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Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Published in:
Business History

DOI:
10.1080/00076791.2023.2215193

Publication date:
2023

License
Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):
Giacomin, V., & Lubinski, C. (2023). Entrepreneurship as Emancipation: Ruth Handler and the Entrepreneurial Process ‘in Time’ and ‘over Time’, 1930s–1980s. *Business History*, *66*(7), 1888-1915. https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2023.2215193

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ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS EMANCIPATION: RUTH HANDLER AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL PROCESS ‘IN TIME’ AND ‘OVER TIME’, 1930-1980”

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2023

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Entrepreneurship as Emancipation
Ruth Handler and the Entrepreneurial Process "In Time" and "Over Time", 1930s–1980s

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Abstract

We take a historical approach to the concept of "entrepreneurship as emancipation" by exploring the entrepreneurial process of Ruth Handler, co-founder of the toy company Mattel and inventor of the iconic Barbie doll. Focusing on the link between Ruth Handler's evolving self-narratives and her entrepreneurial process between the 1930s and the 1980s, we show how her entrepreneurial emancipatory agency was contextualized and socially embedded "in time" as well as an evolutionary and cumulative process "over time." We explore how the entrepreneur engaged with the industry context of the toy industry, and how she linked her social identity to interpretations of past, present, and future. We base our analysis on autobiographical accounts from Handler's personal archival collection at the Schlesinger Library and secondary sources.

Keywords:
Entrepreneurship; Toy Industry; Creative Industry; Entrepreneurial History; Emancipation; Self-Narratives

Published as:
Valeria Giacomin & Christina Lubinski (2023) Entrepreneurship as emancipation: Ruth Handler and the entrepreneurial process 'in time' and 'over time', 1930s–1980s, *Business History*, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2023.2215193.

1. Introduction: Entrepreneurship "In Time" and "Over Time"

> *"I kind of divide my corporate years into the growing years, and the big years, and the bad years. And then of course the new life, and that was doing my own thing. When I think about all these years, I think about a song Frank Sinatra did call I DID IT MY WAY. Well, I see my early years as 'we did it our way', then I see the big years as 'we did it their way' and then I see all the bad stuff, I don't know, I guess that's still their way. And then when I picked up the pieces of my life and started NearlyMe, I see that as 'doing it my way.' I heard that song once when we were away on a promo trip in a piano bar in a hotel we were in, and I just sat there and started to cry. It struck me then (...)."*
> (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, pp. 58-60)

Ruth Handler, the inventor of the iconic Barbie doll, had a long entrepreneurial career with many ups and downs. As a female entrepreneur as early as the 1930s, she differed from both the more numerous male entrepreneurs and the general discourse and expectations associated with entrepreneurship. In her frequent auto-biographical reflections, often triggered by journalists, archivists, or historians, she reconstructed her life many times over. Motivated partly by her perceived need to respond to accusations of fraud, for which she was charged in the 1970s, she reflected on her practices and roles as an entrepreneur, and how they intertwined with identity markers that mattered to her, such as gender (female), religion (Judaism), and her role in her nuclear family (mother/wife).

The unusually rich collection of autobiographical accounts by Ruth Handler, produced at different times between 1963 and 1994 (for an overview see Table 1), provide an opportunity to explore the link between Ruth Handler's evolving self-narratives and her entrepreneurial process. Entrepreneurship scholars and entrepreneurial historians have defined entrepreneurship as the process of creative action designed to change the status quo (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Wadhwani & Lubinski, 2017). This definition reflects what Joseph Schumpeter (1976 [1943]) has called the recombining of (existing) resources to trigger "creative destruction." In his *Theory of Economic Development*, Schumpeter argued that true entrepreneurship is rare because "[a] new and another kind of effort of will is (…) necessary in order to wrest (…) scope and time for conceiving and working out the new combination and to bring oneself to look upon it as a real possibility and not merely as a day-dream" (1936 [first published in German 1911], p. 86). For Schumpeter, exploring these new and innovative (re-)combinations was a crucial driver of market dynamics.

While most entrepreneurship scholarship assumes that these new combinations are ultimately in the service of wealth creation, research on female entrepreneurship has for long emphasized other forms of value creation, such as independence or the flexibility to balance family and work life (Duchéneaut, 1997; Jennings & Brush, 2013). Entrepreneurship scholar Violina Rindova and colleagues emphasize that there is great diversity in what entrepreneurs perceive as valuable at different moments in time. These authors advance an approach to entrepreneurship that makes the "pursuit of freedom and autonomy relative to an existing status quo the focal point of inquiry." They argue for more studies that explore "entrepreneurship as emancipation," defining emancipation as the act or process of "setting free from the power of another" (Rindova et al., 2022, p. 103) with the goal to "disrupt the status quo and change their [the entrepreneurs'] position in the social order in which they are embedded – and on occasion, the social order itself." (Jennings et al., 2016; Rindova et al., 2009, p. 478). Drawing on the French philosophers Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) these authors examine how emancipatory entrepreneurship is shaped by the various moral principles that organize markets and societies, opening up a research agenda that accounts for more diverse rationalities for entrepreneurship (Rindova et al., 2022). Entrepreneurship as emancipation thus contributes to a better understanding of the link between entrepreneurial processes on the micro-level and social transformation on the meso- and macro-level. Conceptualized in this way, entrepreneurship is more than the pursuit of profit. According to Wadhwani & Lubinski (2017, p. 769) it includes at least three distinct processes: envisioning and valuing opportunities, allocating and reconfiguring resources, and legitimizing novelty. In all three areas, entrepreneurs push for change based on their interpretation of the status quo, emancipating themselves from perceived constraints and envisioning more desirable futures.

However, so far, most studies exploring how entrepreneurs work towards novel futures have not explicitly engaged with the full temporal complexity of this process and how it connects to the entrepreneur's self-narrative. Historical accounts (Donzé & Kurosawa, 2013; Vlami & Mandouvalos, 2013) often prioritize the development of entrepreneurial processes over time, rather than engaging with how entrepreneurs, in their own time, reflected on their identity and related it to their past, present, and future. By contrast, entrepreneurship scholars exhibit an obsession with novel opportunities (Shane, 2003) and have frequently discussed how entrepreneurs envision them (Seelig, 2017). However, they confine the process primarily to the early idea generation stage and see it as "timeless," i.e., without links to its historical context and without attention to its role in the entrepreneur's self-narrative.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the entrepreneurial process of Ruth Handler as "entrepreneurship as emancipation" (Rindova et al., 2009) and explicitly analyze her entrepreneurial process both in time and over time. We understand ***entrepreneurship in time*** as thinking entrepreneurial action forward by analyzing how entrepreneurs in their own time engaged with challenges and opportunities and how they imagined unrealized opportunities and desirable futures while they were still uncertain. This perspective foregrounds the deeply contextualized and socially embedded nature of entrepreneurial action (Wadhwani et al., 2020; Welter & Gartner, 2016), which requires an understanding of who the entrepreneur is to understand how she engages with her present (Sarasvathy, 2001). By contrast, ***entrepreneurship over time*** is the perspective that historians take when they look back at an entrepreneurial process diachronically, seeing the evolution and cumulative quality of entrepreneurial action and thinking. This can often only become apparent by looking at entrepreneurial processes – and entrepreneurial self-narrating – in the long run and with (at least some) temporal distance (Phillips, 2015). Our biographical frame is one promising way of exploring such cumulative processes. Both *in time* and *over time* perspectives have already been employed in business history (Galambos, 2012; Wadhwani et al., 2020) and entrepreneurship (Johnsen & Holt, 2021), but have not yet been applied to the dynamic interplay between emancipatory identity work and the entrepreneurial process.

