

Jews, although a minority, play a large part in the American entertainment industry and today's popular culture. Just think of film directors like Steven Spielberg and Woody Allen, actors like Barbara Streisand and Natalie Portman, comedians like Jerry Seinfeld and Jon Stewart, and, for any American Idol fans out there, even Paula Abdul. But despite the great parts they play now, many people may not know the full extent of their influence on the culture of today and throughout the history of America.

Jewish immigrants were, in fact, the founders and heads of many of the major film companies of today; such companies as Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios, and Warner Brothers. They were bravely (and somewhat desperately) attempting to find success in a land they had heard was a place where anyone could be wealthy.

When the Jews who would later become the moguls of the American film industry entered America, they found their opportunities for success limited. Anti-Semitism was strong, and many of the business owners didn't support immigrants, especially those who had experienced little formal education. As a result, many Jewish immigrants had to find work in businesses like the clothing industry, and some had a difficult time making a living.

But around 1910, when vaudeville was popular, penny arcades saw an increase, too. Penny arcades were small buildings where one would pay money (usually a

penny or so, hence the name) to play pinball machines or see peep shows. Peep shows were machines, where, after a coin was inserted, a crank was turned and cards with photographs were displayed sequentially which presented a flickering, live action motion picture. These were the precursors to the movie industry, as were nickelodeons, small theaters that showed short films for 5 cents, hence the name (once again).

Movies started off in small theaters, raking in viewers and profits from working class people. Although regarded as a mere novelty by many, the future moguls saw the potential in the small industry, and became involved in it. Many of them shared a goal; to cast off their earlier poverty and use whatever they could to become successful in the new industry.

Although coming from devoutly religious backgrounds and families, almost all of the moguls did not care for religion and some such as Harry Cohn, the ruthless leader of Columbia Pictures, even tried to deny his Jewish ethnicity.

The moguls did not want to be seen as Jews; they wanted to be seen as Americans. They feared that their background would only impair their business and lives as it had before their rise to power.

Driven by their determination to succeed in America and their desire for acceptance, these men became great patriots. Louis B. Mayer, the head of

MGM, even went so far as to say that his birthday was July 4th and that he could not remember his true birthday. These men were extremely successful, living wealthy lives with glamour, women and pleasure.

During their time in power, the moguls made a great deal of movies glorifying America, and it was films like these that manifested their dreams of a great America of equal opportunity and meritocracy. This was the dream that became inscribed in Americans' vision of their country, the dream the moguls had tried to live.

But, in doing so, the moguls had lost their heritage, their religion and background that made them Jews. They, in their quest to become American, had redefined what it meant to be American and had truly become assimilated.

After World War II the Jewish moguls' power in the industry began to weaken, after being accused of communism and anti-American activities (even after they had made a great deal of films for the war effort). Anti-Semites like John Rankin worked to kick the Jews out of Hollywood, and although they fortunately failed to destroy the Jews' so-called empire, many talented men left the industry

The leaders were shaken by the sudden attack too; for years they had been a great part of American culture, and now they had been attacked for, once again, being Jewish

It was this and the eventual deaths of many important men that ended the age of Jewish power in the movie industry. Although Jews are still one of the most prominent groups in Hollywood, larger conglomerates and companies own the mogul's original companies. However, the moguls' influences on American culture are still visible today, as is their dream of America, which survives in classic films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Now I'd like to contrast three of the men of Hollywood who built the empire and ultimately lost it

Adolph Zukor, like many poor Jewish immigrants of the late 1800s and early 1900s, began in the clothing business. Mildly successful for a time, he decided to go into the entertainment industry, starting with penny arcades, because of the money-making potential. He soon became interested in the movies, and got an early start in the business with his Famous Players company, becoming successful with nickelodeons and small theaters, and helping to establish Paramount Pictures. Later, he would control the company. It is still one of the largest and oldest film companies today.

Paramount was revolutionary in that it incorporated all aspects of filmmaking and distribution in a single company, and it was wildly successful. But Zukor, affected by his impoverished past, would settle for nothing less than the top. He would use whatever methods he could to eliminate opposing companies and become

supreme in the industry, never selling his own company or letting anything (even family) get in the way of business. He would often use strategies such as rumors and intimidation to destroy his competition.

Although his father had been a rabbi, Zukor abandoned his religion. He did return to his home in Hungary to contribute charity after World War I, but he was more a vicious businessman than a charitable figure. He was secular, but held little regard for humanism and was totally focused on his business and success.

Carl Laemmle, unlike Zukor, was not the stereotypical businessman willing to do anything for more money and power. Although very successful, his Universal Studios, founded in 1915, did not become a major competitor with other companies like Fox and Paramount until Laemmle's son took over. Carl Laemmle was more friendly and honest than the other moguls, which was also reflected in his appearance; short, elfish even, not imposing at all.

