Interview with Michael Kimmel, author of **PLAYMAKERS:** ***The Jewish Entrepreneurs Who Created The Toy Industry In America***

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How did the idea for this book come about?

In one sense, I've been waiting to do this book all my life. When I was a boy, there was a photograph on the piano in our living room. It was of an older man with Shirley Temple sitting on his lap. "To Barbara," it said, "with love from Shirley Temple and Uncle Morris." (My mother's name was Barbara.). Okay, I knew who Shirley Temple was, but who the heck was "Uncle Morris?" And what was he doing on my piano?

It turned out Uncle Morris was Morris Michtom, the inventor of the Teddy Bear, the Shirley Temple doll, and countless other toys made by the Ideal Toy Company, which was, in the 1950s, the largest toy company in the world. I was always curious about this side of the family (from which we were largely estranged) and my retirement after 35 years as a professor provided the opportunity to begin to research what I thought would be a brief family history.

What did you learn in your research for this book that surprised you the most?

The biggest surprise was the first one: that not only Ideal, but pretty much every single major American toy company in the early years of the 20th century were run by first-generation Jews, the children of impoverished Yiddish-speaking immigrants. Mattel, Hasbro, Lionel trains, Marx, Pressman – and all through the century! The toys were created by these first-gen Jews, distributed by companies run by first-gen Jews and sold in department stores founded or run by largely German Jews of an earlier era (Gimbels, Macys, Abraham and Straus, Bergdorf Goodman, FAO Schwarz, Toys "R" Us). It was as if every famous toy of the century – Barbie, GI Joe, Mr. Potato Head, Rubik's Cube, Mr. Machine, Chatty Cathy - was Jewish!

Once I started down that path, I was stunned – truly stunned – by how extensive was the influence of these first-gen Jews in the creation of the material culture of childhood in the 20th century. From the comic strips like Li'l Abner, Joe Palooka, Popeye, Betty Boop, to virtually every single comic book superhero, to as pantheon of authors of children's books, and finally from the pioneers of the century's new field of developmental psychology, the presence – no, the dominance – of first generation Jews is incontestable.

Why were so many of these creators and inventors first-generation Jewish immigrants? Was there something about their Jewish experience that led them into certain fields?

Well, that's what I wanted to figure out! Why these poor children of Yiddish-speaking immigrants? Why here in New York (mostly)? Why them? Why then?

I think it was a combination of several factors. Many had tried to enter established professional fields and were excluded because of anti-Semitism. For example, most of the comic book artists

and writers had wanted to go into advertising, then a WASP-dominated white-shoe profession but couldn't get in. So there was a drive for assimilation, to gain a foothold in the new country in a new century, and there was the familiar roadblock of anti-Semitism, and so they needed to figure out alternate paths to express their creativity and ambitions for upward mobility.

So that begs the question: why stuff for children? Why not Chinese laundries, Italian masons, Irish police and firefighters? I think these Yiddish-speaking immigrants also had a different idea of childhood itself from the prevailing Puritan ideas that socialization basically meant breaking the will of the child, to make them more obedient and docile. To these Jews, childhood was precious, and children were curious and creative and needed a more loving family life. It was not mere coincidence that these ideas, carried in beat-up cardboard suitcases with the menorahs and prayer shawls, happened to dovetail so perfectly with the new Progressive ideas about education. Right place, right time, and right people to seize the opportunity, to see a niche opening right before their eyes. If the 20th century was to be the "century of the child," then someone had to cater to it.

How is this book an American story and not just a Jewish story?

In a sense, this Jewish story is the quintessential American story, a story of poor immigrants staking a claim for themselves and their families in a new world, overcoming obstacles, and succeeding in a world of opportunity.

You know, of course, that the most famous song of the entire 20th century was all about dreaming of that world "over the rainbow" where one's dreams could really come true. (And you probably, also know that "Over the Rainbow" was written by two first-generation Jews.). It is the song that captures the American Dream of starting over, finding one's way, and striving not only to assimilate, but to excel.

Horatio Alger's motto was that you make it in America by "pluck and luck." These first-gen Jews made their own luck, and it came to define childhood in America iun the 20th century.

What do you hope readers take away from the book?

In one sense, ***Playmakers*** is the hidden history of our childhoods. The toys and games we played with, the comic books we read, the children's books we read (and were read to us), the materials from which we constructed our fantasies – this is the story of the people who created them. It's an inspiring history of irrepressible creativity and ambition, but also joy. Being Jewish meant more than subscribing to a "religion of doubt" but also of joy, wit and mischief! What a pleasure for readers to see their childhoods – and those of their children and grandchildren – through this lens.

In what ways have your Jewish roots influenced your life and career?

My life, as I discuss in the book, is a miniature version of the larger story. My relative, Morris and Rose Michtom among them, were poor immigrants in Brooklyn, my grandparents went into the *schmatta* business (my grandfather owned a men's clothing store), and my parents were the

first to go to college, move to Long Island, and establish themselves as professionals. This wasn't just my story; it was the story of everyone I grew up with! The toys I played with, the plastic models I made, the books I read, the TV shows I watched, the comic books I devoured, the baseball cards I collected – indeed, the entire world of my childhood was filled with the stuff these people created.

In another sense, it is also not accidental that my liberal political outlook was handed down to me just as carefully and convincingly from those same relatives, who, in their support for the New Deal, proclaimed *die velt*, *yene velt Roosevelt*. My grandmother kept a little suitcase next to the door of their 5th floor apartment on Shore Road in Brooklyn (overlooking the construction of the Verrazano Bridge). At age 6 I asked her what it was for, and she said, "in case they come again." In my family, "never again" meant that whenever and wherever you see injustice, it is your moral obligation to speak out against it. I suspect that my career choices have always leaned towards manifesting that mandate.