The relationship between biographical self-narratives and the entrepreneurial process that we explore is important for several reasons. While novel Schumpeterian combinations are certainly innovative, they are not expressions of boundless autonomy and creativity. They remain grounded in experience (not everything is perceivable at all times) and involve a specific form of self-reflection that is captured in Rindova's concept of entrepreneurship as emancipation. Entrepreneurs critically engage with their own perception of the present, which mobilizes them to construe novel desirable futures, emancipating themselves from their own interpretation of past and present. At the same time, this act of criticizing one's own present reveals identity elements – such as the entrepreneurs' gender, role in society, family, religion, etc. – and their evolving relevance to the entrepreneur and society *over time*.

This is particularly apparent in the case of Ruth Handler who was often portrayed as a pioneer of women in business and took great care in defining and shaping her public image as a female and Jewish entrepreneur – not least under the pressure of fraud charges in the 1970s. Although not core to our article, our analysis also contributes to the growing literature on gender in business history (Gamber, 1994; Jones & Choi, 2020; Kwolek-Folland, 2001; Kwolek-Folland

& Walsh, 2007; Scranton, 1998; Yeager, 2001). The bulk of this scholarship concentrates on women's role in the American consumer and labor market after WWII (Blaszczyk, 2009; Durepos et al., 2017), and on changes in the established cultural and corporate norms, propelled by activism and legal battles since the late 1960s and 1970s (Kessler-Harris, 1991; Storrs, 2000). While providing a more balanced view of women's participation in capitalism since the 18th century, this scholarship has been constrained by society's intrinsic sex-segregation by profession (Jones & Amble, 2018; Stage & Vincenti, 1997). Few studies discuss female entrepreneurship as an innovative and potentially disruptive force in male-dominated and non-service industries, such as manufacturing. Ruth Handler's case is thus an exception, providing new insights in the role of women leaders in entrepreneurial history.

For the empirical analysis, we rely on the extensive personal archival collection of Ruth Handler (RH MC501) stored at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America (Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies). Together with a vast array of business and family papers, it includes several autobiographical accounts and interview notes (for an overview see Table 1), which we use to explore the links between Ruth Handler's autobiographical reconstructions at different moments in time and her entrepreneurial process. The archival collection includes speeches, interview notes, biographical notes, as well as several transcripts from taped interviews with Ruth Handler conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. We analyze these latter interviews as oral histories. Oral history refers to the collection, transcription, and recording of memories and voices directly from participants of past events and their preservation and interpretation as historical sources. This methodology has increasingly gained traction in business history over the past decades, most prominently in the context of emerging economies, where traditional archival material is scant (Austin et al., 2017; Jones & Comunale,

2019) and has shown increasing potential in entrepreneurial history (Giacomin, Forthcoming). We use it to understand Ruth Handler's interpretations and legitimizations of past events and to reconstruct her reflections on the path not taken. The interviews allow us to engage with the stories the entrepreneur tells; stories that are always incomplete, told in a specific context, and for a particular purpose (Gartner, 2007). In addition to the autobiographical material, the collection holds business papers from the companies that Ruth founded, Mattel and NearlyMe; material on specific products, like the Barbie doll, HotWheels, and the NearlyMe Malibu swimwear collection; the Handler family correspondence; and miscellaneous material, which we use to contextualize the self-narrative. We supplement these sources with published material (newspaper cuts, reports, interviews) on Ruth Handler and US female entrepreneurship collected by business historian Mary Yeager in her personal archival collection (MYPC) in Los Angeles; as well as relevant scholarly work on the history of the global and American beauty and toy industries (Greenfield, 1991; Yeager, 1999) and childhood in America (Chudacoff, 2007; Mintz, 2004).

The paper is structured chronologically, following the biography of the entrepreneur. Yet, in line with modern studies of (auto-)biography, it relies on a post-heroic understanding of entrepreneurship which provides insights into the modes of individual agency and their social frames within the genre of self-narrating. It understands human beings as active creators of their worlds but also pays close attention to how the world created them (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 130), or in other words: bridges structure and agency (Tinning & Lubinski, 2022). For entrepreneurs, prior research has shown that biography is a crucial determinant in the choice of vocation and for how the entrepreneurial process is enacted (Kontos, 2004, p. 60). Yet, so far less explored in entrepreneurial history is the question how experiences become a resource or constraint for constructing "future biographical projects" (Hoerning, 1989, p. 154). In this sense, biographical narratives have themselves a socializing effect (Kontos, 2004, p. 60) and create a space for emancipatory efforts and declarations, which Rindova et al. (2009, p. 485) define as “unambiguous discursive and rhetorical acts regarding the actor’s intentions to create change.” Entrepreneurship is, in this sense, also identity work. As Kontos (2004, p. 67) argues, it is rooted in “the process of reflection and awareness of ‘unlived life’ that has to be realized, in relation to a struggle for recognition from the social environment that denied that recognition.” Seen in this way and historically embedded, our analysis of Ruth Handler’s entrepreneurial process provides a deeply contextualized understanding of entrepreneurial emancipatory agency both *in time* and *over time*.

2. Imagining Mattel

Ruth Mosko (Moskowicz) and her husband Elliot Handler both grew up in Denver, Colorado, in the 1910s in Jewish immigrant families. In the early accounts of her life story, Ruth remembers her first meeting with Elliot in romantic terms as a formational experience, meeting societal expectations for a young woman and spouse. She later reprioritized her self-narrative of that time and stressed some of the resistance she had to overcome from her family towards getting involved with an artist without financial resources. (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VI, pp. 9). Referring to the Sinatra quote cited at the beginning of this article, she declared: “there was a time before Elliot, a B.E. time, and that isn’t our way. I’ve always felt that time was another lifetime.” (Handler/Field 1993, Tape IVA p. 1). Yet, throughout her life, she continuously referred to her early career in connection with her husband and as “doing it our way.”

