

LIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM? THE CHALLENGE OF WRITING BIOGRAPHIES OF GERMAN-AMERICAN IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS

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Introduction: The GHI Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project

Since 2010, the collaborative research project “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present,” has explored the entrepreneurial, economic, social, and cultural capacity of immigrants by investigating the German-American example in the United States.¹ Biographies of businesspeople offer a new integrative perspective not only to trace the lives, careers, and business ventures of significant immigrants but to answer core questions of American, business, and migration history in a new way. Our main presupposition was that biographies would enable us to question notions of American exceptionalism in order to situate U.S. history in a transnational framework and understand the formation and ongoing changes of an immigrant nation over a period of nearly 300 years. The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project aims to explore hundreds of biographies; the sheer amount of this material has made clear that biographies can be used not only to analyze individual lives but also to address general questions in the history of capitalism and modernity.² The accumulation of biographical details should enable us to more clearly discern and analyze the general patterns of American history as a history of immigration and acculturation. Consequently, the project’s website includes a growing number of thematic essays and teaching tools intended to link the individual cases to the large number of historiographical sub-disciplines, and enable teachers and the general public to situate the individual cases in the larger American historical experience.

The biographies of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship project are freely available to the public via the project’s website <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org>. As of October 2014, more than 130 biographies had been posted, more than 50 additional manuscripts are in the editorial process, and eventually more than 200 individual contributions will provide detailed and nuanced information about German-American immigrant entrepreneurship during the last three centuries. The website offers not only biographical articles but also

- 1 For details, see <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org>.
- 2 An overview setting out the project’s goals was provided by Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann, “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: The German-American Business Biography, 1720 to the Present: A Research Project,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 47 (2010): 69–82. This piece, however, did not specifically address the genre of biography and its methodology as the present article and the companion pieces in this issue attempt to do.

fresh insights into migration, business, and social history by including more than 1,400 images and nearly 700 documents that shed light on business, family life, and social experiences. The research project covers the well-documented period of individual capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century but also presents more than twenty biographies each for the periods before 1840 and after World War II, providing a vivid picture of the dramatic changes in immigration, entrepreneurship, and the economic, social, political, and cultural framework of pre- and postindustrial American history.

Biographical research creates its own dynamics: with each new biography received from our contributors, we have had to learn how to deal with typical narratives of the genre, how to become more specific in our comments and review questions, and how to deal with the variations found among these reconstructed lives. Although the methodological and theoretical challenges of biographies were considered extensively in developing the project's research design, the practical experience of the last four years has pushed us towards constant re-reflection on the project's conceptualization and our editorial practice.

I. General Problems of Biographies

Although sociologists announced a “biographical turn” more than a decade ago, scholars have often had to defend biographical research against basic epistemological criticism.³ One well-known and broadly discussed example was French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's attack on the “biographical illusion.”⁴ For Bourdieu, biography was an expression of bourgeois ideology, with the identity and personality of the bourgeois emerging from a non-reflective approach that begins with the writer taking the subject's life for granted as a continuum of events that can — and should — be shaped into a linear narrative. Bourdieu argued that the individual is not given but produced, with attributes of identity and personality dependent on his or her social world, and that without an analysis of social and historical space there cannot be any understanding of a biography. Consequently, he proposed, biographical research should not start with an analysis of a proposed subjectivity but with the object structures of the social world.⁵ Bourdieu's argument challenged scholars to more deeply explore individual practices under varying social conditions. The usefulness of deconstructing the individual, on the other hand, is open to question, given that most people develop a

3 Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tom Wengraf, “Introduction: The Biographical Turn,” in *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*, ed. Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf (London, 2000), 1-30.

