



The Girl from Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family

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An intimate and profoundly moving Jewish family history—a story of displacement, prejudice, hope, despair, and love.

In this luminous memoir, award-winning *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen turns a compassionate yet discerning eye on the legacy of his own forebears. As he follows them across continents and decades, mapping individual lives that diverge and intertwine, vital patterns of struggle and resilience, valued heritage and evolving loyalties (religious, ethnic, national), converge into a resonant portrait of cultural identity in the modern age.

Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through to the present day, Cohen tracks his family's story of repeated upheaval, from Lithuania to South Africa, and then to England, the United States, and Israel. It is a tale of otherness marked by overt and latent anti-Semitism, but also otherness as a sense of inheritance. We see Cohen's family members grow roots in each adopted homeland even as they struggle to overcome the loss of what is left behind and to adapt—to the racism his parents witness in apartheid-era South Africa, to the familiar ostracism an uncle from Johannesburg faces after fighting against Hitler across Europe, to the ambivalence an Israeli cousin experiences when tasked with policing the occupied West Bank. At the heart of *The Girl from Human Street* is the powerful and touching relationship between Cohen and his mother, that "girl." Tortured by the upheavals in her life yet stoic in her struggle, she embodies her son's complex inheritance.

Graceful, honest, and sweeping, Cohen's remarkable chronicle of the quest for belonging across generations contributes an important chapter to the ongoing narrative of Jewish life.

The Girl from Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family Details

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From Reader Review *The Girl from Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family* for online ebook

Helen says

I came to read this book because of this review on the NAMI blog:

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/...>

The author is a talented writer. It is very poignant, often heartbreakingly so. I wonder at the author's seeming detachment. He only refers to his mother by her first name, June. It seems to be the same detachment he has to all the places he has lived. The twentieth century, indeed centuries, of Jewish experience has been one of not belonging. What does that do to the psyche? So much of our identity comes from our location. Our identity also comes from our family history, and much depends on our being able to make sense of our own story. We also need rituals of faith to anchor us. What happens when people lose those threads and rituals? What happens when they are made to feel ashamed of their identity? What happens when they don't talk about the events that have erased so many from the face of the earth? What happens when the story makes no sense? This family memoir tries to fit all the pieces together to make sense of it. Add mental illness to the story and it's almost too much pain to bear. I can understand his detachment.

Barbara says

I love family sagas and this memoir did not disappoint. In fact, what distinguishes it from others is the passion in the storytelling. Cohen is such a beautiful writer. One can picture his mother, one can picture Johannesburg during its early gold rush days, one can picture his niece in Israel, struggling to find meaning to hang on to life. I was deeply touched at how this Holocaust survival narrative relates to the meaning of being Jewish. A lot of Holocaust narratives don't do that! This book talks about how various members of Cohen's family write about, and practice, Judaism after being traumatized by the Holocaust or by mental illness. It affected me deeply.

Karyl says

I saw the author talk about his book as a blurb on the BBC World News in America. Fascinated as I am by the Holocaust, I figured it would be a really great read, and I was thrilled when my library had it on offer.

But what is Cohen trying to do with this book? Is it a way to tell the world that the Nazis slaughtered an entire village of Jews in Lithuania, Cohen's ancestral homeland? Is it a look at what Jews endured during those horrific years that make up the Holocaust: children hidden in barrels and basements, separated from their parents, looking over their shoulders and every second believing that the Nazis have come for them? Is it a story of emigration and the unease of being a Jew and seeing how apartheid kept the blacks of South Africa as "less than" citizens? Is it a discussion on mental illness and how it can ravage through and affect so many members of one family? Is it a dissertation on the author's politics and belief that a two-party system is the only viable one for Israel?

It is, depending on the chapter, each of these, and unfortunately, it doesn't seem to tell any one story very well. Cohen portrays this book as the story of his mother (the girl from Human Street, indeed), but instead we barely get to know her. He goes into far more detail of his distant cousin's life and battle with mental illness, a woman he admits he never had the chance to meet. I believe he intends to weave all these stories together into one unified whole, but I don't think he ever gets there. The stories stay stubbornly unbraided.