After getting married in 1938, the couple moved to Los Angeles, where Ruth found a job as secretary at Paramount. The creative Elliot attended design school and worked in a lighting-fixture shop in his spare time. Here he befriended his future business partner Harold Mattson (“Matt”). A tinkerer, Elliot worked with wood and some new materials used by the military, such as Plexiglas and “Lucite,” an acrylic resin developed in 1937. He decorated their small empty apartment with modern-looking Lucite coffee tables and lamps. The experience of seeing her husband work with these new substances and living with furniture made from them, eventually sparked Ruth’s idea to use these materials also for manufacturing gift items. It was a process she described not as outcome of clever market research or personal grit but as evolving organically from her sensual experiences (seeing, smelling, touching). Seeing her husband working, and touching and smelling his inventions, led to the development of product ideas; a process she essentially described as co-creation (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 1).

A few months after their move to LA, Elliot quit his art school and part-time job and rented a former Chinese laundry on Olympic Boulevard to establish his workshop, Elliot Handler Plastics. He hired Matt on a part-time basis, while Ruth quit Paramount and joined his business to help with sales. After a few small sales, Ruth established contacts with Douglas aircraft, which also wholesaled the Plexiglas and Lucite foils they used for manufacturing. Ruth met with three (male) Douglas executives. Throughout her life she recalled this experience as formational for her career. “I was 21 years old and I walked in that office and looked at these three guys [Douglas executives] and I wondered what I was doing there…” (Handler/Field 1981, Tape 1, p. 5; Handler, 1993a). She proudly remembered the emancipatory experience of standing her ground as a businesswoman and receiving an order for tailored giftware and a contract for sourcing materials in bulk.

Both Elliot and Ruth scouted for business opportunities in the specific context of World War II and the immediate post-war period. Elliot initially partnered with other immigrant entrepreneurs and launched a different venture, El-Zach, producing giftware and Plexiglas costume jewelry. While the business grew fast, Ruth was pregnant and spent a couple of years taking care of her first child, Barbara, born in 1941. In 1943 she offered to help with sales in Matt’s new workshop. Because World War II made it difficult to source special plastics, Matt made wooden picture-frames based on Elliot's previous designs (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IVB, p. 5). The workshop quickly became successful and, in 1944, during Ruth's second pregnancy, Elliot decided to quit El-Zach and join the venture. In the same year, they renamed the partnership "Mattel," a combination of Mattson and Elliot.

In the post-war period, toy manufacturers in Europe and the US found themselves scrambling for manufacturing materials, which had been denied to the industry during the war (Brown, 1996, p. 155). Since late 1944, low grade rubber, some metals, and plastics were made available in limited quantities for toy production in both the UK and US. This challenge of resource scarcity was an important influence for the type of opportunity the couple envisioned together. Just like other toy firms had capitalized on the use of new materials like steel in the past, Ruth and Elliot spent a lot of time experimenting with the new material of their day, plastics. Plastics had become popular during the war. In quick succession, the Handlers went through several iterations of commercially exploiting Elliot's earlier designs. One of their ideas was based on the observation that doll-house furniture could be produced from the plastic and wooden picture frames' scraps, so they started producing a small toy line to be sold as an add-on to already existing doll houses. By 1945, Mattel had sold USD 100,000 in toy furniture (Mattel, 1968-1969). While in Europe plastics were mostly used in the manufacturing of toy soldiers and guns (Brown, 1996, pp. 158-159), Elliot was among the first to use Plexiglas and Lucite to realize innovative designs for doll furniture and musical instruments.

Toy production was not considered "essential" during the world wars and, consequently, after flourishing in the early 20th century, the toy industry went through a prolonged crisis. The Great Depression, the subsequent segregation of markets through high tariffs, and then the War, decimated most of the main toy manufacturers in Britain and Germany, which had dominated the industry since the 19th century. The main surviving players in Europe had undergone consolidation and sluggish growth in the 1930s and then lost most of their facilities due to war-related bombings (Brown, 1996, pp. 124-125). In the US, during the conflict, many of the major toy producers had converted their facilities to other lines of production or went out of business, unable to access the necessary raw materials and markets (Greenfield, 1991). As a result, by the end of the war, most of the US market was dominated by rubber manufacturers, such as Goodrich, Goodyear, and Firestone; companies that could access raw materials under war restrictions (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, pp. 26-27). Their toy lines were mass produced with scrap materials and unrefined. In contrast to these competitors, the Handlers saw a market opportunity in providing higher quality and modern-looking products, tapping into the increasingly affluent pockets of American baby-boomer's parents. Growing demand supported this trend. In the years immediately after the war, global markets remained segregated with most manufacturers serving primarily their national customers. Despite the fact that tariffs on toy imports started decreasing in the 1940s, the American market was very hard to penetrate for foreign companies due to nationalistic social practices that shielded the US toy industry, such as trade journals rejecting ads from foreign manufacturers and overseas exhibitors being excluded from the main toy fair in NYC (Brown, 1996, p. 156).

In 1945 and 1946, while being stationed for the army in Camps Roberts, Elliot thought up new designs and refined them over the weekend with Ruth and Matt, who would then realize, prototype, and sell them (E. Handler, 1945; Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 28). In the late 1940s, when Elliot returned to working full-time, Mattel was grossing USD 1 million in sales. In 1947, the Handlers bought out their partner Matt and incorporated the company the following year. They split the responsibilities: Elliot represented the creative side and assumed control of internal activities, such as operations, logistics, and processes, while Ruth visualized the market for their products and developed strategies for reaching customers, often capitalizing on her female perspective in a male-dominated industry. She took charge of external relations, namely procurement, distribution, sales, and marketing. In 1950 the company made over USD 2 million in sales and generated over USD 140,000 in profit (Mattel, 1958, p. 61).

Once the opportunity crystallized, the Handlers started to also re-think their execution. In Schumpeterian fashion, they crafted a specific and novel approach to their product and market, which they perceived as emancipation from past routines. Ruth looked back at this period by saying: “We did, far in advance of the whole industry, get into intensive effort and expenditure in research and design very early, because we knew that our growth and our success depended on being unique in both product and marketing.” (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 51). While hindsight bias shaped her memory on this period, Mattel did stand out from competitors for its product strategy and extensive marketing effort. The entire industry in those years was undergoing expansion and widespread use of new technologies. In this context, Mattel focused on novel products and new forms of child-centered advertisement. The Handlers introduced new designs and materials to develop an innovative line of musical toys. Their first major hit was a plastic ukulele, named *uku-de*. A music-box and a miniature plastic piano followed. Handler described the ukulele as “very classy” and recalled “we made all mistakes in the world with that thing. We learnt our lesson very very fast.” (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 28). Despite these difficulties, the musical toys became best sellers, selling over 20 million units between 1947 and 1952 (Mattel, 1968-1969; Handler & Shannon, 1994, p. 15).

