

The Schmooze

Stories with a Yiddish Twist

THE PUSHCART BUSINESS FROM ANATEVKA TO THE MALL OF AMERICA

by
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Syosset, New York

By 1900, there were 25,000 pushcart operators on the Lower East Side. Jacob Riis said, “There is scarcely anything else that can be hawked from a wagon that is not to be found, and at ridiculously low prices...damaged eggs for a song, peaches at a cent a quart...”

It’s not cheap to become a New York City pushcart vendor today. Annual fees for a prime spot in Central Park can cost the equivalent of a small house.

Why did immigrant boys and men take to peddling? It was the quickest way to get started in America. The immigrant couldn’t speak the language and had little chance of obtaining employment. He could start earning money the day he got off the boat. He borrowed \$40 from a friend or relative and went down to the wholesale district and bought sheets, pillowcases, and blankets and went to work.

Shown below is a quiz. Grab a #2 pencil and let’s see how much you know about pushcarts. Unfortunately, Stanley Kaplan does NOT offer a prep course for this exam.

1. In what Broadway show is Tevye a poor dairy PUSHCART peddler in Anatevka?
 - A) Milk & Honey
 - B) Fiddler on the Roof
 - C) My Mother’s Italian, My Father’s Jewish and I’m in Therapy

2. The immigrant came to look upon a peddler as a sort of American

_____. He was able to sell furniture to the in-laws and something to the person who gave the bride away, and to the couple as a wedding present. (Quite often this present was a bed.)

- A) inspiration
- B) godfather
- C) teamster

3. This Romanian immigrant, first peddled his/her knishes via a pushcart around 1890. As his/her business flourished, he/she rented a small store on Houston Street. Family owned since its inception, it still uses the original recipes. Which business is it?

- A) Mrs. Stahl's knishes, owned by Fanny Stahl, was once located under the elevated train at Brighton Beach Avenue. It now houses a Subway sandwich shop.
- B) Yonah Schimmel. Harry Golden, the chronicler of Jewish America, pronounced Yonah Schimmel the "inventor" of the knish. And Leo Rosten said that the word "knish" took on several other meanings, citing it also as "a term of abuse." Ex. He has the brains of a knish.
- C) Gabila's
- D) Shatzkin's. The original store was located at the S/E corner of 31st Street and Surf Avenue, Brooklyn.

4. The watchword of Jewish shopping in the land of the pushcarts and the storefronts that succeeded them was "metsiye." What does the word mean?

5. Many tenement housewives frequented the pushcart markets at least twice a day to purchase the ingredients they needed separately for each meal.

- A) True
- B) False

6. By 1900, the peddlers' marketplace on Hester Street spilled into which of the surrounding streets?

- A) Orchard
- B) Essex
- C) Norfolk
- D) Suffolk
- E) Ludlow
- F) All of the above

7. The first law regulating food carts was known as the Thirty Minute Law, wherein a pushcart had to relocate every 30 minutes.

- A) True

B) False

C) “Ver vaist?” (Who knows?)

8. During the Depression (“di depresye”) the faces of vendors changed as many people were out of work and took to selling from a pushcart.

What did it cost to buy an apple from the pushcart?

A) 5 cents

B) 10 cents

C) 20 cents

9. Some peddlers sold “broken” chocolates, which he bought from a manufacturer as “rejects”--chocolates that would not be packed. They sold for a penny a piece, and the vendor had a scale on the pushcart to weigh the larger purchases.

A) True

B) False

10. Some peddlers sold suspenders. The suspenders dangled over their shoulders and down their backs. Others sold seltzer (carbonated water). A small glass of seltzer cost a penny. If you said, “Give me a small plain,” what did that mean?

11. Some pushcarts and pack peddlers sold men’s coats, slightly used.

“As good as new!” they called. What did they sell for?

A) 50 cents

B) \$1

C) \$2

12. According to Harry Golden (“The Greatest Jewish City in the World”), “some peddlers sold only rainwear and umbrellas, and these peddlers did not always have to wait for a rainy day to make money.” Why is that?

13. The pushcart businesses of New York went into decline when which Mayor conducted a slum clearance effort on the Lower East Side and formed the Municipal Enclosed Retail Market, forcing the peddlers inside?

A) Mayor LaGuardia

B) Mayor John Lindsay

C) Mayor Ed Koch

D) Mayor David Dinkins

E) Mayor Robert Wagner

14. The hot dog, is a North American icon that is famously associated with street vendors and baseball (“beysbol”). Hot dogs gained popularity while being sold on

the streets of New York. Which of the following hot dogs is the iconographic pushcart food with its yellow and blue umbrellas?

- A) Hebrew National
- B) Nathan's Famous
- C) Sabrett

15. Confections of all sorts were sold by peddlers. What was the big seller, which is made by Joyva? "Some people ate it between the slices of rye bread," said Harry Golden. "It was a "halvah sonavich."