I also didn't care for the way Cohen would throw various quotes from scholars and other writers into his story. I'd rather Cohen enumerate his feelings in his own words, not using a crutch like, "As So-and-So says in his book, Such-and-Such..." The only major quote I did think was used effectively was the one from Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*, considering it is her memoir of dealing with manic-depression, the condition that Cohen's mother suffered with.

I'm rather disappointed in this book.

Benjamin Siegel says

A fascinating family story from a talented journalist Beautifully written and researched eighty five percent of the time; if an editor trimmed the fat and the occasional lapse into platitude it would have been all the richer.

Micah says

Roger Cohen's memoir of his Jewish family's trajectory from Eastern Europe to South Africa and Great Britain and parts beyond (including Israel and America) is both absorbing and frustrating. I found myself struggling to keep track of all his different family threads, but eventually realized that the weave was more important than the details of each one. What was most powerful for me was learning how much the effects of voluntary and involuntary migration can have on a family and the mental health of its members. Cohen also does a terrific job of showing how Jewish communities in many settings--Lithuania before WWII, South Africa in the 1950s and 60s, England in the 60s and 70s, and even more recent Israel--experience disempowerment and anti-semitism. It's not an easy read, in part because Cohen chooses a flowery style that sometimes soars but also sometimes slows down the narrative.

Susan says

This book is an elegy to the author's mother who was diagnosed as having manic depression and who was in and out of mental hospitals. It is writing. It is a memoir. Although it does firmly place blame for the mother's depression on anti-semitism and particularly British anti-semitism, and that's good--that is it's biggest insight into the mother's mental processes. It doesn't address the fact that the medical profession offered no solution to or even comprehension of her depression. The author in fact rehearses British medical mysteriousness about mental "illness"--you know "she's not very well. She's a bit of an upset" type Britishism. The book is I believe the author's attempt to come to grips with his mother's life and the fact that her suffering to him in fact remains painfully incomprehensible. The author has only come to understand a little about South Africa or Britain or anti-semitism or manic depression. He's a good person but the book is a confused wandering. It is not written for the reader but for the author--it's an unsuccessful attempt at coming to terms.

Shira Reiss says

The author, Roger Cohen researched many aspects of his family and their life from Lithuania to family members who were lost in the Holocaust to the bipolar illness of his mother, to their life in South Africa and England. At times, I found myself bored with the amount of detail. I became lost because he went back in forth in time and I couldn't figure out what these details had to do with the title or the themes listed in the description of the book. In my opinion, the title did not fit the book. He also addressed the difficulties of Jewish identity during apartheid and in England and, it made me understand why there is still so much anti-semitism in England and why Jews feel disconnected from English society.

I was exhausted and overwhelmed by plowing through details that will delight other readers and members of Cohen's family. The book may have felt like an emotional catharsis for the author, but it was a struggle for me to digest all the details and names and relations, and to maintain interest. The book was often a burden to read, was dry, and was difficult at times to follow.

I found his analysis of present day Israel and the problems there to be quite interesting. There are so many tidbits that can lead to deeper discussions. If my book group had not chosen this book, I probably would not have plowed through the book.

Michelle says

A notable award winning author and journalist/columnist for the New York Times presents: "The Girl From Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family" (2015). This is a stunning beautifully written memorial tribute of Roger Cohen's family history; he explained: "My family story, like millions of other Jews, leads inexorably to Zionism." Cohen traces the profound impact of the Holocaust on humanity, articulating its devastation in his own family largely relating to the severe mental illness of his mother, who passed away in 1999.

Human Street runs through the center of Krugerdorp, a "modest" town in Johannesburg, where Cohen's parents Meyer and June were from. Devoted and committed to family life, Meyer Cohen was a doctor, he believed his young wife's apparent mental illness as "endogenous" (coming from within). Roger was born in 1955, and by the time his sister was born in 1958, his mother had been treated with ECT, it was difficult for June to fit in with English culture in South Africa.

Meyer would eventually develop a secret hidden double life which likely helped him cope with June's illness. The loving attentive father Cohen had remembered in childhood vanished, becoming so remote, distant, and "unreachable" he was absent from family photos at gatherings.