The favorable context of the early 1950s allowed the Handlers to make mistakes and recover. For example, when they first introduced the *uku-de*, Ruth was unaware of the seasonality of the toy industry and failed to plan operations accordingly. New product ideas were presented at fairs in March and production concentrated over the summer to be ready for sales increases in the fall and peaking at Christmas. Since the Handlers started marketing their samples too early, well before the fairs, a plethora of knock-off versions mushroomed after their early release. Their inexperience also reflected in the costs of their early product development and their pricing arrangements with sales representatives and wholesalers, which threatened their relationships in the industry (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, pp. 28-30; Mattel/E. Handler, 1968, p. 2).

While there were obstacles to overcome in production, they celebrated their marketing strategy (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, pp. 27-28). Ruth and Elliot used new media, in particular television, for promoting toys and addressed their product directly to children. This gave them an advantage over established toymakers, with marketing strategies primarily targeting parents (Brown, 1996, p. 167; Fraser, 1972, pp. 218-219). Mattel's novel approach involved focusing on kids' desires and ambitions and encourage children to express their personality. Growing sales indicated that customers appreciated it. Mattel's marketing normalized the idea that kids could be treated as consumers with child-specific expectations and desires.

In 1955, the leading US toy manufacturer Louis Marx spent only USD 312 in advertising, despite its USD 50 million in excess sales (Chudacoff, 2007, p. 155). The same year, Ruth allocated USD 500,000 (about equal to their net worth) to become the exclusive all-year-round sponsor of the kids' TV show "The Mickey Mouse Club" to advertise their brand-new creation, the Burp Gun. Other toy companies in the US had also started advertising on TV and this new approach helped overcome the extreme seasonality of the market, where sales primarily occurred around Christmas. However, as a first mover, Mattel's competitive edge was the long-term relationship with the networks, which ensured weekly repetition of brand names. In 1959, Mattel launched a USD 2 million advertising plan to be the sole sponsor of a co-created 30-minute show on ABC named "Matty (Mattel)'s Funday Funnies," which by 1961 expanded to a bi-weekly show, reaching an estimated 25 million children for 52 weeks a year (Mattel, 1968-1969, p. 24).

Mattel was not the first to use creativity and imagination as a selling point. Since the 1920s toymakers had marketed educational toys by embedding them with specific uses and developmental milestones that kids were supposed to follow while playing (Fraser, 1972, pp. 216-220). Ruth operated under the assumption that children tended to defy the meanings inscribed in toys by adults. She broke with routines of the toy industry by bridging the gap between what adults designed for kids and what kids made of toys. Yet, importantly, this imagination made sense in her time and aligned with the ongoing lived experience of Mattel's customers. It fit seamlessly into the nascent contemporary rhetoric of the Cold War. Stimulating creativity in children was important to ensure individual self-expression and reinforce the values of freedom and democracy in capitalist economies (Ogata, 2013). In the following years, the advertising industry pushed this idea even further, opposing this model to life in totalitarian regimes, which were portrayed as depriving their offspring of a colorful childhood experience. Therefore, kids became a target for the growing advertising industry, alongside with women as the designated responsible for the upbringing of the new generations (Catt, 2014).

In sum, in the first decade of Mattel, the Handlers were able to envision a life as entrepreneurs and create a disruptive toy-making business. They brought fresh ideas to a changing industry. The future they imagined was an emancipation from routines and practices in the toy industry but made sense in time, as it fit into societal developments, such as the creative use of raw materials in the resource-starved environment, the exploitation of new technologies (TV), and the alignment with emerging Cold War sentiments. In the process of learning the ropes, the couple developed its approach to selling toys, placing kids' desires at the center of product development and marketing.

3. Barbie: Innovating Femininity through the 1960s

In the 1960s, Mattel transformed from a mid-size business focusing on the US market into a global toy industry leader. This process accelerated thanks to the introduction of one of the most iconic products in the history of the toy industry: the Barbie doll. Barbie represented an opportunity for Ruth to emancipate herself as a leading entrepreneur and female executive from a male-dominated industry but also to recraft her role in the business partnership with her husband. Ruth first conceived the idea of creating a grown-up doll when observing her daughter Barbara playing with paper dolls. Similar to her earlier product innovation process, she remembered relying on immediate sensual experiences when she observed Barbara's love for paper dolls: "She would sit and play all the adult situations you could imagine with these paper dolls (…) and the clothing was [a] big part of this paper dolls playing and the props, you know, they had little cars and they had this and that and all this was part of the play pattern." (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, pp. 59-60; Handler, 1993b). Handler recalled that Barbara also played with regular dolls, however she observed that "they had flatter bellies, they were breast-less, had chubby stubby legs – they were unrealistic." Instead, paper dolls portrayed adult characters. "She and her friends projected their dreams of being grown-ups through the paper dolls. And kept changing their clothes for each play situation. Through that type [of] doll play they also integrated the world around them." Immersing herself in the world of her daughter, Ruth contrasted her idea from previous patterns in the industry, calling it "a very basic, but much needed play pattern that had never been offered by the doll industry to little girls." (Handler/Shannon, 1993, p. 3).

Indeed, at the time, most tridimensional dolls looked like babies to allow small girls to play the role of moms. Adult dolls also existed and had been around since the 14th century but they were being used by members of the aristocracy to convey the prevailing fashion in clothes and coiffures (Fraser, 1972, pp. 102-104). Since the second half of 19th century, dolls came to assume almost exclusively the features of babies and young kids, and became associated with promoting the roles of housewives and mothers to girls (Ganaway, 2018, pp. 134, 136). Then, in the late 1930s, marketing expert E. Knowles predicted that the future would lie in teenage dolls appealing to less dependent girls (Cross, 1997, p. 119). Some adult fashion dolls, such as Cissy and Miss Revlon, already existed before Barbie, but there was no affordable toy that could be styled with grown-up-like accessories and dresses (Wolf, 2000).

