



# TRANSCRIPT- Hadassah Magazine Presents: The Jewish 'Playmakers' Behind Barbie, G.I. Joe and Mr. Potato Head

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[00:00:18] **Michael Kimmel:** Right.

[00:00:18] **Renée Rosen:** She's had a million wedding dresses, but Ken is still waiting at the altar for her.

She's never taken that walk.

[00:00:25] **Michael Kimmel:** It's a good thing 'cause Ken's her brother.

[00:00:31] **Lisa Hostein:** Hello, and welcome to Hadassah Magazine Presents, a program and podcast for those who love *Hadassah Magazine* and want more, and for those who have never heard of the magazine and are looking for stimulating conversations with acclaimed Jewish authors, thinkers, celebrities, and culinary stars. I'm your host, Lisa Hostein, the executive editor of *Hadassah Magazine*.

I'm delighted to be in conversation today with Michael Kimmel, whose book *Playmakers: The Jewish Entrepreneurs Who Created the Toy Industry in America*, takes a broad view of the toy world. And Renée Rosen, who takes a deep dive into one slice of it with her *Let's Call Her Barbie*. At a time of so

much heaviness in the world, it is a welcome change, fitting for summertime, to focus on a lighter topic.

Lighter though it may be, there's much more to this discussion than the fun toys so many of us grew up with. The two books by our guests that will inform the bulk of our discussion, both terrific reads that I highly recommend, also provide tremendous insight, not only into the evolution of the toy industry and the outsized Jewish role, but also include so much more about all kinds of unexpected but related topics, from the development of child psychology to the industrial growth of plastics.

And now to introduce our guests more fully. Michael Kimmel is a SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Gender Studies and founder of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University, and the author of many books, including most recently, *Playmakers: The Jewish Entrepreneurs Who Created the Toy Industry in America*.

Renée Rosen is a USA Today bestselling author of 10 novels, all historical fiction and women's fiction, that are inspired by iconic women, cultural movements, and moments that changed the course of American history. In addition to her most recent book, *Let's Call Her Barbie*, her titles include *Fifth Avenue Glamour Girl*, *The Social Graces*, and *Park Avenue Summer*.

Renée lives in Chicago, where she is currently working on her next novel. Welcome to you both. Thank you so much for joining us today. So before we get into your books, I wanna ask a really basic question of you both. What were your favorite toys during your childhood? Michael, you go first

[00:02:44] **Michael Kimmel:** I had several.

Not only, of course, did I have a teddy bear, which that's the sort of origin story of my research and in my book. My great uncle, George Hansberg, invented the pogo stick. So that was a favorite. But I have to say, probably my favorite toy when I was a kid was my Mr. Machine. I just loved it. It was created by a first generation Jew, as were virtually all the toys that any of us played with, and Marvin Glass in Chicago.

I guess that was probably my favorite of all of them. Although I did my fair share with my dad of those models from Revell and Aurora with the glue and the decals and all.

[00:03:23] **Lisa Hostein:** Renée, is it obvious what yours was, or- Well- ... do you want me to guess?

[00:03:26] **Renée Rosen :** Yeah. I mean, I think I became a writer because of Barbie. Barbie taught me how to tell stories.

It wasn't even discussed. We just went to our friend's house with our Barbie cases. I will tell you this, my friends did not like playing Barbies with me because I always had to have a narrative arc of what was going on, and my friends just wanted to put on the pretty clothes and have Barbie and Ken kiss.

And I was like, "Wait, wait, wait, Barbie and Ken are not going to Paris. They're having financial problems." "Ken's got a gambling addiction. All that needs to be resolved." So I was very into the story.

[00:04:00] **Lisa Hostein:** And how old were you when you were having these thoughts?

[00:04:02] **Renée Rosen :** Oh, God, I, I was, you know, I was, like, eight, nine, 10.

[00:04:06] **Lisa Hostein:** Michael, your book, as I indicated, is so much more than about the Jewish toymakers, which of course is fascinating enough, just their stories. But as a true sociologist, you delve deep into the societies and circumstances from which they came and what they came upon. From the pogroms and the Pale of Settlement, the clash between German and Eastern European Jews in the early 20th century America, child psychology, the rise and impact of the baby boom generation, and even how plastics came to dominate industry in the mid-20th century, as we might remember from that famous line in the movie that you cite, The Graduate.

[00:04:39] **Renée Rosen :** Right. And

[00:04:39] **Lisa Hostein:** it turns out you have a family connection to one of the biggest names in toy making, but you didn't even know it. So how did that revelation lead to this massive study of the toy world that you undertook?

[00:04:49] **Michael Kimmel:** Well, it was, uh, COVID and, uh, my retirement, which happened simultaneously in early 2020.

There had been a photograph on my family's piano growing up, and it was of this old man with Shirley Temple sitting on his lap, and I had no idea who this

old man was or why Shirley Temple was sitting on his lap, and it was autographed to my mom. And it was from Uncle Morris and Shirley Temple. So, you know, when I was growing up, I used to ask, like, "Who is this guy and why don't I, why did I n- never meet him?"

And it turned out that Morris had created the teddy bear in 1902 and founded the Ideal Toy Company. Now, before you get any ideas, let me just be clear, he was my great-great-uncle. That is to say, the brother of my great-grandfather. And when they arrived at Castle Garden, which was the place you landed before Ellis Island, when they landed at Castle Garden, they had a big fight, and they never spoke to each other again.