4 Pierre Bourdieu, “L'Illusion Biographique,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 62 (1986): 69-72.

5 Cf. Eckart Liebau, “Laufbahn oder Biographie? Eine Bourdieu-Lektüre,” *BIOS* 1990, 83-89.

coherent identity by using a consistent narrative of the self and the social world. British sociologist Anthony Giddens' discussion of the "ontological security" of modern individuals seems to be a better starting point for biographical research. People use their individual experience to give meaning and coherence to their lives even while acknowledging they have only an incomplete understanding and that there are a myriad of challenges and alternatives in the private and social worlds.⁶

Closely related to Bourdieu's criticism is the accusation that biographies tend to reproduce class structures.⁷ The biographical genre was, for a long period, a self-expression of the bourgeois subject and a solipsistic project of historians to enhance their own status through their reflections on the lives of "great men." In recent decades, however, this has changed with the rise of the history of everyday life and growing interest in the lives of individuals of atypical prominence from minority groups and of "ordinary" people, broadly speaking.⁸ Biographical research has not only benefitted from such new areas of attention but has become an important methodological and analytical tool for introducing the challenges of the "cultural turn" into historiography.⁹ Mentalities and meanings, practices and performance, emotions and feelings — all of these fields of modern research need a biographical backing. The genre of biography is no longer a backward and conservative method but an experimental field for the historiography of the twenty-first century.¹⁰ It allows a theoretically and methodologically advanced history without a meta-narrative.¹¹

This does not mean that biographies are a tool to examine the lost subjectivity and individuality of modern history. Bourdieu's warning that we cannot write biographies without a clear-cut understanding of historical context and a detailed empirical examination of the social world must be taken seriously. Although the growing importance of the genre can also be seen as one sign of the "age of fracture" and the attractiveness of a neoliberal, reflexive modernity, it is the interaction

6 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1991), 76 and passim; Anthony Giddens, *Konsequenzen der Moderne* (Frankfurt/M., 1996 [1990]), 117–127.

7 A good overview on the modern history of

biographical research can be found in Dirk Reinhardt, "Autobiographien als Quelle der Ernährungsgeschichte. Gedanken zur Einordnung in den Forschungskontext, zur Quellenkritik und Methodik," in *Neue Wege zur Ernährungsgeschichte*, ed. Dirk Reinhardt, Uwe Spiekermann and

Ulrike Thoms (Frankfurt/M., 1993), 113–157; Falko Schmitz, "19. Jahrhundert," 243–250, and Christian Klein and Falko Schmitz, "20. Jahrhundert," 251–264, both in *Handbuch Biographie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*, ed. Christian Klein (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2009).

8 See, for example, Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88 (June 2001): 129–144; Nick Salvatore, "Biography and Social History: an Intimate Relationship," *Labour History* 87 (2004): 187–192.

9 An overview is given by Simone Lässig, "Introduction: Biography in Modern History — Modern Historiography in Biography," in *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig (New York and Oxford, 2008), 1–26.

10 Jürgen Mittag, "Biografische Forschung und Arbeiterbewegung: Einleitende Anmerkungen," *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* 45 (2011): 5–20.

11 Ian Kershaw, "Biography and the Historian: Opportunities and Constraints," in *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography*, ed. Berghahn and Lässig, 27–39, here 31.

between public and private, the general and the individual, which allows a thorough description of a person's life and empirically solid results, which shed light far beyond the individual.¹² Modern biographies are an indispensable tool of historiography but they offer no silver bullet for significantly better results.¹³

Biographies are surely a challenge for historians: thinking about subjectivity pertains not only to this particular genre but has a bearing on the social role of all scholars doing historical research. Biographical research helps us to reflect — individually and as a profession — on how we organize knowledge and why. This process, ideally, can force us to think more honestly and self-critically about the uses and functions of history and historical knowledge in modern societies. The paradox is that not only do we attribute agency to others, but as experts, we are constantly fighting against the subjective knowledge of the majority. We no longer see our work — individually and as a profession — as an exact reconstruction of the past. Instead, we are more likely to reflect on how inherited narratives should be reconstructed and challenged — and why.

II. The Rise and Fall of Entrepreneurial Biography

Entrepreneurs, broadly stated, formed the core of the bourgeois middle and upper classes that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and have remained the most prominent and lauded figures in American society. Consider, for example, the celebration of small business as “the backbone of our economy” by President Barack Obama and the lionization of business leaders such as Steve Jobs, whose biography was a #1 bestseller.¹⁴ Although nineteenth and early-twentieth century biographies predominantly focused on “great” men (and a few women) — namely politicians, writers, civic activists, and religious leaders — entrepreneurs were also prominently covered in the public media of the time.¹⁵

These biographies were interested in the secrets of success and in the example that prosperous and innovative businesspeople presented. Biographers claimed to be offering keen insights into the intellectual

12 Susan E. Chase, “Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 2005), 651–680.

13 Volker Depkat, “Ein schwieriges Genre: Zum Ort der Biographik in der Arbeitergeschichtsschreibung,” *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* 45 (2011): 21–35.

