

Life of intrigue gets a stamp of approval

Gitner's business has others licked

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Middletown — Henry Gitner talks like a character out of a spy novel.

"I used to do a lot of work with a Swedish baron, who was interested in Saudi Arabia of all places," he says moments after an introduction.

Gitner is a stamp dealer, one of the world's largest. He is described by some as the "Wal-Mart" of the stamp business — a Wal-Mart with high-end retail.

The stamp world is a rarified, yet egalitarian one. It is a quiet pursuit, rarely publicized, kept to quiet rooms and small details.

"It is called the king of hobbies and the hobby of paupers and kings," Gitner says.

You never know who collects them — a factory worker or his CEO, spending pennies or thousands of dollars at a time.

The stamp world means casual stories of philanthropists and ambassadors, night trains to Lucerne and nervous weeks held up in China.

For more than 20 years, Gitner has based this life out of Middletown. With the help of a city loan, he just moved from the old O&W railroad station to a 19th century brick building on Highland Avenue.

The building was once a house later converted to offices. A tour leads from room to room, all filled with boxes of stamps, finding a staff member here and there holding tweezers or pouring over a book of stamps.

"I'm not afraid to own things," he says. "I'm the consummate pack rat."

He is a leading stamp dealer for stamps from country after country. He is probably the world's biggest dealer in United Nations stamps.

With the help of his wife, Debbie, he focuses on large wholesaling but will sell the intriguing, expensive stamps retail.

He negotiates casual but tough, dismissing a price and naming his own. Speaking quietly with absolute confidence of his trade, he says he doesn't try to take advantage of people. He says he tries to be fair.

He recently expanded into coins and autographs, not Mickey Mantle but signatures like Gen. Robert E. Lee on Confederate money.

There are stamps for anyone. Some people collect themes, like mushrooms or butterflies, while others collect countries, like Guyana, Liechtenstein or Belgian parcel post.

Gitner started collecting at 8 and went into business at 16. He specialized in Switzerland simply because his father commuted with a watchmaker.

Two years later, he took his first trip to Europe. He bought stamps in Belgium for \$1,500, took the night train to Lucerne, Switzerland, and sold them for \$10,000 — not bad for a teenager.

Gitner came to Middletown in 1981 because he could afford a home and had easy access to Route 17 and Interstate 84.

Now he is an institution in the stamp business, one of the major advertisers in Linn's, the paper of record in the world of philately, or stamp collecting.

"People think I should be 100 years old because I've been around forever," he says.

He has around 10 employees, which means he is "big for the stamp business but not big in the real world," he says.

But few Middletown businesses have Spaniards as their biggest customers or work closely with the Jordanian ambassador to Italy. Few local businessmen get stuck in China on suspicion of smuggling.

It was the late 1990s, and Gitner had a whole lot of Chinese stamps, "the largest lot I ever bought," he says.

He flew to China to sell them. Customs agents thought he was smuggling. He says



Times Herald-Record/TOM BUSHEY

Henry Gitner and his wife, Debbie, at Henry Gitner Philatelists Inc., in Middletown. The company is one of the world's leading buyers of philatelic properties.

he wasn't.

"It was a big misunderstanding," he says.

He stayed in Beijing for a month, a five-day trip stretched to 30, with his wife sick at home. He switched hotels every few days, never making a call from the hotel phones.

"I had the feeling they were trying to catch me at something," he says. "It was out of a bad spy novel."

Gitner says you know you are in real trouble when they take your passport. They never took his. They never asked for money either.

But it was "all about money," he says. "I

could feel guys were convinced they could have their retirement on me."

He called in "clients with influence" to help. He thinks an imminent visit by President Clinton helped loosen the atmosphere.

In the end, he paid only about \$50 for a storage fee, though it took him six months to get the most valuable stamps back.

This bad spy novel, with Swedish barons and Chinese intrigue, think Agatha Christie from Orange County, already has a slogan.

It's at the bottom of Gitner's business card.

"Philately: The Quiet Excitement."