So here was my great-great-uncle, who was the founder of the Ideal Toy Company, and Harris Michtom, my great-grandfather, who had nothing to do with the toy industry at all. So if you have this idea that somehow I'm to the manor born and all the, those big boxes of that season's toys came every Christmas, they did not.

I grew up a comfortable middle-class kid in suburban New York, but n- nothing like that. But that was my personal story, and so I started to, to research that. Like, how did they get here? Why did they create this teddy bear? Why did Morris go into the toy business? And that led me to think about all of the other toy companies that existed at the turn of the 20th century.

And it turns out that all but one was founded by a first-generation Jew, by which I mean either came as a young child or was born on the Lower East Side in complete poverty in the tenements. And it turned out they were all, all of them, Marx, Pressman, Mattel, Hasbro, Effanbee dolls, Aranbee dolls, Madame Alexander dolls, Lionel trains, all of them.

So that's how the b- book began to expand from what I thought was gonna be a nice, tidy, little family memoir into a very big, broad canvas that just kept getting bigger. As you mentioned, it included comic strips, you know, Dick Tracy, Joe Palooka, Popeye, Li'l Abner, to comic books, which was virtually a Jewish ghetto, and then eventually the child psychologist who theorized the whole thing, all of whom were first-generation Jews.

[00:07:17] **Lisa Hostein:** So fascinating. We're gonna get back to the teddy bear in a little bit, but Renée, I wanna turn to you. So I owe you a debt of gratitude for the article that you wrote for the magazine in July 2023, a- around the time of the release of the Barbie movie, and that article enabled us to put Barbie on

the cover of the magazine, along with her Jewish mother, Ruth, something I never thought I would do or never thought I would wanna do.

But here it was, fabulous, still one of my favorite covers of all time. So Let's Call Her Barbie is such a great story in which you explore the rise of one particular company, Mattel, another one of the giants, and particularly the Jewish mother who gave birth to Barbie and other top-selling toys. So tell us a little about Ruth and Elliot Handler, who were children of Jewish immigrants, and the beginnings of their business.

[00:08:02] **Renée Rosen** : So Ruth and Elliot both grew up in Denver. Elliot, I can't remember if it was his father or grandfather who was a rabbi, and it was sort of understood that he was gonna go to rabbinical school, but he was an artist. Ruth was the youngest of some say eight children, some say 10 children. She was the youngest daughter, and her parents spoke only Yiddish, and the two met, as I said, in Denver.

Ruth's mother, and this was really something that really shaped Ruth Handler, her mother, having had either eight or 10 children, was exhausted by the time Ruth came along. And she gave her daughter to her eldest daughter, Sarah, to raise. Even though Ruth sort of glosses over it in her memoir, like, "Oh, it was fine.

It was fine," you know, that had to have left a huge scar for her. And she falls in love with Elliot, and her sister steps in and basically says, "No, he's not good enough for you. You know, you're, you're gonna starve. He's a starving artist. You're gonna starve." Sarah sends Ruth to LA to stay with a, a relative, and little do they know that Elliot follows Ruth out there.

But they were absolute opposites in the sense that, you know, Elliot was very mild-mannered. He was an introvert. He was an artist. Ruth, they called her Ruthless for a reason. She was very petite, but what she lacked in height, she made up for in personality, and if she was in the room, you knew it. And her husband was sort of fooling around with some plastics, once again, plastics, and making tchotchkes.

And Ruth had gotten a job at Paramount Studios as a secretary. She comes home one day, and he and his friend, Harold Matson, are in the garage making these little bookends and all this stuff out of plastic. And Ruth comes home and she says, "I could sell those." And she does. And that's how they end up with a company.

And when they had to name it, they took Harold Matson's name, Matt, and Elliot, Mattel. That's where you got Mattel from. Even though Ruth was the driving force behind it, her name wasn't in the company.

[00:10:19] **Michael Kimmel:** Didn't Ruth and Elliot actually meet at a Jewish dance?

[00:10:22] **Renée Rosen :** Yes.

[00:10:23] **Michael Kimmel:** A dance in Denver. Yes.

[00:10:24] **Renée Rosen :** At a B'nai B'rith

[00:10:26] **Michael Kimmel:** dance.

B'nai B'rith dance. Yeah.

[00:10:27] **Renée Rosen :** Yeah, and he had to borrow five cents to get back in so he could ask her to dance. And it was truly, it was love at first sight for them.

[00:10:36] **Lisa Hostein:** That's so interesting. So I want to ask each of you to focus on some of the big toys that many of us, depending on our age, knew and loved and that continue to be consumed by millions of children.

So Michael, I want to go back to the teddy bear because that creation and the connection to your great uncle and its birth at a candy store in Brooklyn, if I'm not mistaken, I think a lot of people know, I knew that it was named after Teddy Roosevelt, but what's the origin story there?

[00:11:02] **Michael Kimmel:** The origin story is that in 1902, Roosevelt had gone to Mississippi to settle a land dispute.

Mississippi and Louisiana were having a dispute over a border that included a river. And after that was over, he was kind of grumpy and tired, and so he said, "I want to go hunt bears in Mississippi." And so they said, "Okay, great." They organized a bear hunt. Three days in and they hadn't seen a bear, and he was getting kind of pissed off about this.

So they finally captured this, like, scraggly old bear and tied it to a tree and said, "President Roosevelt, come here. You can kill this bear." And he took one look at it, and he said, "No, no, I'm not gonna kill that." Now, this story would've

ended there, and there would've been no teddy bear had not Clifford Berryman been along on this trip.