14 “Remarks by the President After Roundtable With Local Business Leaders in Seattle, Washington,” August 17, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/17/remarks-president-> »

» after-roundtable-with-local-business-leaders-seattle-w; “Best Sellers: Hardcover Nonfiction,” *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 13, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/>

2011-11-13/hardcover-nonfiction/list.html (both accessed Oct. 7, 2014).

15 Theodore P. Greene, *America's Heroes: The Changing Models of Suc-*

cess in American Magazines (New York, 1970); Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002).

and moral worlds of industrialists. Austin Adams, for example, declared in his profile of John D. Spreckels that “I have long and keenly watched this big man. . . . I have watched him in moments of exaltation or of hilarity, and in moments of wordless grief and crushing sorrow; I have watched the working of his mind and spirit in no end of subjects. I know the man — his soul — his secret — and it is in the light of my discovery of this inward and spiritual side that I have told the story of his outward and visible life.”¹⁶ Adams’ idol was one of California’s leading investors, second generation German-American immigrant entrepreneur John D. Spreckels, and Adams’ biography offers a myopic portrait of Spreckels’ life. Throughout the nineteenth century entrepreneurs were presented as representative men who served as examples to their communities and were publicly celebrated in biographical compendia on local and regional elites.¹⁷ The dominant narrative was that of a self-made man who lived the American dream by advancing through hard work to economic and social success.¹⁸

During the Gilded Age, entrepreneurs were integral members of the class of “pioneers ... merchants, orators, and divines,” who “made” the country and its counties and were perceived as apostles of growth, civilization and wealth.¹⁹ Biographical sketches of the local and regional elites aimed to create a common idea of public spirit and civic duty and to define an “all-American” ideal of citizenship. At the same time, however, the immigrant communities were creating their own compilations of representative biographies, celebrating, for example, “the German element” in works published throughout the United States.²⁰ Biographies remained an ambivalent element in forming melting-pot America.²¹

16 H. Austin Adams, *The Man: John D. Spreckels* (San Diego, 1924), 8–9.

17 Originally, “Representative Men” was a series of biographical sketches by essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (Ralph W. Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Boston, 1850)). The collection is a fine example of the historicist idea that “great men” made history and their biography offers a tool to understand the past and to predict

the future. The transition to entrepreneurs can be studied in books like George F. Bacon, *Portland: Its Representative Business Men and Its Points of Interest* (Newark, N.J., 1891); *Reading: Its Representative Business Men, and Its Points of Interest* (New York, 1891).

18 See for example Charles C.B. Seymour, *Self-Made Men* (New York, 1858). The development of this idea is discussed in a number of studies,

including Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture* (Columbia, Mo., 2000).

19 Typical titles include Oscar T. Shuck, *The Representative and Leading Men of the Pacific: Being Original Sketches of the Lives and Characters of the Principal Men... of the Pacific States and Territories—Pioneers, Politicians, Lawyers, Doctors, Merchants, Orators and Divines...* (San Francisco, 1870); »

» *A History of the City of Chicago: Its Men and Institutions. Biographical Sketches of Leading Citizens* (Chicago, 1900).

20 The best known work is probably Albert Bernhardt Faust, *The German Element in the United States*, 2 vols. (Boston and New York, 1909).

21 Cf., for example, James Bernard Cullen, ed., *The Story of the Irish in Boston* (Boston, 1893), and William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (Cleveland, 1887), a compilation of profiles of African-Americans.