16. In 2012, three people launched the Gefilteria, a pushcart of sustainably sourced Ashkenazi foods in Brooklyn. They served borscht, kvass and black and white cookies alongside the gefilte fish. (Note: Can we expect to hear this old joke? "How to recognize a gefilte fish in the ocean? It will be the one with the carrot on its head.) This story is

- A) True
- B) False
- C) a "bubbe-mayse"--a grandma story

17. New York City's street vendors sell souvenir photographs of Manhattan's skyline, beaded slippers made in India, cellphones, fake silk ties, imitation designer handbags, sunglasses, knock-off baseball caps, and fake Jimmy Choo pumps. Almost all the handbags, photo frames and sunglasses are made in what country?

18. Some NYC street vendors said, "Wanna buy a watch? The watch said, "Kolex" on its face. What are they selling?

19. In 2015, a New York City hot dog vendor was caught on camera selling hot dogs at Ground Zero for how much money?

- A) \$5
- B) \$10
- C) \$30

Note: Food vendor's fines generally range from \$200 to \$500 per ticket.

He could face a \$1,500 fine because he also failed to display his prices and that allowed him to charge whatever he wanted.

20. Cindy Adams (New York Post, Oct. 26, 2015) wrote: "Woody's outfit?

The omnipresent wardrobe he wears even at black-tie events: rumpled chinos, cotton shirt, and some battered hat you can buy off a PUSHCART ON CANAL STREET." Which Woody is she describing?

- A) Woody Harrelson
- B) Woody Allen
- C) Woody Guthrie
- D) Woody Herman
- E) Woody Blackburn

21. Successful carts at the Mall of America average \$30,000 to \$40,000 a month in sales and can easily top \$70,000 in December. Mall carts often have as much in common with traditional pushcarts as a personal computer linked to the Internet does with a slide rule. Many carts have telephone lines to handle credit cards and they remain in one place long enough to become regular stops on UPS routes. Unlike most malls, the Mall of America will not sign cart leases for less than a year, and has a year-round waiting list. What does this prove?

- A) "Progress imposes not only new possibilities for the future but new restrictions." (Norbert Wiener)
- B) "We progress a step farther, in each tick of the clock." (Ronnie Cornelisz)
- C) "Emergencies have always been necessary to progress. It was darkness which produced the lamp. It was fog that produced the compass. It was hunger that drove us to exploration. And it took a depression to teach us the real value of a job." (Victor Hugo)
- D) All of the above

ANSWERS:

- 1. A
- 2. From peddling small goods on the streets, you don't make big fortunes.
- 3. B
- 4. A "metsiye"--in this case--is "the bargain that might really be one."
- 5. A
- 6. F
- 7. A
- 8. A But sweet California McIntosh apples sold for 6 cents.
- 9. A
- 10. B
- 11. A
- 12. "An umbrella was a mark of distinction. All the "shadchens" (marriage

brokers) carried umbrellas, rain or shine, as a symbol of their profession. The rainwear peddler, of course, had his problems. His margin of profit was small and he had to be shrewd about the propitious time to replenish his stock. Some of these fellows were expert cloud readers who would probably score higher today in forecasting than the weather man on the late night TV.” (Harry Golden)

- 13. A
- 14. C
- 15. Halvah
- 16. A
- 17. China
- 18. Fake Rolex watches. In 1984, Marjorie Wolfe’s son, Daniel, purchased a \$10 fake Rolex from a NYC street vendor for \$10.
- 19. C
- 20. B
- 21. D

Sources: “The Greatest Jewish City in the World” by Harry Golden”
[“http://strangeside.com/new-york-pushcarts-and-peddlers](http://strangeside.com/new-york-pushcarts-and-peddlers)
“Bohemians of Trade and Bedouins of Traffic: New York Street Vendors, 1800-1914”

Marjorie’s favorite peddler joke:

A blind peddler and his seeing friend bought a basket of cherries and agreed, as gentlemen, to take turns in eating one cherry at a time.

They sampled the cherries for a few minutes when suddenly the blind man struck out wildly, his blow landing on the seeing man’s nose.

“What’s the matter with you?” cried the surprised friend. “What did I do?”

“You are a cheat--a paskudniak of the lowest order!” rasped the blind one.

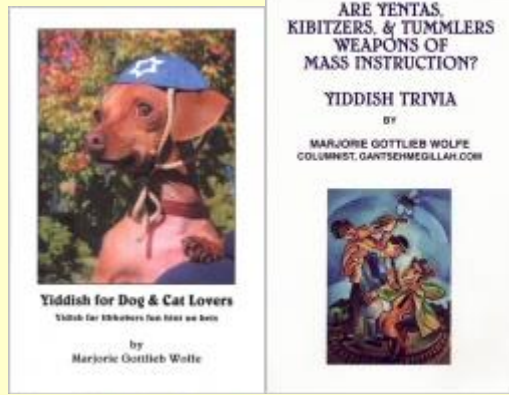
“Here I am taking two cherries at a time and you don’t say a word. So it figures--you must be taking three or four at a time or you would have complained; you lowlife you!”

(Source: “Joys of Jewish Humor” by Henry D. Spalding)

Search for Stories Beginning with the Letter

<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>G</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>K</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>M</u>
<u>N</u>	<u>O</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>Q</u>	<u>R</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>U</u>	<u>V</u>	<u>W</u>		<u>Y</u>	<u>Z</u>

**Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of
two books:**



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tumblers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish Trivia." To order a copy, go to her website: MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com

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