Clifford Berryman was the cartoonist for the Washington Post. Now, Morris owned a candy store, read all the newspapers. He had been a rabbinical student prior to coming here. He saw this cartoon, and he thought to himself, "This is adorable." Y- don't ask. I have no idea why he completely glommed onto this cartoon, but he said, "The czar would, would never have treated people so well as Teddy Roosevelt."

He became infatuated with it. He said to his wife, "Rose, let's go down in the basement, take some scraps of material. Let's make a little model of this bear and put it in the window of the candy store," which they did. And people came by and they said, "That's really cool. What is that? We want one." And so Morris and Rose said, "Well, we don't know.

We- we're calling it Teddy's Bear," with the, with the apostrophe S. And people said, "We want it," and, "We want one." So Rose and Morris went, you know, started hiring a couple of local yeshiva bochers, and they made... 'Cause who doesn't know tailoring? So they all started making these little dolls. They put them in the window.

They sold them, and it was, it was quite lucrative. And so Morris... Now, this is the part that's apocryphal, I must admit. We've never seen this letter, but apparently Morris wrote to President Roosevelt and asked him permission to call it a teddy bear. Roosevelt apparently wrote back, it was in Morris's memoirs, but I've never seen the document, that he said, "I don't know what my name will do in the bear business, but you're welcome to use it."

And so they created the teddy bear. 1902 was when it was created. 1904 was when they started marketing it and created the Ideal Toy Company. Now, the thing that's interesting about this story is if you grew up anywhere but the United States, this is not the story you would hear about the origin of the teddy bear.

You would hear that it was invented by Richard Steiff in Germany. If you look at the Steiff bear and the teddy bear, you can see it's seated. It's sad-looking. It needs love. Whereas the Steiff bear is standing up very straight, no expression on its face at all. The, the Ideal bear has a little frown. It really needs somebody to love it.

I'm tempted to say it even looks Jewish. In any case, that is in the Smithsonian. That original bear is in the Smithsonian in the Hall of the Presidents next to Roosevelt's material. So that's the origin of the story, and they eventually began to produce it. The Steiff bear was produced around the same time, so there's, you know, great idea happened twice at the same time period.

And that's the origin of the story, and they went on. Mostly, Ideal was best known for making dolls. The way that the doll industry worked in the US, you had to have a new doll every year for the Christmas season. About 85% of all toys are sold between Thanksgiving and Christmas. So guess who invented the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade?

The Jewish department stores, of course. Gimbels and Macy's and F.A.O. Schwarz.

[00:14:45] **Ad:** Attention, book lovers. Are you an avid reader? Do you especially love our episodes of Hadassah Magazine Presents that feature authors talking about their books? Then you might want to join a Hadassah book club. There are Hadassah book clubs across the country who meet in person and online to talk about books by women, books with Jewish themes, and books they love.

To find out if there's a Hadassah book club near you, or if you would like to start one, email us at [engagement@hadassah.org](mailto:engagement@hadassah.org).

[00:15:21] **Lisa Hostein:** So Renée, of course, we want to hear from you about Barbie's story, right? It might come as a big surprise to some when you describe her German, perhaps not so savory origins. Tell us that story.

Yeah,

[00:15:33] **Renée Rosen :** yeah. Well, first we have to understand, though, why Ruth wanted to create a doll like Barbie. She recognized that there was a huge gender gap in the toy market. She had two children, and we can circle back to her children later, but her son had toy trucks, he had toy soldiers, he had guns, he had all kinds of toys to choose from.

What did her daughter have? Baby dolls. And Ruth wanted to create a doll that would empower young girls, that you could be anything. There were no limits to what you could do. So fast-forward, but she's not a designer, right? She's not a toy designer, but she's got this idea. She and her family are in Europe on a

vacation, and she sees a doll in a souvenir shop window, and her name is Bild Lilli.

And Bild Lilli has breasts And she is a full-figure doll, and she is for men. She's a prostitute novelty gag doll based on a comic strip character named Bild Lilli. She was never intended for little girls. She was a gag gift. She was for bachelors and all that. Well, Ruth sees the doll and says, "Oh my God, this is exactly what I'm talking about."

So she gets two of the dolls, she runs over to Elliot and says, "Elliot, Elliot, this is the doll I want to make." He thinks she's kidding. He's like, "You're crazy. You cannot give a little girl a doll with breasts. It's indecent." Ruth being Ruth persisted, but when she goes back to Mattel with Bild Lilli, and I would encourage people to Google Bild Lilli because that's Barbie's DNA.

She looks exactly like Barbie. When she goes into the boardroom, and she is the only woman in the boardroom among all these Ivy League engineers and designers, she says, "Gentlemen, you want into the lucrative doll market? Here's our way in." And their reaction is exactly the same as Elliot's. "You've got to be kidding.

It's indecent." It was an uphill battle for her with Barbie from the get-go.

[00:17:41] **Michael Kimmel:** Barbie comes out in 1959. Ideal had considered, in 1956, they had approached Marilyn Monroe- Right ... about doing a Marilyn Monroe doll and licensing her because they also w- a designer at Ideal thought, "Yeah, you know, a doll that's not just a baby that you have to shampoo her hair or that wets or that you give a bottle to."

The board at Ideal laughed him out of the room, said, "There's no way we could possibly ever market a doll that looks like Marilyn Monroe to young girls. It would be indecent." And so they passed on the idea, and of course, three years later, Barbie was born and- Right ... is still the best-selling toy in history.

[00:18:22] **Renée Rosen :** Michael, was it Madame Alexander? I mean, there were other adult dolls, but they did not look ... Barbie was a teenage fashion model. She was all about the clothes, but there were several other dolls that attempted to be adult dolls, but they just still sort of had a baby doll body.