This ambivalence was of particular importance in business: Many of the leading entrepreneurs were persons whose success often resulted from rude and shrewd business deals and practices.²² The notorious “robber barons” undermined the Jacksonian ideal of local and mid-sized business communities, while sharp scrutiny of their private lives and habits was used to discuss the rise of big business and monopolies and the danger to civil society.²³ During the Progressive Era, biographies of businessmen had an important critical function in public debate and helped lend legitimacy to anti-monopoly legislation and other reform efforts throughout the early twentieth century, none more, perhaps, than Ida Tarbell’s biography of the business of John D. Rockefeller, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*.²⁴

But it was not only this negative heroism that made business biographies a more challenging field than other sub-disciplines of the genre. Histories of firms, corporations, products, and organizational principles often became more important than biographies of individuals. Entrepreneurs were perceived as torchbearers of progress and innovation, of creative destruction and re-organization of society. Firms, corporations, products, and organizational principles helped to institutionalize the ideas of the industrial age, and often accounts of individual careers were focused only on this legacy. Thus, in order to offer a simple story of progress, the activities of entrepreneurs in multiple ventures tended to be ignored or deemphasized to limit the scope and the focus of the biography. The Uihlein brothers, for example, are directly connected to the rise of the Schlitz Brewing Company, America’s largest brewery in 1900, but from the 1890s onward, they invested much more time in becoming, at least for a short while, the largest real estate owners in the United States.²⁵ As “captains of industry” were more and more replaced by “biographies” of firms and products, the result was a business history that was no longer interested in individuals.²⁶

These developments in the historiography of business were pushed by microeconomic functionalism, which put business history on a new intellectual level and enabled better explanations for business development and long-term changes of the firm. Mostly linked to the name of Alfred Chandler — although based largely on publications from the interwar period — these modern approaches were interested in decision-making and functions, in generalizations and in de-individualizing research, seeing people as “puppets or . . . unconscious agents, who obey various hidden determinations that frame

22 Burton W. Folsom, *The Myth of the Robber Barons: A New Look at the Rise of Big Business in America*, 5th ed. (Herndon, Va., 2010).

23 Richard R. John, “Robber Barons Redux: Antimonopoly Reconsidered,” *Enterprise & Society* 13 (2012): 1-38.

24 Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, 2 vols. (New York, 1904); Steve Weinberg, *Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller* (New York, 2008).

25 Uwe Spiekermann, “Family Ties in Beer Business: August Krug, Joseph Schlitz and the Uihleins,” *Yearbook of the Society for German-American Studies* 49 (forthcoming).

26 Consider, for example, the title of John Winthrop Hammond’s *Men and Volts: The Story of General Electric* (Philadelphia, 1941). In Germany, the *Rheinisch-Westfälische Wirtschaftsbiographien* tried to combine biographies of firms and businesspeople. Launched in 1932, to date 18 volumes with 263 biographies have been published. However, the series is still descriptive and does not incorporate more advanced methodological and theoretical approaches (see http://www.ihk-koeln.de/RWWB_Index.AxCMS, accessed September 22, 2014).

their actions.”²⁷ Entrepreneurs were no longer important; instead intense discussions of the concept of entrepreneurship shaped the profession of business history.²⁸ The rise of modern business, which is no less than the rise of the modern world, was written without individuals: groups like merchants and entrepreneurs were integrated into these narratives only as representatives of general ideas and trends.²⁹ Biographies were still referenced, but they were used to explain more general questions and to enable an understanding of theoretical approaches and complex configurations in history.³⁰ In other words, economic functionalism and historical tradition merged into an often deterministic interpretation of (business) history.

This has changed in the last two decades. Business history has faced the challenges of the “cultural turn” and broadened its perspectives. Philip Scranton and Patrick Fridenson, suggesting a new agenda for business history, recently argued that historians need to pay attention to how entrepreneurs express their values and beliefs in the business, how managers’ personal motivations affect the fate of the firm, and how “minor” actors can damage or reshape a company’s performance. Further, they argued, actors can mobilize additional resources from outside the firm, and therefore networks and the social world cannot be ignored in business history.³¹

These changes in business history were relevant factors in our decision to use a biographical approach for the Immigrant Entrepreneurship project. Today, even biographies written by family members or descendants are often no longer hagiographic and punctilious but try to combine individual biography with an analysis of the historical background.³² Most scholars do not concentrate on an individual career but try to broaden the analytical perspective.³³ More common are group biographies, like Leon Harris’ well-known history of the merchant princes.³⁴ Company histories are more and more linked

27 Philip Scranton and Patrick Fridenson, *Reimagining Business History* (Baltimore, 2013), 201. See also Christopher D. McKenna, “Writing the Ghost-Writer Back In: Alfred Sloan, Alfred Chandler, John McDonald and the Intellectual Origins of Corporate Strategy,” *Management and Organizational History* 1 (May 2006): 107–126.

