

The Intersection of Neighborhood and Nation: General Book Store in Chicago, 1938–1947

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On Monday, April 25, 1938, the author's parents, Henry and Natalie Witkowski, purchased General Book Store for \$450 (\$5971 in 2004 dollars) from Henry's older brother. They would live in a room at the back of the store and would continue to operate the business at 2022 West Division Street until 1947. This paper contextualizes this small business, and the lives of its young owners, within both the local environment and national events – the Great Depression and World War II – of the time. Small retailers and their world deserve historical study in their own right (Hollander 1980; Ward 1994). Equally important, this research aims to offset the over-emphasis on large stores, which has led to something of a one-dimensional portrayal of the evolution of American retailing and consumer culture in the 20th century.

Primary sources for this study include (1) the General Book Store Record Book from April 25, 1938 to April 24, 1942, (2) 17 b/w photographs of family members inside and in front of the store taken between 1938 and 1947, (3) a scrapbook containing 355 World War II era greeting cards, (4) 1940s era model airplane ephemera, (5) interviews with Natalie conducted August 3-9, 2003, and (6) personal recollections of the author and his older sister.

General Book Store was located in Wicker Park, a neighborhood on the near-northwest side of Chicago. Polish-Americans constituted a sizeable part of the trade. Dubbed the "Polish Downtown" (Granacki 2004), Wicker Park and its environs constituted the largest of several clusters of Polish settlement in Chicago. In 1930, 49% of the 187,292 people in the neighborhood were of Polish descent (Kantowicz 1975). Polish immigrants were intent on establishing their own institutions. They formed their own Catholic parishes and parochial schools, hospitals and asylums, death-benefit societies, and a Polish-language publishing industry. Typical businesses included sausage factories and bakeries, meat markets, groceries, dairies, confectionaries, drug and cigar stores, restaurants, taverns, undertakers, and photography studios.

Wicker Park, and especially nearby Humboldt Park, also had many Jewish residences, businesses, religious centers, and social organizations (Cutler 1996). Relations between Poles and Jews in Chicago sometimes echoed their social interactions in Europe. The latter tended to be the business owners and professionals, the former their working class customers and clients. For example, the

family's physician, Dr. Fuchsman, was Jewish and some of their first furniture purchases were on an installment plan financed by a Jewish money lender and purchasing agent, Mr. Goldman.

To reach General Book Store's front door, customers passed through a small entranceway flanked by display windows on both sides (Figure 1). Inside the store, books were lined up on wooden shelves and magazines were stacked in piles on tables (Figure 2). Racks held greeting card samples wrapped in cellophane (duplicates were stored in the cabinets underneath) and glass showcases contained model kit supplies such as glue, paints, and brushes (Figure 3). The greeting card units may have been added after 1938 – their style differs from the other fixtures – and the store layout surely changed when the proprietors stopped selling books and magazines sometime around 1944 (see below).

General Book Store was open seven days a week: Monday through Saturday from 9am to 9pm and on Sunday from 9am to 1pm, and sometimes as late as 3pm. It was closed only seven times (usually Christmas and New Years' Days) over the four years reported in the Record Book. All sales appear to have been on a cash and carry basis although layaways and some credit arrangements may have occurred. The business did not have a telephone until 1941. Advertising was limited to signage on the front windows (e.g. "Magazines 5¢ & Up" in Figure 1) and on the awning ("Photo Finishing" and "Greeting Cards"), and to in-store displays. Several photographs show oversized, cardboard promotional film boxes supplied by Kodak, and one picture depicts a free-standing, cardboard cutout advertising photographic greeting cards (i.e. photos with additional imprinted messages).

General Book Store product lines included used book and magazine sales and rentals, model kits and supplies, greeting cards and stationary, collector stamps and coins, and film and camera supplies. Henry also did some photo-finishing, a trade he had learned from his step-father. Table 1 shows the sales of these different product lines for the fiscal years 1938-39 through 1941-42. The book and magazine business gradually declined, both nominally and as a percentage of gross receipts, from 52.3% to 23.4%. Similarly, the stamp and coin trade dropped off considerably. Model kits and stationary grew modestly. Greeting cards, film, and camera supplies showed much faster growth, and the sideline of film finishing burgeoned

from 6.3% of gross receipts in 1938-39 to 34.9% in 1941-42.

