War. Rosen began by importing photo booths to Japan and eventually importing arcade games. Sega Enterprises was formed in 1965 when Goraku Bussan acquired Rosen Enterprises and Rosen was put in charge. The company took the name Sega from a recognized brand name of Goraku Busan and the name Enterprises from Rosen's business name.

Sega slowly expanded into manufacturing parts to repair its imported machines and started making games of its own, beginning with Periscope, a submarine game with light and sound effects. Over the decades since, Sega has made its own arcade games, managed arcade centers in Japan, created its own home video game consoles, and produced games for them along with other hardware. It, too, has gone through a number of acquisitions and reboots but remains active today. Its mascot remains the famous Sonic the Hedgehog.

**AJP:** Where do you see your research going as you continue exploring this area?

**Jacobs:** Though I have an academic background in media studies, throughout

my career at the Rochester Institute of Technology, much of my work has been translating areas of technical expertise to nonspecialists. My work on Jewish toy makers is no different. I started using my experience researching the early days of the home computer and video games and bringing an understanding of these technologies to others via nontechnical and general interest media. Similarly, for this work, I've become someone who sits somewhere on a spectrum between a public historian and a formally trained toy and game historian. What I've done here brings a new lens to the history of play, intending to introduce it to the general public and also for other toy, game, or Jewish historians to explore. I started with The Jewish Play Project, a website for the general public. Still, I also took it to Jewish academic conferences to open doors for formally trained scholars of Jewish secular and religious history and culture. That site is currently undergoing a reboot to reopen this coming summer. I'm working on a book introducing this history in more depth to a broad audience and working with The Strong to develop an exhibit scheduled for opening in November 2025.