28 Geoffrey Jones and Dan Wadhvani, “Entrepreneurship,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Business History*, ed. Geoffrey Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin (Oxford and New York, 2008), 501–528.

29 Mansel G. Blackford, *The Rise of Modern Business: Great Britain, the United States, Germany, Japan, and China*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008).

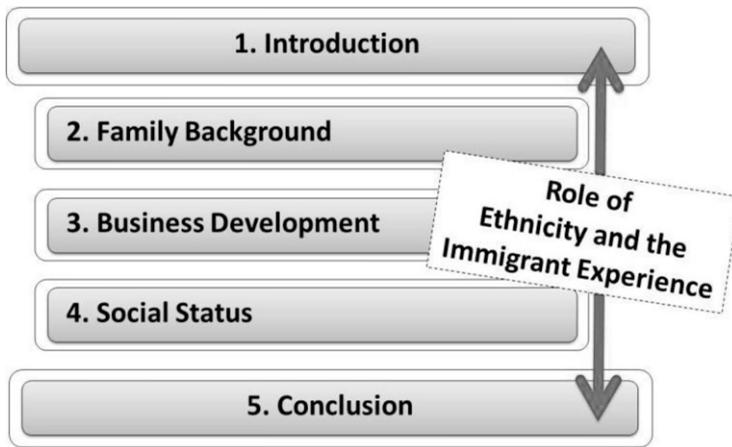
30 Good examples of this include Toni Pierenkemper, *Unternehmensgeschichte: Eine Einführung in ihre Methoden und Ergebnisse* (Stuttgart, 2000) and Hartmut Berghoff, *Moderne Unternehmensgeschichte: Eine themen- und theorieorientierte Einführung* (Paderborn et al., 2004).

31 Scranton and Fridenson, *Reimagining Business History*, 201–203.

32 Noteworthy examples include John Paul Rathbone, *The Sugar King of Havana: The Rise and Fall of Julio Lobo, Cuba’s Last Tycoon* (New York, 2010) and Harry W. Havemeyer, *Henry Osborne Havemeyer: “The Most Independent Mind”* (New York, 2010).

33 Although such endeavors can result in highly interesting books, for instance William Edmundson, *The Nitrate King: A Biography of “Colonel” John Thomas North* (New York, 2010).

34 Leon Harris, *Merchant Princes: An Intimate History of Jewish Families Who Built Great Department Stores* (New York, 1977).



Outline of Article Structure for the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project.

social history are still closely connected.³⁷ Network analysis has been another inspiring approach and has not only been used for business history but also for a better understanding of the political economy of the Nazi period and the early history of West Germany.³⁸

35 Richard J. Orsi, *Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West, 1850-1930* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005) combines the history of the firm with the history of leading representatives, like Edward H. Harriman, William F. Herrin, Collis P. Huntington; Ulrike Schulz, *Simson: Vom unwahrscheinlichen Überleben eines Unternehmens 1856-1993* (Göttingen, 2013).

36 Christina Lubinski, *Familienunternehmen in Westdeutschland: Corporate Governance und Gesellschafterkultur seit den 1960er Jahren* (Munich, 2010) used the Bagel, Deckel, and Rodenstock families to examine their economic performance in the age of the second globalization. Andrea Colli and Mary Rose's article "Family Business," in *The Oxford Handbook of Business History*, ed. Geoffrey »

III. Operationalization: The Guidelines of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project

The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project was conceptualized as a way to integrate the insights of social and cultural history into histories of business development that have either emphasized lone geniuses or attributed changes in production, distribution, and consumption to the rationalization efforts of anonymous agents or the result of large-scale, inescapable trends. In addition, the project has adopted a transnational approach and considers new insights from the field of migration history.

Authors of biographical articles (which generally range between 6,000 and 8,000 words) use a structural frame with three components. First, authors are asked to describe the subject's family

» Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin (Oxford and New York, 2008), 194-208, provide a more general description of this still dominant type of business.