[00:18:43] **Michael Kimmel:** Right.

[00:18:43] **Renée Rosen :** Kind of odd.

[00:18:44] **Michael Kimmel:** They were not genetically correct.

Right. Uh,

[00:18:47] **Renée Rosen :** I, I also would argue- Well, we could argue Barbie wasn't either.

[00:18:49] **Michael Kimmel:** You should Google, as Renée says, you should Google Bild Lilli. She was sassy. She had an edge to her. In the comic strips, you know, she would be at a beach wearing a two-piece bathing suit, which was really quite risqué, and a policeman would come over and said, "I'm sorry.

At this beach, you can only wear a one-piece bathing suit." And Bild Lilli says, "Okay, which part would you like me to take off?" She was sassy and in your face. Although she was sold as a kind of sexy doll to men, she was proto-feminist in the same way that Barbie was, I think.

[00:19:20] **Renée Rosen :** Yeah.

[00:19:20] **Lisa Hostein:** I actually want to get to that point because- We all know people who love Barbie, and we know people who hated Barbie.

And as you said, she was a fashion model. She had this perfect body that, you know, none of us could begin to replicate, or very few of us. But she was touted as a feminist and derided by many feminists. So Renée, can you talk about how central that debate was as she landed in the market? And was this an issue that people at Mattel cared about?

[00:19:48] **Renée Rosen :** There's so many facets to that question. When they were trying to figure out how to market Barbie, they did these living laboratories, but what we would consider a focus group today, and they interviewed a bunch of little girls, and they all loved Barbie. "Oh, Barbie's wonderful." Then they interviewed the mothers, and the mothers-

are appalled. You know, "Oh my God, she's a hussy. I wouldn't leave the house dressed like that," blah, blah, blah, blah. "No way would I give my daughter this doll." Except all the mothers did agree that their daughters all said, "Oh, Mommy, Barbie is so well-groomed, and she's so well put together." And you know, it's the 1950s.

It's late 1950s, and the mothers are lamenting, "I can't get my daughter to wash her face, let alone put on a dress." Mm. "Comb her hair. How am I ever gonna

get her a man?" You know, I'll never be able to marry her off. And that was the light bulb moment for Ruth, when she realized that the way to the mothers is buy your daughter a Barbie.

She will show your daughter how to accessorize herself, and therefore- Mm-hmm ... she will get a man. But Ruth was very adamant that Barbie will never get married.

[00:21:00] **Michael Kimmel:** Right.

[00:21:00] **Renée Rosen :** She's had a million wedding dresses, but Ken is still waiting at the altar for her. She's never taken that walk.

[00:21:07] **Michael Kimmel:** It's a good thing, 'cause Ken's her brother.

[00:21:09] **Renée Rosen :** Well, yeah, yeah. And you know, that, when I found that out, I'm like, has anybody written a novel about this? That her daughter is Barbara and her son is Ken.

[00:21:20] **Michael Kimmel:** Right.

[00:21:20] **Renée Rosen :** You know, big ick factor there. Big, big ick factor. But-

[00:21:23] **Lisa Hostein:** And as you indicate in the book, that was actually a huge process to find the name, right?

Yeah. I mean, it took what? Like, over a year to kind of come up with a name, and then suddenly

[00:21:32] **Renée Rosen :** the light bulb went on. Well, they were going to call it the Barbara doll. Yeah. You know, they had all these various... And the thing that's interesting, the head engineer at Mattel was a gentleman named Jack Ryan- Hmm

who was also married to a woman named Barbie. And so you had Ruth's daughter that was Barbie, and Jack's wife. And you know, if Ruth was the mother of Barbie, then Jack Ryan was certainly the father of Barbie. Hmm. We wouldn't have had Barbie without both of them, so- Hmm ... who named her? It's interesting.

[00:22:02] **Lisa Hostein:** Right. Right. So I'm intrigued by the fashion element, right? And you actually talk about meeting one of the top des- I mean, they hired top designers- Hmm ... who, like, made these- Yeah ... you know, magnificent little, tiny clothes. And you met one of them who had worked there, who not only revealed a lot about the clothing element, but also what was going on behind the scenes there.

Tell us about that.

[00:22:24] **Renée Rosen :** Yeah. Meeting Carol Spencer, that was sort of the research jackpot for me. She was 90 years old when I met her. She's still going strong. She had started at Mattel in 1963, so she was, worked very closely with Elliot and Ruth, and her boss, Charlotte Johnson, who was a fashion designer.

Carol was also a designer, and she told me all the steps they had to go through to dress Barbie, and that Barbie's measurements, which, I mean, let's, she's come under attack constantly. 39-inch bust, 18-inch waist, and 33-inch hips. But it was not some misogynistic fantasy. Barbie's measurements, for the most part, were dictated by the wardrobe.

If Barbie was one-sixth the scale of a real woman, there was no such thing as one-sixth the thickness of fabric. So fabric- Mm ... was fabric was fabric. And they're making these very intricate designs with waistbands and little zippers and hooks and eye. All that was adding bulk to Barbie. So unless she had an abnormally thin waist- Mm-hmm

those clothes, she would not have had that hourglass figure when she was dressed. Now, I cannot speak to the 39-inch bust line. I think that was all Jack Ryan.

[00:23:40] **Lisa Hostein:** Makes sense, right.

