

The Surprising Jewish History of Peeps

The classic Easter confection was actually invented by Russian Jews.

By [Victoria Dozer](#) | April 5, 2023



IMAGE DESIGN BY GRACE YAGEL

I won't sugarcoat it: I love Peeps. They're the perfect two-bite seasonal candy that's sure to stain your tongue and satisfy a sugar craving. I can never resist their squishy centers and candy coating. However, my Jewish friends think that I'm crazy for indulging in this iconic North American Easter treat. So, when I discovered that the [Peeps](#) creator was Jewish, I was elated to prove them wrong.

Just Born Quality Confections was founded in 1923 by Russian Jewish immigrant, Sam Born. The candy company is now famous for its production of Peeps and is located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, but its origin story actually started in modern day Ukraine. Sam Born began his education as a rabbinical student in Berdichev, but his family fled to Paris in the early 1900s. In Paris, Born learned the art of chocolate-making, and after moving to the United States in 1910, set out to start his own candy business. Just six years after immigrating, Sam Born was awarded the key to the city of San Francisco for one of his incredible inventions: [a machine that inserts sticks into lollipops](#). After this success, Sam Born joined forces with his brother-in-law, Jack Shaffer, and Jack's brother, Irv Shaffer, to

open a batch of Just Born candy stores. These establishments ultimately grew to be the Just Born Quality Confections company that we know today.

While “3D” marshmallows were not Sam Born’s original conception, he certainly perfected them. Roscoe Rodda of Rodda Candy Company came up with the idea, but formed his 3D marshmallows by hand-squeezing the marshmallow out of piping bags over the course of 27 hours. Using machines, Sam Born could make them in just six minutes. In 1953, [Just Born Quality Confections purchased the Rodda Candy Company](#) and began to market Peeps. In the 1960s, the company started to introduce shapes other than the iconic Easter chick, including bunnies, Christmas trees and Halloween pumpkins.

Today, 5.5 million Peeps are produced daily [through a mechanical process](#) using conveyor belts and itty-bitty paint guns. After Sam Born’s death, his son, Ira “Bob” Born took over the company. Despite studying to go to medical school, Bob Born also fell in love with the candy industry, and continued his father’s legacy until his [death](#) in January 2022 at age 98.

Sam Born’s grandson, Ross Born, and his cousin, David Shaffer, are now co-CEOs of Just Born Quality Confections; the company is still family — and Jewish-run! The business has a [long history](#) of supporting Jewish causes and organizations, receiving recognition from the Federation of Jewish Philanthropy, the United Jewish Appeal and the Israeli government through the Shema Yisrael Award. Ross Born and his wife are both notably previous presidents of the [Jewish Federation of Lehigh Valley](#), which they continue to support.

Just Born now produces numerous other iconic candies, including Mike and Ikes, Hot Tamales and [Goldenberg’s Peanut Chews](#). Interestingly, the company tried to [rebrand](#) Goldenberg’s Peanut Chews in recent years, but sales plummeted. Consumers couldn’t recognize the new branding as their old favorite candy, and ultimately the classically Jewish “Goldenberg” name was re-established. While the Peanut Chews are kosher, Peeps are not, as they contain pork-derived gelatin (vegans: take note!).

The Jewish invention of Peeps marks an age-old trend: Jewish creations for the Christian consumer. The popularity of Peeps as an Easter basket staple is not a lone phenomenon. Jews have been [writing Christmas songs for decades](#), including Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” and Johnny Marks’s “A Holly, Jolly Christmas,” “Silver and Gold,” “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” and... you get it. Not to mention, Jews have been making and [starring in](#) popular Christmas specials for years. Even [Christmas lights were invented by Jews](#), dating back to the Ottoman Empire but marketed for Christian consumption in the last century. Peeps are no exception to this rule. And it is no surprise that Jews are especially talented at enticing the holiday consumer with

our speciality: good food. Still, even if Peeps are marketed for the Easter crowd, they carry a rich Jewish history and a truly sweet family legacy.