37 *Die deutsche Wirtschaftselite im 20. Jahrhundert:*

Kontinuität und Mentalität, ed. Volker Berghahn, Stefan Unger and Dieter Ziegler (Essen, 2003); Michael Schäfer, *Familienunternehmen und Unternehmerfamilien: Zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte der*

sächsischen Unternehmer 1850-1940 (Munich, 2007).

38 Nina Grunenberg, *Die Wundertäter: Netzwerke der deutschen Wirtschaft 1942 bis 1966* (Munich, 2006).

background, including his/her community or region of origin, and to provide information about the subject's parents, class and occupational background, religion, and educational achievements. The author describes the circumstances under which the subject (or his or her parents) emigrated from Germany, and the extent to which the candidate established a German ethnic identity after arriving in the United States (or, for second-generation German-Americans, the extent to which the family maintained a German identity). The second component includes a description of the entrepreneur's business career, including experiences of success and failure, the role of political events and government policy, access to capital and use of technology, and how the entrepreneur's business strategies innovated markets or reflected broader trends in a specific industry. Finally, in the third component, the biography addresses the entrepreneur's social status, family, political engagement, philanthropic and other non-economic activities, and the role of cultural heritage and social networks. Throughout the biography, authors consider the role of migration, German ethnic communities and traditions, and entrepreneurial opportunities in shaping the subject's life.

This predefined structure enables a comparative perspective across all biographies. It emphasizes the project's core interests in the individual, family and community, business development, and the immigrant experience. It offers freedom to add specific topics related to an individual life and a unique career. The guidelines give room for the typical chronology of a biography, but also elicit additional entry points for reflection. With this approach authors are encouraged to disrupt standard narratives of "success" because they are asked to concentrate on multiple topics that will have different relevant chronologies in a given subject's life.

IV. Examples from the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project

The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project, with more than 120 authors to date writing on as many biographical subjects, inevitably has produced a wide range of approaches to the topic within the structural framework. Some biographies lend themselves to a highly individualistic treatment because this most closely reflects the entrepreneur's career. Contributor Leslie Goddard's biography of candy manufacturer E.J. Brach, for example, traces his career from opening "Brach's Palace of Sweets" in Chicago in 1904, a small



Emil Brach on the front step of the Brach Palace of Sweets, c. 1905, *Brach Review of 1948*, courtesy of private collection.

shop where candies made by hand in a back room were retailed to customers at the front counter.³⁹ Brach then became a supplier for the city’s largest department stores, took over a factory, and established himself as a wholesale candy manufacturer, continually adopting new methods to eliminate manual labor, increase the variety of products offered, and add production capacity. By 1918, E.J. Brach & Sons

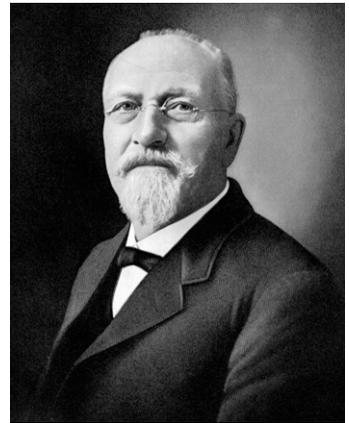
had three factories producing two million pounds of candy a week. The Brach company was promoted as an extension of the founder’s personality: advertisements emphasized his dedication to product quality and purity; the company’s 1946 annual report included a comic-book-style retelling of Emil J. Brach’s life and career; and internal employee publications referred to the founder as “Father Brach.” The project’s emphasis on ethnic identity, however, focuses attention on the ways in which “entrepreneurial myths” often smooth away potential friction points with dominant cultural values. For example, the comic-book retelling of Brach’s life, published shortly after the end of World War II, elided the fact that he grew up in Germany until age seven and began the story with his later childhood in Iowa.