[00:23:41] **Michael Kimmel:** Let me add something to this, 'cause I think it's, it's important. Mattel takes this to an entirely different level. Morris Micklem, when he was making his dolls, and particularly the Shirley Temple doll, what he did was he licensed with Shirley Temple that every time she would put out a new movie, they would put out a new outfit.

They didn't need, because they had invented unbreakable rubber and plastic for her face. Prior to that, the dolls had been porcelain and bisque, and they were very fragile. But he licensed it, and he realized that there was a, a big after-sale

market in the clothing. Barbie, it is said, is the largest women's clothing manufacturer in the world.

[00:24:20] **Renée Rosen** : Well, it was the razor blade theory, right?

[00:24:22] **Michael Kimmel**: Yeah.

[00:24:22] **Renée Rosen** : You know? And Ruth inherently knew that, that the money that they were gonna make on this doll was not in the sale of Barbie, it was her wardrobe. Whereas Bild Lilli, remember that each doll had their own outfit. Right. She's like, "Well, what if I want that outfit?"

"Well, then you have to buy that doll."

[00:24:38] **Lisa Hostein**: One last question about Barbie, and that is, you started writing your book, Renée, before the blockbuster Barbie movie in 2023 came out, but it was published afterwards. Yeah. So how did the movie impact the book?

[00:24:50] **Renée Rosen** : It didn't impact the writing at all. I was about three-quarters of the way through, and then all the movie hype started.

And if you remember, they weren't showing their cards at all. I had- Lucky

[00:25:03] **Michael Kimmel**: you ...

[00:25:04] **Renée Rosen** : no idea. I was freaking out. I remember many conversations with my agent, my editor. Do we try and rush the book out? What do we do here? And I'm glad that we waited, 'cause it was important to get it right. But what, what it did really influence was the marketing.

Originally, I had a different title, and it was suddenly, you know, it's not gonna be The Dollmakers. We need Barbie in the title. Mm-hmm. And getting a hot pink cover. Yeah. So that was what it affected more than anything.

[00:25:36] **Michael Kimmel**: We know that Ruth and Elliot were Jewish, but is Barbie Jewish? And my reason for asking is because her backstory suggests a tremendous amount of antisemitism and Jewish self-hatred on the part of Ruth and Elliot.

Her backstory is that her name is Barbara Millicent Roberts, and she comes from Willow, Wisconsin. Wisconsin,

[00:25:57] **Renée Rosen** : yeah.

[00:25:58] **Michael Kimmel**: And she's absolutely a WASP. How do they reconcile their Jewishness with Barbie's non-Jewishness? And I ask this because this is an assimilationist story in here, as well as confronting antisemitism.

Morris's son, I mean, it doesn't get more assimilationist than this. His son was named Benjamin Franklin Michtom, right? I mean, they're so desperate to fit in, to find a home, to find a place. It's a tease to say, is she Jewish? But you know what I'm asking about her backstory.

[00:26:29] **Renée Rosen** : I think one thing that was very important to Ruth was that Barbie could be relatable to everyone.

If you look back at the very first Barbies, they were certainly attractive, but Barbie got much more glamorous- Mm ... and beautiful through the years. She didn't want Barbie to be that beautiful. Attractive, yes, but a doll that every child- Mm ... could relate to. So I think the fact that her background is about as generic, really, Mi- Midwest-

[00:27:01] **Michael Kimmel**: It's Clark Kent.

[00:27:02] **Renée Rosen** : Yeah. You know? I mean, so that there was no real attachment to that. I don't think it was that we don't want to reflect anything about Judaism in it. I think it was more about being all-inclusive. And if you look at the dolls that Mattel has continued to produce, they literally have a doll with almost every body shape.

They've just really gone as far as they possibly can to make sure that- There is a doll for every child out there. Yeah. Mm-hmm. So that's kind of where I think it's at.

[00:27:36] **Lisa Hostein**: Michael, you know, I think that you raise this issue a lot in your book, and so talk a little bit more about this assimilationist story because, as you said, Ben Michtom's name is reflective of that as well.

[00:27:47] **Michael Kimmel**: The Barbie story has that also. I mean, Siegel and Shuster created Superman, and they made him not a Jewish boy from Cleveland, but a generic farm boy from Kansas. There was an effort to try to

make it mainstream American, as you say, Renée. I think it's really- Yeah ... important that in a way she's glamorous, but in another way she's generic.

She's American, and so is Superman. Clark Kent is as American as they get. There is some self-hatred in not proclaiming their Jewishness. A lot of the superheroes created by the comic book guys were all, you know, they all wrestled with it. They hated the Nazis, but they didn't fully claim their Jewishness until Jack Kirby created The Thing, who's- Yeah

explicitly Jewish.

[00:28:33] **Renée Rosen** : Where would you put G.I. Joe in all of that? Because -

[00:28:37] **Michael Kimmel**: I think G.I. Joe belongs in a kind of conversation about gender in a way, which is to say initially when Jerry Reiner created G.I. Joe, he created it for Ideal. And again, Ideal missed this one also. They said, "Boys aren't gonna play with dolls, even if they're 11 inches tall, and, you know, they just won't do it."

And so Reiner said, "Well, do you mind if I take it somewhere else?" And Ben said, "Oh, sure. Go ahead." He took it to Hasbro, and Hasbro created G.I. Joe. There is a wrestling with anti-Semitism and the desire for assimilation that goes through all of the children's books and the comic books. The comic book artists did not wanna go into comic books.

They wanted to go into advertising. But in the 1930s and '40s, advertising was a very white shoe, very anti-Semitic profession in New York. So these guys, these artists, these young boys w- would bring their portfolio to the advertising agency, and the ad agency would say, "I'm sorry, we already have our quota of Jews," which usually meant zero.