Despite these trends, introducing an adult-looking doll to market at this time was a heavily contested choice. Elliot himself was not convinced about pursuing his wife's vision. Inspired by Thomas Edison, who in 1877 adapted a phonograph with a round disc inside a baby doll's body (Fraser, 1972, p. 120), Elliot was focused on a talking-doll concept. In the late 1950s, when Ruth first thought of a grown-up doll, Elliot was developing Chatty Cathy (eventually introduced in 1960), upgrading some of the technology already in use for musical toys. The male engineers at Mattel were also initially skeptical towards Ruth's idea. Considering such opposition, Ruth described this period as one of inaction: "I did nothing about it because I didn't know quite how to go about getting it done. We did not have the best doll designers and we were not in the doll-business." (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 61). However, in 1956, the Handler family embarked on a business-cum-vacation trip to Europe. While shopping with her daughter Barbara in Switzerland, Ruth came across "Bild Lilli," a blond-haired and blue-eyed adult-looking doll inspired by a quite salacious character in the German daily *Bild-Zeitung*. Bild Lilli's character was known as a sex symbol addressing German men (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 57; Wolf, 2000). Bild Lilli came dressed in different styles, but the clothes could not be bought separately. Ruth explained in hindsight: “So, I bought the doll into that costume and still another costume. By now I had it all figured out.” (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p. 63). Ruth recombined the elements she had observed in the doll industry over the past years. Rooted in her prior experience with furniture as an add-on for doll houses, she was uniquely placed to develop a new type of fashion doll suited for the play pattern she had observed in her daughter.

Upon return to the US, Ruth bought the rights to market Bild Lilli and used her as a prototype for creating grown-up dolls. She transformed the doll from its “Aryan-featured” German version (Lord, 2004, p. 8) into a wholesome and respectable American girl. She called her “Barbie,” after her daughter. She explained “A Lilli doll was too much of a caricature. And it was too…, it wasn’t American. I wanted an American teenager, but I wanted a narrow waist, narrow ankles, and boobs. And she should look good, and be American, and she should wear a swimsuit because it’s the cheapest costume and then we should [separately] sell toy costumes - to begin with.” (Handler/Field 1981, Tape 1, p. 64).

While Ruth was well placed to see this opportunity, she needed a collaborator to bring expertise in fashion which she did not have. Ruth hired a young fashion designer, Charlotte Johnson, to develop Barbie’s first clothing line, reflecting what was considered stylish at the time. The social interactions with Charlotte, who understood the taste and trends among American teenagers, were paramount for creating a clear character for Barbie. Once the two had visualized the perfect American girl, Ruth proceeded to take practical steps to commercialize it. The Handlers also realized that Barbie was the right product “for the Orient” (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, p.

64), namely a product that could be manufactured in Japan, following the growing trend of American manufacturers outsourcing production to Asia (Jones, 2005; Lipsey, 2003).

Barbie was launched at the 1959 Toy Show. It received initial skepticism because the doll's curves were considered too provocative and buyers thought the market was already saturated with baby dolls whose clothes could be changed. However, Ruth was determined. With some distance, having prevailed against the skepticism became a foundational moment of emancipation for her, even from her husband who by her own account she otherwise questioned rarely. "He [Elliot] didn't really believe in Barbie. (…) In his head he couldn't connect the two [Barbie and doll furniture]. I connected it, but [initially] couldn't convince him." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIA, p. 1). Against all odds, once Barbie hit the counters, she was an instant success (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IA, p. 15; Mattel/Playthings, 1970, p. 52). The original Barbie ad in the Mattel catalogue highlighted the most exciting feature of the new product; the fact that it represented a fashionable grown-up: "A shapely teenage fashion model. An exciting all new kind of doll (She's grown up!)." Barbie ads suggested that the doll was a real person with whom children could identify (Cross, 1997, p. 165).

Imagining and re-imagining Barbie continued to be a collective undertaking. Mattel hired a team of experts to study cultural trends, especially among sub-urban teenagers, aiming to present Barbie as an inspirational role model (Johnson, 1996). Barbie was linked to different societal developments. To legitimize the product, Ruth also engaged with the beauty ideals of her time and crafted a new narrative reflecting women's changing aspirations. Handler's idea was to have kids play with a doll that echoed the most mainstream version of the real world, but would also allow them to visualize possible futures (Handler/Shannon, 1993, p. 4).

Barbie with her various add-ons and clothing options challenged the singular focus on the role of wife and mother for girls. This theme mattered to Ruth Hander. In her self-narratives, she continuously grappled with her own double role as mother and active business executive (see also, Table 1). However, over time, as female professionals became more common, Ruth's accounts became less defensive and exhibited more pride in her professional accomplishments. She continued to assign ultimate authority to her husband – "his decision always prevailed. I was not presumptuous enough to insist that I knew better than he about a product" – yet she proudly recounted moments when her decisions turned out to be right. She also became more outspoken about feeling criticized by her daughter. "Barbara hated it that I was a career woman and that I was different from everybody else's mother." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIIB, p. 10). Ruth contrasted this experience with her own mother who in Ruth's words "didn't speak much English, and (…) didn't hear very well" and therefore had neither professional ambitions nor much verbal communication with her daughter (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIB, p. 20). With the help of fashion designer Johnson, Ruth formed Barbie to embody a new type of woman and femininity. Among the possible roles, the most prominent was initially a new female version of the American dream: independent, career- and consumption-oriented (BillyBoy, 1987; Varaste, 1999). The different clothing options also enabled Barbie to personify different professions and situations. They included, for example, office clothing, nurse uniforms, prom-dresses, and tennis outfits.

Embedding Handler's process of imagining *in time* reveals the impact of her act of emancipation when marketing a variety of new roles for women. Global beauty brands, such as Estee Lauder and Max Factor, did not incorporate professional styles in their campaigns until the 1970s (Jones, 2010, p. 293). However, Handler integrated not just the contemporary professional roles for women but also the existing beauty standards of the American middle-class (Johnson, 1996). The doll reflected the growing attention to thinness and fitness. Barbie had breasts, but her forms were quite unrealistic, corresponding to a real person proportion of 37'-21'-32' and connecting to entertainment and lifestyle trends. Since the mid-1950s, television had transformed beauty pageants into international media events (Jones, 2010, p. 152). And, in 1961, Jean Nidetch, an overweight housewife from Queens NY, launched "Weight Watchers," starting the commercialization of diets (Nidetch, 2009). Barbie as a product became part of this larger stream of entrepreneurial opportunities.

Barbie made its first TV appearance in 1959 and sold 351,000 units in the first year, marking a new record for Mattel (Wolf, 2000). By the time Barbie was in distribution, Mattel had moved to an expensive "wall-to-wall advertising" strategy with simultaneous ads on multiple networks. As Ruth explained: "We would buy up all the programs on Saturday morning on ABC, NBC, CBS, all the shows, we became very strong in buying TV time all year long. Where the other manufacturers couldn't keep up and wouldn't dare." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIIB, p. 3). In the 1960s, more than 1.5 million customers signed up for Barbie fun clubs in the US and by 1973, the Barbie line alone had contributed more than USD 600 million in sales (Mattel/Playthings, 1970, p. 52).