Another approach has been to show the importance of family networks in fostering entrepreneurship. For many nineteenth-century businesses, particularly commercial and mercantile firms, having multiple family members to manage far-flung operations was an important contributor to entrepreneurial success. The five Sanger brothers, for example, operated a string of dry-goods stores in nineteenth-century Texas, as elaborated by author Kay Goldman in her biographical article. The employment of multiple family members who could be dispersed to different locations and shifted from place to place depending on a particular town’s fortunes allowed the family enterprise, as a whole, to diversify its risks and acquire information in multiple locations in order to make good business decisions.⁴⁰

39 Leslie Goddard, “Emil Julius Brach,” in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 4, ed. Jeffrey Fear. Last modified March 25, 2014. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=165>.

40 Kay Goldman, “Isaac Sanger,” in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 2, ed. William J. Hausman. Last modified July 25, 2012. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=116>.

The origins of the company Bausch & Lomb were also based on family relationships. Emigrant John Bausch opened a small optician's shop in the 1850s, relying on his brother, who remained in Germany, for his supplies. Another emigrant, Henry Lomb, invested in the shop when Bausch was in need of funds; as the United States became more prosperous in the years after the Civil War, Bausch began manufacturing eyewear and lenses while embarking on a strategy of expanding both its domestic and foreign markets. Other relatives of Bausch and Lomb became affiliated with the company in both the United States and in Germany. The firm continually took advantage of information flows from Germany's camera-manufacturing sector and scientific research in optics, and integrated "backward" into the production of industrial materials for its lenses as well as "forward" into the production of camera shutters. Members of the Bausch and Lomb families, as well as men from other German-American families in their social network, assumed positions in the company's hierarchy and remained in control of the company through the 1930s. Berti Kolbow, author of the biographical profile of Bausch, notes that the persistence of this interrelated network of company executives and owners challenges the Chandlerian model of business history that argues that innovative diversification and vertical integration were processes that only occurred once ownership and management of the corporation were separated.⁴¹



John Jacob Bausch, 1905.
Courtesy of Bausch & Lomb.

Another variation on the theme of entrepreneurship focuses on subjects whose success lay in their ability to adapt large corporations to new challenges, using skills in information management and interpersonal negotiation rather than a talent for invention or technical expertise to enable a business to expand. Gerard Swope, for example, trained as an electrical engineer and joined the Western Electric Company in 1895. He ascended the corporate ladder by becoming a talented sales executive. After Western Electric was taken over by General Electric in 1909, he was charged with examining the company's foreign operations, and spent much of the next decade developing new business overseas in Europe and Asia. In 1922, he became president of General Electric, where he focused on both developing new products for the homes of the burgeoning middle class and also on creating harmonious relations with labor that enabled the company to expand its manufacturing capacity. The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project's approach examines the migration not only

⁴¹ Berti Kolbow, "John Bausch," in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 2, ed. William J. Hausman. Last modified November 14, 2013. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=18>.

of individuals but also of goods and ideas. In Swope's case, author Thomas Irmer notes that Swope's proposals for a robust system of employee benefits were probably shaped by his knowledge of similar proposals in the German electrical equipment industry.⁴²

One of the primary difficulties in using a biographical approach to study the history of immigrant entrepreneurship is that of scale. On the one hand, it is usually difficult to catch sight of the business careers of any individual entrepreneur except for those who achieved some measure of renown at the local or national level. On the other hand, this means that the experiences of innumerable entrepreneurs who played roles in building and sustaining ethnic communities are difficult to retrieve. The problem of scale leads, in turn, to other problems, above all the question of how to represent the experiences of female entrepreneurs. This is particularly true of women who operated boarding houses, kept small shops, and operated laundries or other small-scale businesses. The biography of Fredericka Mandelbaum, by Rona Holub, represents one woman who took advantage of one of the limited number of business positions open to her in the mid-nineteenth century, initially operating a peddling business and then becoming a "fence," offering a discounted price to criminals who wished to unload stolen goods and then offering them for sale to the general public. In Mandelbaum's case, ethnic ties in Manhattan's Kleindeutschland neighborhood led to alliances of convenience with craftsmen such as engravers who used their skills to erase distinguishing marks from stolen jewelry.⁴³ While several scholars have examined forms of both legitimate and illicit small enterprise, the question of how ethnic identity shaped options for female entrepreneurship has only begun to be addressed.⁴⁴

