

Louis Bamberger: Department Store Innovator and Philanthropist**Linda B. Forgosh****Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2016****296 pages****\$29.95****ISBN: 978-1611689815****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.97>**

As twelve hundred people gathered to mourn his death they heard speakers describe the impact of his work as having the “indelible marks of human greatness.” Louis Bamberger, as author Linda B. Forgosh contends in *Louis Bamberger: Department Store Innovator and Philanthropist*, was a “figure of considerable importance, not only in Newark and New Jersey but also a man who helped create modern America” (p. 1). Forgosh, an independent scholar and executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey, has written the only biography of a man who can be considered a founding father of the modern day department store, and whose charitable work continues to have an impact to the present day.

This biography is stocked with details. Beginning with the first part of the book, Forgosh offers an extensive overview of Bamberger’s business innovations, such as having courses to train his employees, including classes at Rutgers University; using live models, and installing a “Red Phone” service that gave customers the ability to ask questions about anything in the store. His innovations also extended to the production of large scale publicity events, making his store both a retail space and an attraction. The biography details the inner workings of the store and business operations using the store’s employee newsletter *Counter Currents* (1918-1929) and newspaper advertisements. The details of the store are often paired with local and national events or figures. This context places Bamberger in historical snapshots, thus building the case for his significance.

The second part of the book, after the business was sold to R.H. Macy in 1929, proceeds much in the same way Bamberger’s business is detailed. Here we are offered a similar view into

his philanthropic work both in Newark and nationally. The biography locates Bamberger among other wealthy Jewish entrepreneurs who supported both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. Two of his greatest gifts, which reveal his lifelong interests in culture, the arts, and education, were funding a building to house the Newark Museum and the establishment of the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton University. In addition to he and his sister acting as sole benefactors of the Institute by providing it with its initial \$5 million endowment, Bamberger also helped convince Albert Einstein to take the position as one of its first faculty members.

The vast and varied array of details in this biography offers a rich view of Newark in the first half of the twentieth century. As Bamberger was an intensely private man who left no business or personal papers and often did not allow public acknowledgments of his gifts, details of his life are limited. Insights into his personal life and his motivations are largely absent. Ms. Forgosh does provide a personalized view of Bamberger through his connections with his employees, where she focused on their accounts of his generosity. Much of what is provided was chronicled in the employee newsletter *Counter Currents* and through “several hundred reminiscences by individuals who had vivid memories of the store and its owner” (p. 8).

This biography is able to shift in and out of personal, local, and national stories with relative ease. The details of the book, like the first model home called the “Ideal Home,” which was supported by the Hoover administration, or Newark’s Thanksgiving Day parade that was brought to New York’s Fifth Avenue, allows readers a walk through Newark and the early department stores. But though these details are engaging individually, as a collection they form a one-sided idyllic portrait of the man, his business, and his philanthropic work. There is little, if any, alternative viewpoints or criticisms. Overall, this biography does successfully show the significance of Louis Bamberger and the far reaching impact of his life’s work. It can serve as a

launching off point for scholars to continue to fill in the life and impact of this previously under-told story.

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