What did they do with their artistic talent? Yeah. They went to the pulps. So there's always this story, this running story of confronting anti-Semitism, desire for assimilation, that really lies behind a lot of these creations, I think.

[00:29:53] **Renée Rosen** : Yeah.

[00:29:54] **Lisa Hostein**: And not only the creations, it seems just getting at the question of why did they dominate this business?

You know, you talk about the Jewish influence extending beyond toys to comic books, as you mentioned, children's literature, movies, child psychology. You look at them all through the prism of ethnicity and immigration. So what was going on in the minds and what opportunities were there or weren't there that were available to these Jewish immigrants and, in some cases, their children?

Like, why is it that so many Jews ended up in these areas?

[00:30:22] **Michael Kimmel:** This, this is the question that I posed to myself. After all, I'm a sociologist. So I wanna know why them, why then, why there. You know, why was it in New York or in the US at that particular moment at the turn of the 20th century, and why these Jews?

And I came up with several different answers. One of the answers, of course, is... And this relates in a way to the Barbie story. One is the technology, the ability to create and mass produce toys which didn't exist before. In the 19th century, most toys in America were either imported from Germany or they were handmade.

[00:30:56] **Renée Rosen :** Did you find, though, that they were just starting to do everything overseas for economically-

[00:31:02] **Michael Kimmel:** Initially, all the dolls and toys were imported from Germany, if they weren't, like, rag dolls or corn husk dolls and things like that. So there's the technological change. But then most important, at the turn of the 20th century, there was a progressive movement that was beginning in the United States around John Dewey and at Columbia And it basically led to compulsory education and an effort to end child labor.

So child labor restrictions, compulsory education created a kind of time zone that was called childhood that wasn't about working, and children were seen not as necessarily economic assets, but also as creatures of their own. Now, the child-rearing literature, and this is where I think the Jews come in, the child-rearing literature at the turn of the 20th century would horrify you today.

They said things like, "If your baby wakes up and is crying in the middle of the night, go in and give them a good spanking, and they'll stop." Or, "Don't let your baby look at pictures of ugly people." Don't ask. Or the most famous, before Benjamin Spock, the most famous child-rearing expert in the United States was John Watson.

In his book in 1928 about raising babies, basically said, "Don't ever hug or kiss your child. If you have to, before they go to bed, you can kiss them on the head and then shake their hand in the morning when they wake up, but basically show no affection." And Jews, these Yiddish-speaking Jews from the Pale of Settlement come here, and they had the exact same reaction that Renée just had.

Are you kidding? Children are wonderful. They're Yiddish inachas. They're creative, they're loving, they're curious. We have to create environments for them. These Yiddish-speaking Jews who came from the Pale of Settlement had a very different idea of children, and it is not a surprise that these Yiddish-speaking Jews were the ones who completely dominated the attendance in kindergartens and Montessori schools in the first two decades of the 20th century.

So they had a very different idea of childhood. So that plus the creation of the space of childhood, not working, play is the business of childhood, as one child reformer said. So there you have the sort of material base of this. Then you have a century of child-rearing experts, child psychologists, all of whom were also first-generation Jews, including Maslow and Erikson and Brofenbrenner and Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, nee Carol Friedman, and, uh, Haim Ginott.

All of them first-gen Jews, including, of course, the dean of all child psychology, Erik Erikson. That's not obviously his real name. You know, complete assimilationist model, right, Lisa? Erik, son of Erik. Like, I've given birth to myself. His real name was Eric Hamburger. Again, an assimilationist story. So they theorized this whole idea of children as inquiring and curious, and they should be nurtured and developed, and that clashed with the traditional Protestant 19th century child-rearing model, which was children are willful, and the goal of child-rearing is to break their will.

[00:34:19] **Lisa Hostein:** So that whole phenomenon in terms of the psychological thinking, but how is it that these individuals decided, okay, it's the toy industry that we're gonna jump into?

[00:34:29] **Michael Kimmel:** A lot of it was luck. From teddy bears to dolls, I mean, Ideal was best known for dolls. Other companies came in, as I mentioned, Aaron B, R-- S&B.

Louis Marx basically was your classic Jewish toymaker. You create a toy at one company, he would make more of it and undersell you. No matter what you made, he would sell it cheaper. And Lionel trained Lionel Cohen, who changed

his name to Lionel Cowen, just so you wouldn't get the wrong idea, or get the right idea, I suppose.

It was one of those niches. And of course, the German Jews, who had come in the middle of the 19th century- Remember, they were much more prosperous, much more middle class, much wealthier. And what did those German Jews in the mid-19th century do? They created all the department stores. So these Yiddish Jews who created the toys suddenly had a place to sell them

[00:35:20] **Lisa Hostein:** Tell us the story about Curious George.

I think a lot of people may know, but not everybody, and it's such an important story, a little bit later, a kind of a escape from Nazi-land.

[00:35:30] **Michael Kimmel:** This is a beautiful story, and it's part of a way in which I feel that learning the Jewish origins... The New York Public Library did a list in 2005 of the 100 most important children's books of the 20th century, and 42 of them were written by first-generation Jews, which is way disproportionate, right?

So I started asking that question also, and I'll tell you the Curious George story because what I feel like is that this is the backstory of so many of the children's books that were read to me as a child. One of my favorites was Caps for Sale, for example. I just loved that book. And first-generation Jew.