TABLE 1
GENERAL BOOK STORE SALES BY PRODUCT LINE, 1938-39 to 1941-42 (Entries rounded to nearest dollar)

| Product Line | 1938-39 | 1939-40 | 1940-41 | 1941-42 |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Books | \$ 297 | 201 | 36 | 71 |
| Magazines | \$ 1371 | 1292 | 1287 | 1141 |
| Rentals | \$ 378 | 428 | 386 | 374 |
| Model Kits | \$ 731 | 889 | 955 | 1056 |
| Greeting Cards | \$ 297 | 335 | 434 | 1035 |
| Stationary | \$ 68 | 70 | 30 | 100 |
| Stamps & Coins | \$ 393 | 204 | 162 | 107 |
| Film | \$ 96 | 144 | 214 | 371 |
| Camera Supplies | \$ 11 | 24 | 74 | 162 |
| Photo Finishing | \$ 246 | 536 | 985 | 2370 |
| Miscellaneous | \$ 22 | | | |
| Total Receipts | \$ 3910 | 4112 | 4564 | 6788 |

The onset of World War II meant great changes for the nation, the city, the neighborhood, and, eventually, for General Book Store and its owners. By the Fall of 1944, books and magazines had been discontinued as a product line. There are several possible explanations for this major change in assortment. First, wartime recycling may have reduced the source of supply of used magazines. Second, demand for used books and magazines rentals may have declined since people had more spending money and did not need to economize as much. Third, Table 1 shows that book and magazine revenues were in decline even before the War started. Finally, the owners were simply not very passionate about books and never did keep many around the household. Thus, for whatever reasons, they decided that devoting their time and store space to the other product lines presented better opportunities.

On the other hand, the War effort definitely stimulated the purchasing of model kits. In 1942 and 1943, the U.S. Office of Education and Department of the Navy organized a "model airplane project" that delivered plans and materials for making instructional "spotter" or "recognition" 1/72nd scale models to the nation's schools where students did the assembly (Zimmerman 1985). The Comet, Strombecker, and Testor Chemical companies also marketed spotter kits. Meanwhile, other types of kits sold well. Cleveland Designed, a maker of more complex, high-end models had a particularly good year in 1944, grossing about \$7.5 million in today's dollars (Hewett 2004). In Figure 4, Henry sits behind large boxed kits for the American Douglas "Dauntless" dive bomber, the British Supermarine "Spitfire" fighter, and the British De Havilland "Mosquito" bomber. On the shelves are smaller-sized airplane kits, some with the 'V' for Victory insignia, as well as kits for U.S. Army jeeps and trucks.

Because so many people moved long distances for military duty and War jobs, they purchased greeting cards to stay in touch. Greeting cards incorporated images of the stars and stripes, soldiers in uniform, the V for Victory, and the American eagle. Birthday card headlines read: "Happy Birthday, Soldier," "Greeting to a Brother in the Service," and "hi-yah Soldier! Happy Birthday!" Several of the cards in scrapbook are striking in how they portray soldiers as little boys (Figure 5). Another card refers to food rationing and shortages (Figure 6). Above a cartoon drawing of a white-haired man seated at a table set with just a few items of food on his plate, the copy reads: "HAPPY BIRTHDAY We may be eatin' less these days . . ." This good-natured acceptance of small deprivations is consistent with the upbeat tone of most other wartime frugality campaigns (Witkowski 2003) and with consumer recollections (Witkowski and Hogan 1998). Wartime separations, uncertainties, and sentiments also might have increased purchasing of cameras, film, and photo-finishing.

General Book Store provided the family with a modest income and life style. During the first year, April 25, 1938 to April 24, 1939, net profit was \$1770.29 (\$23,517 in 2004 dollars). Net profit for the next three fiscal years was \$1628.40 (\$21,944) for 1939-40, \$1771.93 (\$23,651) for 1940-41, and \$2540.22 (\$32,291) for 1941-42. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1976, p. 303), the median salary income for whites in 1939 was \$1,325. Families who took in over \$2000 in 1941 were just within the upper half of the income distribution (p. 299). Henry and Natalie owned a car and were able to afford basic household furnishings, entertainment durables (a Philco radio, portable phonograph, cameras), and summer vacations in Fox Lake, Illinois. After running the business for just a few years, they could afford to lease a small two-room flat in the same building.

Each year Henry would calculate how much the net profit amounted to per day and per week. The figures were \$4.85 and \$33.95, respectively, for the first year, and \$6.98 and \$48.85 for the fourth year. Henry also estimated his assets. On the inside back cover of the Record Book, he wrote in ink "1941 Inventory 560.00" and, presumably at a later date, crossed out 560 and in pencil wrote "960." Facilitated by long working hours and prudent business decisions, the \$450 investment yielded a reasonable yearly income and growth in assets. The increasing emphasis on cameras, film, and especially photo-finishing, as well as the eventual discontinuation of books and magazines, indicates an openness to pursuing better business opportunities.