While Barbie's sales surged, Handler continued imagining novel business practices. As the doll streams of adaptations were potentially infinite, Ruth was set to provide what we would today call a "Barbie ecosystem," reflecting changing trends. Barbie was suited to limitless follow-on products, not only clothes and accessories, but also cars, houses, and other auxiliary dolls. This included the boy doll, "Ken," named after the Handlers' son Kenneth, which was launched in 1961 (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIIIA, p. 2), and several other characters, such as "Skipper," Barbie's younger (and flatter) sister, and "Colored Francie," an African American friend, launched in the context of the 1960s civil rights movement. Reflecting the social trends of the 1960s, Barbie became the symbol of a liberated young woman with no visible ties to parents and family.

Yet, Ruth's initial vision started to show first cracks in the mid-1960s, when a new generation of women entered the labor force. Women born immediately after the war were twice as likely to attend college and work outside the household than Ruth's generation (DuBois & Dumenil, 2018, p. 69). The attempts to incorporate the diversity of the changing society into Mattel's product lines proved not to be sufficient to convince them. The critical feminist movement that emerged in those years questioned the narrative of Barbie as a model of female emancipation and criticized the doll for promoting unhealthy beauty standards (Grassel, 1999; Lord, 2004; Wright, 2003). Critics of Barbie would blame Mattel not just for the doll's look but also for encouraging conspicuous consumption and projecting a lifestyle based on the accumulation of material goods (Clark, 1978). However, after a slight dip in the late 1960s and 1970s, Barbie's sales recovered in the 1980s and reached almost USD 2 billion annually. The doll was dubbed the "Coca Cola of toys" and found favor as a "Regan-era go-getter, (…) a New Woman who could be anybody and do anything" (Goodman, 1998).

As Mattel evolved into a large company with global ambitions, its success built on new practices in the toy industry, novel marketing, and an ongoing (if increasingly challenged) image of toys as tools to trigger children's creativity. Barbie was a symbol for this growth phase. It allowed Ruth Handler to gain respect and legitimacy in the toy industry and emancipate herself as a female entrepreneur. In 1959, Ruth was appointed the first female member of the board of the Toy Manufacturing Association and the following year became vice-president of it (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IIIA, p. 1).

4. HotWheels, and the Crisis of the 1970s

Supported by the market success of its bestsellers, Mattel went public over the counter in 1960. In 1963, the Handlers proceeded to list the company on the New York Stock Exchange for USD 10 million and quickly entered the Fortune 500 list (Mattel/Playthings, 1970, p. 53). By the mid-1960s the company reached the USD 100 million sales mark and acquired further manufacturing facilities in the United States and abroad (primarily in Mexico and in the Far East) to support growth. The company's marketing budget increased from USD 2 million in 1960 to USD 10 million in 1970. It involved a whole range of initiatives: national network shows featuring Mattel's own characters; TV spots and extensive magazine advertising; and strong displays at retail locations (Mattel, 1961; Mattel/Schwarz, 1970). To Ruth Handler, this growth period elevated her professional career as a female executive. "Where do I get my kicks? You know, it's a pretty heavy experience to walk into a room and be the only female. Fifty men and me. (…) Gave me power." (Handler/Aero, 1983, p. 52). Mattel aggressively pursued internationalization and started a process of divisionalization, reorganizing the firm by product lines across different managerial levels. This process helped them fulfill Wall Street's expectations but reduced the Handlers' control over the company.

In 1968, ten years after the launch of Barbie, Mattel introduced Elliot's most successful creation: the HotWheels cars. In the post war period, the US market became quickly saturated with flashy miniature model vehicles, such as Dinkie and Matchbox cars. However, Elliot was able to design a product that stood out for being much faster than competitors: he thought that boys would be thrilled by faster cars and racing action. To increase speed, he designed an independent suspension system, adding axles and working wheels to the traditional structure of die-cast cars. Mattel's R&D team devised a prototype that could run at up to 8.3 mph downhill (which corresponded to over 300 mph in the cars' 1/87th scale) thanks to newly patented styrene wheels hung on torsion bars (Palmer, 2018). While Elliot knew toys, he hired Harry Bradley, a former car designer for General Motors, to help envision the first 16 California-style customized 3-inches Hot-Wheels. Inspired by Barbie, this product was designed to become a collectible, allowing for infinite variations and a separate line of add-ons, such as racing sets. To outcompete the incumbent miniature car leaders, Mattel also applied some of its signature marketing tricks: for instance, it partnered with Heinz to make limited HotWheels models available at premium price with labels from Heinz spaghetti (Brown, 1996, p. 195). Hot-Wheels were advertised as "the fastest metal cars in the world," and became an instant bestseller, with Mattel producing 16 million models in its first year 1968 (Mattel, 1991). With HotWheels, Mattel tapped into the American fascination with cars, a lived experience shared among many US customers. They mirrored current trends in their annual series, while marketing them through the familiar idea that kids could use the miniatures to travel with their imagination and dream up unlimited adventures and trips (Mattel, 1991).

Hot-Wheel's success represented the peak before the descent for the Handlers, who in the 1970s were hit by a series of personal and business setbacks. On the business front, after going public, the company received increasing criticism for the nature of their products and the scale of advertising campaigns. Through the 1960s, Mattel had already experienced vocal attacks from the consumerism movement, which had been lobbying against excessive advertising to children (Blanchard, 2013, p. 593), against the sale of toy guns for normalizing violence, and in favor of the introduction of official guidelines on product safety specifications (i.e. type of materials) (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIIIA, p. 4). In addition, the Handlers increasingly lost control of the company, as executives took over the running of the now public entity. Seymour Rosenberg became a senior financial officer and implemented a process of diversification through acquisitions of unrelated businesses, turning Mattel into a conglomerate in line with the corporate trends of the late 1960s (Amatori & Colli, 2014, pp. 150-156). Elliot recalled that: "[they] started diversifying because we feared that we might be cut off advertising to children." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIIIA, p. 4). While the business was on the brink of crisis, Ruth was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1970 and underwent a mastectomy (Mattel/E. Handler, 1970). Ruth's recovery kept her away from the business for some time.

In March 1973, Mattel unexpectedly reported a USD 32 million loss. Alarm among shareholders escalated, resulting in a class-action suit against the company. A preliminary SEC investigation on the company's insider trading and irregular accounting practices ensued. At that point, Rosenberg left Mattel, Ruth resigned as president and became co-chairman of the board with Elliot, who remained CEO. After the investigation found elements of false reporting and fraud, the Handlers were forced out of Mattel and left the board on October 17th, 1975 (Mattel, 1975). Ruth remembered the crisis as an unjust and personal prosecution: "I was spending a lot of time with lawyers because the U.S. Attorney and everybody else was after me." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IV, p. 12). "Now, to bring down a woman, a famous woman, a woman who had had the nerves to get up there, and to bring her down … just think of the reputation that could be made on bringing her down. And honest to God, that is the truth of what did happen." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IXA, p. 14). In the next three years, the SEC case was turned to the US attorney office and then to the grand jury. In 1978, Ruth, Rosenberg, and three other executives were indicted for falsifying earnings and sales records. Ruth and Rosenberg were condemned to each pay a USD 57,000 fine and were given a 41-year sentence converted into 2,500 hours of community services spread over five years, which Ruth performed at the prosecutor's office. In 1980, the Handlers sold most of their stock, equaling 12 percent of the company, for USD 18.5 million (Mattel, 1981).