And Ezra Jack Keats' book, Snowy Day, which was so revolutionary 'cause it foregrounds a little Black boy, but it's not about race. It's about a snowy day and a little boy walking through his neighborhood. The story of Curious George is that Hans and Margareta Rey were living in Paris in June of 1940. And in June of 1940, the Nazis were coming into France, France having surrendered.

They were marching through from the north and the east, through Belgium, through Lille, down toward Paris, and everyone has always seen those amazing photographs of the German troops marching up the Champs-Élysées. Well, the night before that photograph, Hans and Margareta Rey, Jews living in Paris, said, "We better get out of here."

They put together two bicycles from random parts, and they bicycled south and west out of Paris, down through the PyRenées to Spain, and eventually got to Lisbon, took a boat to New York, and in their backpack was a story about a little monkey called Fifi. And they got here, and they brought it to an editor who

they had had some contact with earlier, and the editor said, "I don't think Fifi's gonna fly."

So they came up with Curious George, and Curious George's backstory is fleeing the Nazis marching into Paris. And so many of the children's books that we knew and loved when we were children have that kind of story. Did you know that Eloise was Jewish? I mean, there doesn't get to be a more non-Jewish character than the person who lives on the 33rd floor of the Plaza Hotel and rather hates to take her bath.

I mean, it's just amazing, the backstory of so many of these books, including probably the number one children's book of the 20th century, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. Maurice Sendak was a window dresser at Saks Fifth Avenue. When he met Ruth Krauss and Crockett Johnson. Crockett Johnson, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*.

And Ruth had him illustrate a book, uh, that she was doing, and instead of doing the standard thing, which is you pay the artist a flat fee, she let him share the royalties, and it was enough money for him to quit his job and actually start to do children's books. So all of these stories, if I was generous to myself, I would say the gift I feel like I'm giving you is the backstory of the books that you're reading to your children and your grandchildren, and the books that were read to you as a child.

This is their Jewish backstory, and we didn't even know it. Most of the time I was doing this research, I was saying to myself, "Why didn't anybody tell me this?"

[00:38:48] **Lisa Hostein**: It's so true. We didn't know it. Renée, what do you think about all that in terms of, you know, I don't know if it's connected so much to the Barbie, but again, in terms of the story that you tell about Ruth and Elliot and the fact that they didn't necessarily continue their Jewish piece, but there was a every person sentiment connected with Barbie.

[00:39:05] **Renée Rosen** : Yeah. One thing with Michael's book that comes through so beautifully is the Jewish pride. Just everything and the nostalgia of growing up, it will bring back lots of wonderful memories. The one thing about Mattel, where maybe it was not necessarily Jewish-centered or anything like that, but they were very, very progressive in terms of who they hired.

They didn't care if you were Mexican, you were Asian. If you could do the job, man, woman, you did it. And a New York Times reporter had visited Mattel in

the early '60s, and he said, "My God, it's like the United Nations here." They were very ahead of the curve in terms of that. They really valued people for their skills, what they could do, what they could bring.

But I also think that for whatever reason, why was it the Jews that brought all these toys to market? I think there's a certain fire in our bellies, you know, a certain hustle. We've always been the underdogs, right? We fight a little bit harder, we try a little bit harder, we work harder. There's a work ethic there, that entrepreneurial spirit.

And whether you're making Mr. Potato Head or you're making Hot Wheels, there's something inherent that I think came through in that era.

[00:40:29] **Michael Kimmel:** I think Mattel is really quite revolutionary in one respect. Ideal tried to manufacture and did manufacture in the late 1950s, early '60s, the first mass-produced Black doll in America, the Sara Lee doll, and it has a long history.

I tell a, a long history in the book about how they tried to do it. And the Sara Lee doll, which was endorsed by Eleanor Roosevelt and tons of Black celebrities, it failed because the department stores, like Saks Fifth Avenue, refused to carry it because they were afraid that Black people would come into the department store and buy it, and it would scare the white people away.

So Ideal withdrew it from the market two years after launching it. The first mass-produced Black doll is Chrissy, which is Barbie's friend.

[00:41:14] **Renée Rosen :** Yeah.

[00:41:14] **Michael Kimmel:** And Mattel has always been good on race, and I think this underscores something that Renée was just talking about, about the multicultural aspects of the place.

Mattel gave a grant of over \$100,000 to Shindana, which was a Black-owned Black doll company in Watts that was just starting up during the Black Power era in 1965, '66. And Mattel underwrote the production of their first dolls because they thought there should be one. That's a marvelous story about using your power to empower others.

[00:41:51] **Ad:** Hadassah is life-changing for those we heal and for those who help. When people connect through Hadassah, they change lives in their communities, in the US, in Israel, and around the world, and in turn, change

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[00:42:25] **Lisa Hostein:** So we have two questions from the audience actually, and they're similar. One is, if Jews invented the toy industry in America, what about overseas? Were there also Jewish toy makers in Europe? How did they impact the toy industry worldwide?

[00:42:37] **Michael Kimmel:** The answer to the question is twofold. One is Jews were very involved in the only other place where there was a major mass produced toy manufacturing in the 19th century, and that was Germany.

All those metal soldiers, wood toys, and all of the dolls that were imported, Jews were very involved in that toy industry, not elsewhere. And the second answer is, that's about all I know, because I really focused on the Jewi- the, the Jews once they got here.

[00:43:03] **Renée Rosen :** All I can tell you is that Barbie was produced in Japan because she was too costly to do it here in the States, and that was the only cost-effective way they could find to do it.