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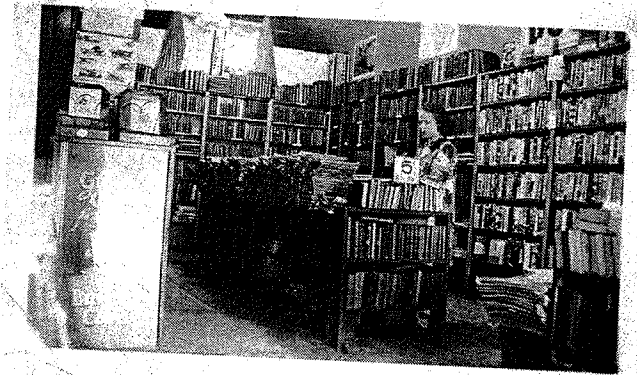


FIGURE 2
STORE INTERIOR, CA. APRIL, 1938

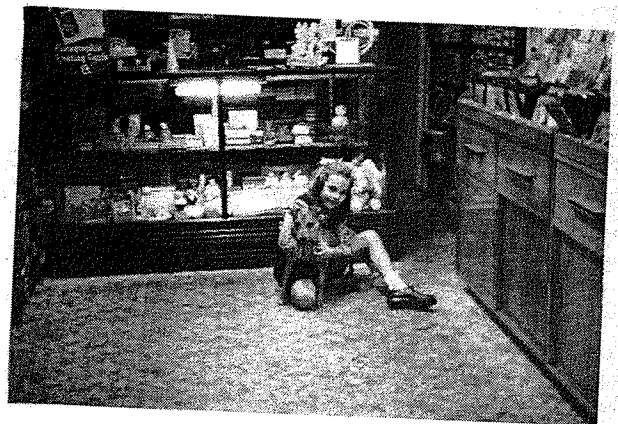


FIGURE 3
GREETING CARD CABINET AND GLASS DISPLAY
CASE, CA. 1945



FIGURE 1
STORE ENTRANCE, CA. APRIL, 1938

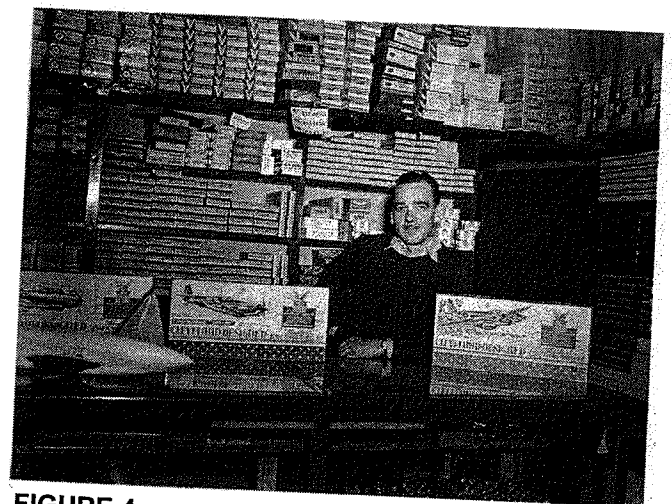


FIGURE 4
WORLD WAR II AIRPLANE KITS, CA. 1940s

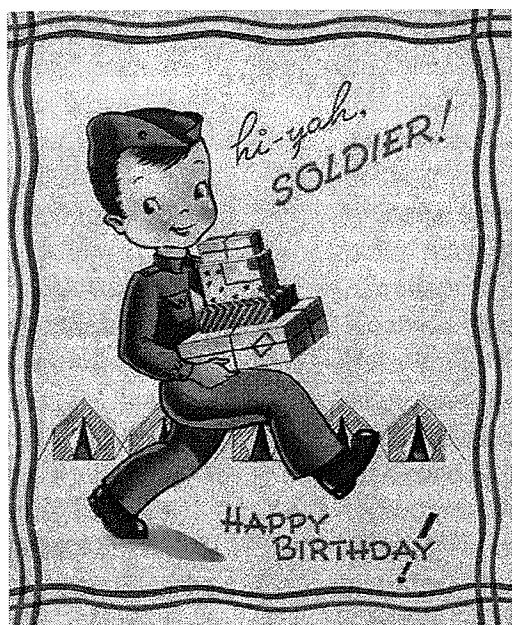


FIGURE 5
WWII BIRTHDAY CARD

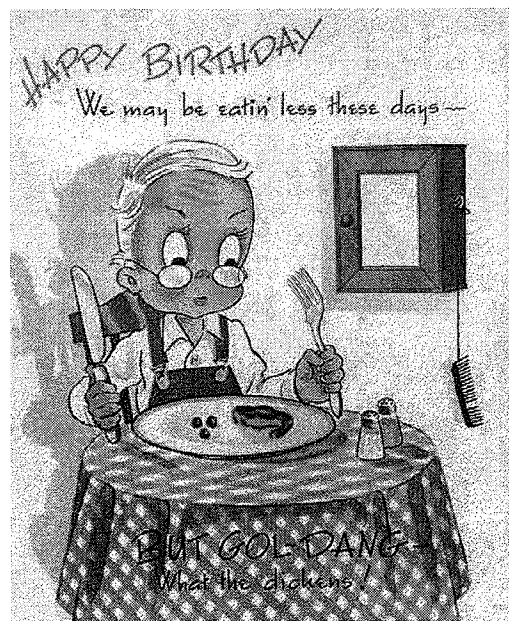


FIGURE 6
WWII BIRTHDAY CARD