In the late 1970's, June, while posted as a magistrate, attempted suicide and was treated with antidepressants and admitted to St. Mary's and University College Hospital for severe depression. In 1979, renowned psychiatrist Silvo Benaim (his Jewish family fled Italy in 1938) studied the phenomenon of hysterical epidemics. Benaim diagnosed the high and lows of June's mood swings, erratic behavior and inability to sleep well as "manic depression". He began a treatment with Lithium which seemed to stabilize her. In the early 1980's there were further mental breakdowns. Cohen observed: "My parents love had been twisted by the manic-depressive scourge and yet it had persisted. My father was the fixed point of my mothers life, her

one man, her only and forever man."

Mental illness would continue to cause stigma and anxiety in the circle of family and close friends. June seldom found freedom from the bewildering pain and torment that seemed to define her life, Cohen reflected; "life and death coexisted- she could feel one and taste the other." While in a state of exhaustion, Cohen made a shocking confession in regards to his mothers ashes following her death from liver failure and lung cancer. This may have been related his own detachment, a trait he recalled similar to that of his father,

Returning to Lithuania in 2012, to his ancestor's hometown of Siauliai, and Zagare` (Zhager) located near the River Svete, Cohen speaks of the 2,200 plus Jews executed on October 2, 1941 by the Nazi's and their Lithuanian collaborators. There was a ceremony and memorial plaque that inscribed in Lithuanian, English and Yiddish: "I mourn them to this day 'Remember Us' their unquiet spirits seem to call from the grave, as though anyone could forget. They do not ask for vengeance, only remembrance. To see the future, you must look into the past." This was an unforgettable deeply moving profound book. ~ With thanks to the Seattle Public Library.

Eric Hassall says

Through the vehicle of his family stories across generations and countries, Roger Cohen has captured the South African Jewish experience, from its origins in Eastern Europe - its depth, its richness, its difficulties and struggles. But the book covers much more than this...

Cohen's parents emigrate from Johannesburg to London, and his mother, June Cohen, develops a severe depressive illness. Mr Cohen postulates that that his mother's dislocation from a warm, loving family, an easy-going life in sunny privileged-under-apartheid South Africa, to grim grey post-war London, was a major contributor to the development of her depressive illness. A strong positive family history of mental illness subsequently becomes evident. In other words, he describes how June Cohen's wrenching dislocation and isolation in the UK seemed to be the catalytic precipitant factor in her illness. He describes the immediate and lasting effects her illness has on him, his sister and his father. It's a courageous and touching account.

Emigration / immigration is a central theme of the book, and as Cohen points out, while the Jews who fled oppression in Eastern Europe to live in South Africa were hugely successful in the professions and business, the flip side is the price sometimes paid for leaving family, culture and familiarity. Another theme he explores is that anti-Semitism over the centuries - the pogroms, the expulsions, the need to flee, and the Holocaust - has engendered a transgenerational trauma, which often resulted in shame, silence, assimilation, denial of Jewish identity, and the precipitation of mental illness in some. Mr Cohen does not present this as a randomized double-blind placebo-controlled trial; rather, it's a hypothesis richly and thoughtfully illustrated.

Mr Cohen perfectly captures the atmosphere of South Africa under apartheid – its spectacular natural beauty, the warmth of its climate and people, the successes of the Jews as new immigrants, and their privilege as whites. This is portrayed against the backdrop of the ugliness and brutality of apartheid and the stripped human rights of 'non-whites'.

In this context, the book accurately describes the particular condition of Jews in South Africa - the vulnerability they felt, despite their privilege and success. The sense of fragility stemmed from being a successful, high profile minority that was also disproportionately represented in the anti-apartheid movements, including among the lawyers and fellow travelers of Mandela and the African National Congress - in a country with many Nazi sympathizers in the government and instruments of state.

The vulnerability of South African Jews and their consequent general tightness as a community, is contrasted with the situation of American Jews, who have been blessedly secure for so long. Mr Cohen also describes 'to a T' the particular British brand of casual, subtle-but-pervasive anti-Semitism he encounters during his life in the UK.

The book has a big vision, and it is beautifully written, with humanity and courage.

Eric Hassall MD
San Francisco, CA

Karen Newsome says

Having just read W G Sebald's 'The Emigrants' as part of the required reading for an OU course, I really 'enjoyed' reading 'The Girl from Human Street', which is a thoughtful and beautifully written book exploring the same issues of memory, nostalgia, loss, love and grief. I say 'enjoyed' because sometimes the subject matter is shocking - but then, it would be, wouldn't it? I feel like I have had a door opened onto a whole new world by reading this book; I have learned things that took my breath away, made my heart sink, and made me reassess what I thought I knew about civilised society.