5. NearlyMe, and Emancipation Over Time (1980s and 1990s)

Ruth remembered the years after leaving Mattel as the darkest of her life. The fame that she had gained for her business accomplishments at Mattel abruptly backfired and the Handlers were haunted by negative press coverage. After spending most of her time either dealing with lawyers or playing poker in the Los Angeles suburb of Gardena, 60-year-old Ruth decided to start over by founding a new business (Handler/Quinn, 1987, p. 19). She pursued the idea of a breast prosthesis company, which she had been pondering since her mastectomy and for which she could rely on her prior experience with plastic dolls (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IVB, p. 10).

After her surgery in 1970, she had experimented with the artificial breast prostheses available and realized that they were ill-fitting, uncomfortable, and very limited in selection. She recalled the experience of buying her first prosthesis as quite unpleasant: “I threw away my entire wardrobe and wore loose things and the layered look (…) to hide the fact that my two sides didn’t match.” (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VA, p. 16). She struggled with the changes of her body. “I was proud of how I looked, I wore designer clothes, they fit me tight and showed my body, and I liked that. Suddenly, when I lost my breast, I felt de-womanized.” (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VA, p. 15). Having battled all her life as a woman in a man’s world of business, Ruth struggled with what she perceived as an assault on her personhood and femininity.

After some research, Ruth found a prosthesis designer in Santa Monica, Peyton Massey, who designed her first two prostheses for USD 350 each. After several attempts and adjustments in shape, size, and material, he eventually came up with a customized artificial breast (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VA, p. 19). Ruth set up her office in the back alley of Massey’s laboratory and summoned some former Mattel employees: Elliot, an engineer, a modelist, and a materials expert. Together, they brainstormed the best way to envision and design the product. Ruth also proceeded to implement a marketing strategy. As models for the first prototypes, she contacted breast cancer survivors through a network of Los Angeles surgeons and the Cancer Society (NearlyMe, 1978, p. 40).

In 1976, Ruth's launched her new venture Ruthton Corporation (combining the names Ruth and Peyton) and named the product collection "NearlyMe" (NearlyMe, 1975-1977). After selling it in her Los Angeles flagship store, Ruth launched a nation-wide department-store campaign in 1977. She recalled: "We were getting lots of publicity and lots of advertising; having tremendous excitement, and I was turning again to life. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience to stand there, toe to toe with women and fit them with the prosthesis which I had designed and made. It was a thrilling feeling". Yet, her legal problems were not over and provided a stark contrast to the newly found entrepreneurial emancipation. "Then I would come home, and I'd have a lawyer's meeting and that would drive me down to the ground, and it was just an awful feeling. I couldn't wait to get out of town and go back into the fitting rooms and fit women with breasts; it became my salvation." (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape IVB, p. 13).

The company was primarily self-financed by Peyton and Ruth, who by 1978 had invested USD 100,000 of her own savings and about USD 500,000 in loans secured by her Mattel stock. The NearlyMe line was innovative on multiple fronts. First the prothesis were more user-friendly, designed for regular lingerie and not for surgical bras. Second it came in different left and right shapes, which could be purchased separately, and in more than 50 bra-sizes, making it easy for women to find their own. Third, they were affordable, retailing between USD 90 and 150. Besides capitalizing on her Mattel contacts, Ruth applied several marketing tricks she had developed for Barbie. For instance, she created the swimsuit "Malibu" collection and a bra-line to be sold as add-on to the prosthesis, and launched a trade-in program for the artificial breasts, just like she had for Barbie previously. Recognizing a familiar pattern, she saw that department stores displayed a seasonality similar to the toy industry (Handler, 1978). By 1979, NearlyMe had sold 200,000 prostheses and grossed USD 2 million (NearlyMe, 1980, p. 50).

Most importantly, NearlyMe served Ruth in rebuilding her personal image. She built a business centered around the vision and objective of rehabilitating her image as a female business leader with a positive impact on society (Handler/Souer, 1973). Ruth actively combatted her image as a shrewd businesswoman who liked expensive clothes, drove a Rolls Royce, and cooked the books. She turned herself into an activist, inspiring cancer survivors to recreate their life after a major trauma. Analogously to her innovative practices at Mattel, the idea of empowering women was not just limited to the product but was incorporated into the company's organization, as Ruth hired cancer survivors as sales representatives and staff.

Finally, NearlyMe's sales and marketing strategy hinged on Ruth's experience and charisma. She was herself a breast cancer survivor. Her picture featured on all the prostheses pamphlets, and she also modelled for the Malibu collection (NearlyMe, 1979). She spent the early 1980s touring America to personally present the product in department stores, meeting customers in the fitting rooms, and training the personnel. Her experience with NearlyMe repositioned her story in the press (NearlyMe, 1985-1990). As a result, she also started receiving invitations to formal and informal meetings of female business leaders, in the context of a growing participation of women in business. In the 1980s, she increasingly engaged with non-profit organizations, becoming vocal about the role of women in society and business: "I did not like girls (…) I had very few girlfriends (…) but I think I missed a lot because in the years after my trauma at Mattel, these gals from the women in business bunch pulled me in. And I discovered the camaraderie of a female. I found it more fulfilling than I could have ever believed." (Handler/Field, 1981-1982, p.

4). This increased involvement with female leaders contributed to strengthening her public image and changed the narrative about her persona.

The Ruthton venture always remained small, since its target market was limited and advances in angioplasties soon made breast implants more affordable. After another mastectomy and other health issues Ruth sold the company to Spenco Medical Corp. in 1991 (NearlyMe, 1991). Although sales had increased through the 1980s, Elliot later recalled that the venture "never made much money." (Handler/Fields, 1993, Tape VIIIA, p. 4). However, it allowed Ruth to re-empower herself as an entrepreneur and rewrite her own entrepreneurial story. She crafted a tailored narrative for her products based on healing and presented herself as a survivor, using her business as a vehicle of activism. Symbolically, she spoke about this period as "doing it my way", in stark contrast to her descriptions of the co-creation processes with her husband that started Mattel and that she labeled "our way" (Handler/Field, 1981, Tape 1, pp. 58-60).