In the decades after World War II, the character of German-American entrepreneurship changed in notable ways. The German Jews who fled the violence of the early Nazi period and those who arrived in the United States after surviving the war and the death camps constitute a special experience of forced emigration, distinct both from earlier Christian and Jewish emigrants and from later postwar migrants by choice. Whether they had been wealthy managers of important regional or national firms or the proprietors of small businesses, German Jewish entrepreneurs who were expelled from Germany or fled often arrived in the United States with little more than a week or a month's living expenses to their names. Many sought to reestablish themselves as entrepreneurs in the United States, using their preexisting

42 Thomas Irmer, "Gerard Swope," in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 4, ed. Jeffrey Fear. Last modified March 05, 2013. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=61>.

43 Rona Holub, "Fredericka Mandelbaum," in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 2, ed. William J. Hausman. Last modified October 15, 2013. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=160>

44 See for example Edith Sparks, *Capital Intentions: Female Proprietors in San Francisco, 1850-1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), 45-54, 88-90; Susan Ingalls Lewis, *Unexceptional Women: Female Proprietors in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Albany, New York, 1830-1885* (Columbus, O., 2009), 34-45; and Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana, Ill., 2010), 16-31, 61-81.

skills, but the ability to attain this goal often depended on whether or not they had business contacts in the United States who could assist in this process. Brewing executive Hermann Schülein was one of the few who were able to leverage business contacts to attain a position of comparable stature to what they had enjoyed in Germany. Others, such as the Joel family, went from managing large, complex businesses to making a living from small-scale manufacturing.⁴⁵

Those who emigrated voluntarily since the 1950s present important contrasts with the emigrants of earlier decades, who brought with them a wide variety of craft and managerial skills and sometimes no skills at all. The desire for political and economic opportunity that motivated earlier generations of emigrants lessened as West Germany enjoyed the benefits of postwar prosperity while East Germans were largely barred from emigrating. More recent German emigrants have tended to be either university graduates in business or scientific fields or individuals who have completed a formal apprenticeship program; in both cases, these emigrants tend to arrive in the United States to pursue a specific job or educational opportunity. German-Americans in recent decades offer fewer examples of an important stream of modern-day immigrant entrepreneurship, namely individuals who started their own businesses as a form of “self-employment” and have parlayed such work into important local or regional enterprises.⁴⁶ Yet another important form of entrepreneurship has been the arrival of executives to direct the subsidiaries of German corporations in the United States. In many cases, these companies and entrepreneurs have benefited from a government infrastructure that had not existed earlier, in particular networks of consulates and German-American chambers of commerce and other business associations, which have produced a different sociopolitical context for entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project’s goals of seeing business history in a transnational context and migration history in the context of entrepreneurship over the long term are intended to offer a context for future research even as both of these topics continue to evolve.⁴⁷ Technological developments will play unanticipated roles in the future of both migration and entrepreneurship. Among other services, one might point to cellular telephones and Internet access that enable near-instantaneous communication across national borders, as well

45 Martin Münzel and Beate Schreiber, “Hermann Schülein,” and Martin Münzel, “Expulsion — Plunder — Flight: Businessmen and Emigration from Nazi Germany,” both in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 4, ed. Jeffrey Fear. <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=200> and <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=174>.

46 See Zulema Valdez, *The New Entrepreneurs: How Race, Class, and Gender Shape American Enterprise* (Stanford, Calif., 2011), 26–32, 42–62.

47 Further discussion of these goals is offered in Benjamin Schwantes, “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present — An Online Project of the German Historical Institute Washington,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33 (Summer 2014): 67–72.

as the rise of mobile payments and other forms of non-traditional exchange. Government policy will likely play an increasingly important part in shaping the terms on which migration can and cannot take place, with effects that will vary between small and large enterprises as well as between companies operating in local and multinational environments. The contributions of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship project, it is hoped, will offer a framework for considering the ranges of possibility that have been open to or withheld from new residents at various points in the American past and in its present. Biographies are one of the most useful methods for examining these possibilities, of the desire for liberty and success, to make a difference, or to fight against failure and hostility in an unfamiliar country. Abstract dreams like these became concrete in the private lives of these individuals who crossed from one country into another. That is the productive challenge of biographies.

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