Even though Jack Ryan spent a great deal of time there with an interpreter, there was still clearly a language barrier, because when the first Barbie prototypes came back to Mattel, all the dolls had Asian features. And they had to send them back. And then all the Barbies came in, they had nipples. And Jack Ryan famously sawed off the nipples with his pocket knife and sent them back.

All the clothes were made over there. Everything was made over there. So, and yet they didn't sell Barbie in Japan

[00:43:45] **Lisa Hostein:** Michael, you know, it's refreshing to see a book title these days that has the word Jewish in it, given the current mixed climate for Jewish-themed books. You know, one could read your book and think the Jews really do control the world, or at least that they controlled American culture, toys, books, Hollywood, which of course we know that they controlled Hollywood.

Right. But have you had any negative experiences from either suggested changes from the publisher within the text to public events? Have you had any backlash?

[00:44:11] **Michael Kimmel:** Not yet. You know, Morris Micklberg didn't exactly have a foreign policy. There's a story there that I don't think is particularly politically problematic, which is the assimilationist story.

Renée was saying this before, and I think of the idea of resilience. You know that expression, you know, if life gives you lemon, make lemonade. Jews are the ultimate lemonade makers. You're not gonna let us be advertisers? Okay, we'll do comic books. You don't want us to join your country club? Okay, we'll have our own.

It does seem to me that there is that story of Jews have never been the home team. They've always been the away team. And it does seem to me that this desire for a home, desire to fit in, is so powerful. It's the story of the Lower East Side, how people struggled and scraped everything they could to feel like that they belonged here.

I have to say, it's an occupational hazard as a sociologist to not simply want... My mother and I used to talk about this. I think my mother would've been very happy had I just written a parade of awesome Jews. But I wanted to tell a story about why. Why them? Why there? It's a story about wanting to fit in and at the same time wanting to stand out.

Every girl who's ever played with Barbie wants to fit in and stand out, and the one thing you don't wanna do is to stick out.

[00:45:27] **Lisa Hostein:** One more question from the audience. If Mattel was so multicultural, why didn't it produce a specifically Jewish doll?

[00:45:33] **Renée Rosen :** Well, initially Barbie was the headliner, and then there was so much fan mail that came in from little girls.

Barbie was getting more fan mail than Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor combined. All the little girls wrote in, and what did they say? "My Barbie's lonely. My Barbie wants a boyfriend," and that's where Ken came from. Each doll was very strategically brought on, but- As the years have gone on, there's a Barbra Streisand doll.

They have modeled Barbie after various celebrities and all that. I don't have a really good answer for why there hasn't been a Jewish Barbie. She's probably coming, overdue. But, you know, they certainly have a, a doll for just about every other-- to represent every- everyone else.

[00:46:23] **Michael Kimmel:** At the moment, I think that would be politically really challenging.

If you have a Jewish Barbie, you're gonna have a keffiyeh Barbie. It's tricky. Yeah. I do wanna say one thing about the assimilationist project, and that is what happened to Barbara and Ken, what happened to Mark Michtom, who was the grandson of Morris, the son of Ben, because the assimilationist story is really quite interesting.

Barbara Handler didn't talk to her mother for quite some time. They had a real falling out. She was freaked out about being Barbie. You know, if Barbie the doll is a screen on which people project stuff, imagine what life would've been like for Barbara Handler. So she was not a happy camper.

[00:47:00] **Renée Rosen :** Yeah, and Barbara also, 'cause I, I go into this quite a bit, their, their relationship in my book, because Barbara also came out and said, "I was an absolute brat."

[00:47:08] **Michael Kimmel:** But at the end of her life, who says now Barbara is living in a gated community, and she loves playing golf. Golf. And she has an English boyfriend. I mean, like, she's-- we've made it. And Marc Michtom, who had no interest in the toy business at all, his father made him executive vice president, but as soon as he could, he went public, sold his shares, took the company public, and eventually it dissolved.

He took his money and moved to Napa, where he opened a winery. Not exactly your typical Jewish story. Louis Marx's sons also had no interest in the toy business. They were successfully assimilated, by which I mean they no longer identified with the industries that brought them all the wealth that they had.

[00:47:50] **Lisa Hostein:** Isn't Hasbro still the only-

[00:47:52] **Michael Kimmel:** Yes ...

[00:47:52] **Lisa Hostein:** Jewish family

[00:47:52] **Michael Kimmel:** owned? Hasbro and Alan Hassenfeld, who just passed last year, it was still carrying on, and, and the, the family still has a controlling interest in Hasbro. They are the nicest people I have talked to in the entire toy industry, aside from Eddie Goldfarb, who's now 105.

He's a toy inventor. He's the one who invented the Yakety Yak talk-- Chattering Teeth. That was his first toy. He's amazing. But they were some of the nicest people I talked to.

[00:48:18] **Lisa Hostein:** Well, I actually grew up in Rhode Island, and so the Hassenfeld name was very important- Of course ... as Jewish philanthropists and not only- Yeah

toy makers. So maybe that's a good note to end on. I wanna thank you both. This was really a wonderful conversation, such an important part of American Jewish history that, that we really haven't known. Renée and Michael, such a pleasure to talk with you today, and one last call to buy their books. I wish you good luck with whatever your future projects are.

[00:48:42] **Renée Rosen :** Thank you so much.

[00:48:43] **Michael Kimmel:** Thank you so much. A pleasure.

[00:48:45] **Lisa Hostein:** I wanna thank Arielle Kaplan, the magazine's digital editor, who both produced and promoted this program, and also produces the podcast, and to Libby Barnea, our deputy editor, who not only helped plan and implement this program, but always is very involved with these productions.

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