Although he wanted success as much as any other man in the movie business, he did not want the same kind that Zukor wanted. For almost the first forty years of his life, he had little success, moving from job to job, never becoming quite as wealthy as he would have wanted to be. Yet, nearing his fortieth birthday, he suddenly wanted something more than he had. He wanted success and recognition, and he would get it.

After losing his job in the clothing company, he became interested in the movies, and opened a nickelodeon in Chicago that was run mostly by him and his family. His theater became successful, and he opened another in Chicago. Soon he also went into distributing films, and his wealth grew substantially in only a few months.

As the movies exploded into popularity, Laemmle raked in even more profit. He, along with other Jews in the movie business, went up against the monopolistic Edison Film Trust around 1908 to 1915. This was a group founded by Thomas Edison, an anti-Semite, which held patents on motion picture cameras and raw film, attempting to limit the individual success of the Jewish filmmakers. The filmmakers fled to Hollywood partly because of the great California weather, but also to escape the dominance of the Edison Trust on the East Coast. Laemmle was one of the key fighters.

During the time that Jews were gaining great power in the movie industry, Laemmle established Universal Pictures and was no doubt one of the most powerful men in the industry. Yet despite his overwhelming success, he never forgot about his German hometown of Laupheim. He would return there many times, celebrating and donating money to the town. He even assisted Jews from the town to come to America before the rise of Nazism, effectively saving them from the future Holocaust. He was a humanitarian, a key aspect of Secular Humanistic Judaism, despite the fact that he was not religiously observant.

Leaving the industry would have little negative effect over his life, and in this way he was unlike the other moguls. He had achieved what he wanted all along, and had no desire to expand the wealth and power Universal had already given him.

These two men defined polar opposites in the industry; one a vicious businessman, the other a kind and charitable person.

Other men were a little closer to the middle ground in terms of viciousness and kindness, although still extremely deeply involved in their business. A fine example of this would be Louis B. Mayer, the president of MGM, who said he would never have been able to survive without his company. Like others in the business, he had been born in a poor village, but Mayer was different in that he actually grew up in Canada after his parents fled from Russian oppression in their Ukrainian hometown.

Mayer, after opening a few small theaters in Massachusetts from 1907 to 1916 later formed MGM with Samuel Goldwyn and Marcus Loew. During his time as the head of MGM, Mayer would be one of the most successful men in the country. The highest paid American during the thirties, Mayer made it his job to acquire as many movie stars as possible and, as a result, MGM was the biggest film company during the 1920s through the 1940s.

Mayer, although wanting power in the industry like any other mogul, did not want total control as Zukor did. One of Mayer's highest goals was to be accepted and loved, part of his motivation to acquire as many stars as possible. Not only a wealthy businessman, Mayer was the Chairman of the Republican Party of California during the early thirties, a strong political post in a party that was more progressive and liberal than the party of today. But Mayer, although powerful, would not have success forever.

Mayer was fired after a disagreement with the owner of MGM's parent company, Loews Inc. Although he did little in the way of promoting Secular Humanistic Jewish values, he made great contributions to the industry

As I stated earlier, the Hollywood moguls held little regard for religion, focusing mainly on their business. Although some performed philanthropic activities, like Carl Laemmle's support of his hometown, business was the major factor in the moguls' lives. When Frank Capra, Harry Cohn's best director, was about to leave Columbia, Cohn gave an emotional speech, saying, "I would die without Columbia!" Whether or not this was just an attempt to make Capra stay (which it succeeded at doing) or was really the truth does not matter, for it showed how involved Cohn was with his studio; the other moguls (with the exception of Carl Laemmle) shared his devotion. Adolph Zukor's Paramount Pictures had been his life's work - literally; he worked there up until his death at over 100 years old in the 1970s.

A few moguls were philanthropic, but it is debatable whether they were Secular Humanistic Jews. Yet, their work was a small example of Secular Humanism. They believed outright that no greater force would help them, as shown by their abandonment of organized religion. They built their success solely with their own fists and feet.

This is one aspect of Secular Humanistic Judaism as I see it: using one's own strengths and determination to live life, not depending on divine intervention to help your well being.

Although more of a secular value in general than a Secular Humanistic value, it shows that Jews, even in the early 1900s, were facing the same issues as we are today, such as overcoming Anti-Semitism and achieving greatness, and were using their own strengths to succeed.

Carl Laemmle, of course, was the closest to showing the true secular humanistic values that we believe in. I would like to learn from his example, that it is possible to be successful through hard work and self-reliance, but still retain the values of charity and philanthropy. This is a lesson we as Secular Humanistic Jews must explore and teach to others as we seek new ways to improve our lives and our world.

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