When Ruth retired from NearlyMe in the early 1990s, the Barbie line was yielding more than USD 75 million. Mattel's board also nominated the company's first female president, Jill Baran. One of Baran's first symbolic acts was to award Ruth with the "Women of Distinction" prize (Handler/Field, 1993, Tape VIIIA, p. 6). In 1994, Barbie turned 35 and Ruth accepted Mattel's invitation to give a commemorative address at an International-Fun-Club event, where she was celebrated as a pioneer and social entrepreneur. Ruth died in Los Angeles in 2002.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of the autobiographical narrative reconstructions of Ruth Handler, in dialogue with the history of Mattel and the toy industry, foregrounds value creation (rather than wealth creation) as motive for entrepreneurship. Specifically, it supports the argument that entrepreneurship involves acts of emancipation (Rindova et al., 2009), rooted in a critical reflection on the entrepreneur's present status quo, with its ideological and material constraints. The exemplar of Ruth Handler shows how the entrepreneur repeatedly escaped the (perceived, if not always fully articulated) constraints of the status quo to envision novel futures. In her self-narratives, Ruth Handler grappled with societal and family expectations towards her as a mother, her role as a female entrepreneur and later business executive, and with the challenge of her changing body after breast cancer. Our analysis is also a critique towards the literature on entrepreneurial imagination which has focused too strongly on the early opportunity recognition phase, thus disguising many imaginative and emancipatory acts. Returning to Schumpeter's understanding of the rare act of recombining resources in novel ways opens the field up to interesting new research questions, rather than bracketing the initial part of the entrepreneurial process and confining entrepreneurial imagination exclusively to it. The Handlers actively used their imagination to establish and emancipate themselves as entrepreneurs. They continued to engage in acts of envisioning changes to the status quo, not only when projecting new products but also in marketing, use of resources, firm organization, production processes, and, importantly, in the ways they legitimized their actions. Our biographical perspective allows us to analyze these processes over time, across different stages of firm history and multiple ventures. Future research may be able to further distinguish different types of "entrepreneurship as emancipation" at different stages in a venture's life cycle, complementing and expanding on the focus on the early idea stage.

At the same time, dominant societal values clearly shaped – both facilitated and constrained – which futures were imaginable for Ruth Handler and which forms of emancipation she would and could pursue. Our analysis shows that ideas for changing the status quo derived from the interaction with societal and political context, including the use of unusual and novel materials (e.g., plastics), newly available technologies (e.g., TV for advertising), new organizational structures (e.g., outsourcing to Japan), and other trends (e.g., increased women participation in the workforce, changing beauty ideals). Analyzed in a biographical frame, Ruth Handler's entrepreneurial process emerges as sustained by cumulative effects over time, showing how one act of emancipation prepared the ground for a stream of future connected activities: from embedding product into the empowerment discourse of first children and then cancer survivors, to the conceptualization of product ecosystems (for Barbie, HotWheel, and breast prosthesis), to the increasingly more confident declarations of emancipation with regards to being a female entrepreneur in the context of changing gender roles. Future research can expand on the idea of entrepreneurship as an ongoing act of reflection and self-critical analysis with cumulative effects *over time*, opening up new research areas at the intersection of entrepreneurship and biographical research.

Whereas some of Ruth's emancipatory entrepreneurial acts were targeted at restrictive personal attachments, others freed her from community obligations. In both cases, she made her life meaningful in her "biographical project of self-realization" (Rose, 1999, p. ix). While that was liberating in many ways, our analysis shows that these acts of entrepreneurial emancipation were also personally demanding. Our analysis confirms Rindova et al.'s (2022, p. 111) argument that one aspect of emancipatory entrepreneurship is "the emotional distance required between the self and situations", which challenged Ruth Handler repeatedly. Among her strategies for managing this form of identity work were (1) distributing responsibility by (at least formally) assigning big decisions to her husband or her work colleagues, (2) narratively working through guilt for breaking with societal conventions and role expectations, especially when reflecting on her role as a mother, and (3) emphasizing her use of the senses as a more empirically grounded and thus more legitimate form of challenging conventional wisdom. It was *seeing* her daughter's doll play and the German

Bild Lilly as well as *touching* different types of materials (plastics, wood, etc.) in her own living space that legitimized her experimenting with products. Our analysis of autobiographical sources allowed us to trace these forms of identity work *over time* and connect them to larger historical developments to arrive at an account of embedded entrepreneurial agency.

Exploring this type of identity work *over time* is unusual because we rarely have sources available that provide opportunities for studying how individuals legitimize their acts of entrepreneurial emancipation at different moments in time. Seen in a Schumpeterian frame, most scholarship so far has focused on innovative forms of opportunity recognition (Shane, 2003) and imaginative (re-)combination of resources, e.g., in what has been termed "entrepreneurial bricolage" (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Yet, scholars have engaged less with innovative forms of (repeated, cumulative and even revisionist) legitimization efforts. Our analysis of Ruth Handler is thus interesting as a potential model for studying the process of legitimization over time in entrepreneurial history to understand a stream of connected and evolving legitimizations efforts (Wadhwani & Lubinski, 2017). This stream may even extend beyond the life of a single entrepreneur and include communities or families, with legitimization narratives being told and retold across several members.

Finally, Ruth Handler's acts and declarations of emancipation also served her to mobilize collaborators and allies. Understanding how entrepreneurs present their emancipatory activities and how they relate them to others is an important element of a more holistic understanding of how entrepreneurship ultimately contributes to collective action and, in the long run, change in society (Rindova et al., 2022; Wadhwani & Lubinski, 2017). Across her entrepreneurial journey, Ruth Handler was never a lone genius; her ideas evolved through collaborations. She worked closely with Elliot, Matt, and also with Charlotte Johnson for Barbie. Similarly, the idea of

NearlyMe required Ruth Handler's continuous collaboration with prosthetics designers and cancer survivors. Collectively, they pushed the process of creatively recombining resources and narratives, thus challenging the status quo in the process. Ruth's emancipatory declarations helped collaborators to see and buy into her vision, particularly in the context of her last venture, Ruthton Corporation, which never generated much profit but was immensely valuable to Ruth Handler as a way to reframe her entrepreneurial story.

In conclusion, understanding how entrepreneurs imagine new futures requires us to also explore how they emancipate themselves from the constraints of their interpreted past and present. Our analysis of Ruth Handler showed the value of an explicit and historically sensitive engagement with entrepreneurship as emancipation both *in time* and *over time*, nurturing an inspiring dialogue between business historians and entrepreneurship scholars.

7. Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mary Yeager for her constructive criticism and for kindly providing us access to her private collection. We also thank Dan Wadhwani, the participants of the panel on women entrepreneurship at the 2021 2nd World Congress of Business History and three anonymous reviewers for comments and suggestions on the paper. We are grateful to the staff at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliff Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University, for the help and support during the process of data collection. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support by the Carlsberg Foundation's Semper Ardens: Advance grant "The Entrepreneurial Age: Rethinking Entrepreneurship in Society."

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