I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn more about the recent history of Europe and what happened to the Jewish people. Its characters are warm and human and teach us about ourselves as well.

Louise says

This book was not what I expected. I thought I was going to read the story of a Jewish South African (the author's mother, June) woman suffering from Bi polar. June's story is a constant thread throughout the book, along with digressing, albeit briefly with stories of other people's struggles with the disease. Roger Cohen digresses frequently. He takes the reader to Lithuania. This is where both sets of his grandparents were born. He gives a history of the fate of those who did not emigrate from Lithuania suffered at the hands of the Nazi's.

The book zig zags from June's story, the Lithuania history, Roger's own story of his childhood growing up in London, his memories of time spent in South Africa with his wealthy grand parents and his views about being Jewish. His parents were secular, barely acknowledging being Jewish

He then moves to an analysis of the conflicts in Israel and shares his views of the Israel/Palestine situation.

The book is well researched and well written. For me I felt there were too many agendas and too many stories or opinions the author wanted to share. It did not all hang together for me.

Jane says

I picked up this book to read based upon the enticing title and the positive reviews written about it. My expectations for this book exceeded delivery. I was looking forward to really understanding Roger Cohen's mother and her spiral into madness. Instead the book concentrated on the Lithuanian history of the family. I've met a number of former South African Jewish families who emigrated to Israel and most of them did so because they were afraid of the blacks uprising which they felt was inevitable. Their lives in South Africa, like Mrs. Cohen's, were very comfortable with maids and gardeners attending to all their needs. I think that Mr. Cohen only skimmed the surface of his mother's life. His description of his cousin Rena's life and illness delved more deeply into the roots of her mental illness than he did of his mother's. I was hoping for a deeper and more personal look at her life, less like written by a journalist and more like a memoir by a loving son.

Hannah Symonds says

I was very moved by the stories in this book. Even though some of the accounts are truly devastating and horrific, I found myself fascinated about how a Jewish family survived throughout the holocaust. Roger Cohen puts a truly hauntingly perspective on them, that sometimes I did have to come away and think about other things. There is quite a bit of jumping around in this book but it didn't faze me. This is a kind of book that will stay with you for a lifetime.

Adam says

This is a superb example of family history writing. It rivals my other favourite in this genre, Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*. Roger Cohen's book is a tour-de-force because it combines the story of his family, its flight from Lithuania to South Africa and elsewhere, with an account of the plight of the Jewish people. Cohen covers many aspects of the complex story of the Jews and their relationships to people of differing ethnicities and beliefs.

In this intricate, beautifully written book that makes skilful use of his family's history, Cohen tackles, amongst many other topics, the question of British anti-Semitism and the true meaning of the criticism of Zionism, namely as an expression of anti-Semitism. At the same time, he explores what is wrong in Israel and the (difficult to achieve) possibilities of resolving the country's problems.

I can heartily recommend this fascinating and compelling book.

Susan Grodsky says

Read -- partly just skimmed -- for my book club. The discussion, with about a dozen bright, articulate, and opinionated women, was certainly much more enjoyable than reading the book itself.

The book, we all agreed, was disjointed, rambling, unsatisfying. We speculated that the author, a New York Times columnist, had written short narratives, had these bits rejected by his editor, and therefore created this book so he finally publish his surplus work.

We did understand the motifs. Wandering. Exile. Resettlement. Never being home. Always being the stranger. And we got the author's assertion that his mother's mental illness was a result of her wanderings and "homelessness".

But we didn't really believe this assertion. Many people migrate from one country to another and yet don't fall victim to bipolar disorder. One member of our group was the daughter of Holocaust survivors. She was, understandably, not too sympathetic. June moved from sunny South Africa to gloomy England. She lost her luxury lifestyle and extended family. But her family wasn't murdered and she didn't flee with only the clothes on her back.

The book also revealed an inconvenient truth: the family in South Africa went along with and benefited from apartheid. Jews like to think of themselves as sympathetic to the downtrodden. We like to think of ourselves as crusaders for social justice. But the Cohen family happily prospered while participating in a heinous system. It was not any better than the typical white South African.

This cognitive dissonance (or just call it shame) may be the real reason behind our antipathy.
