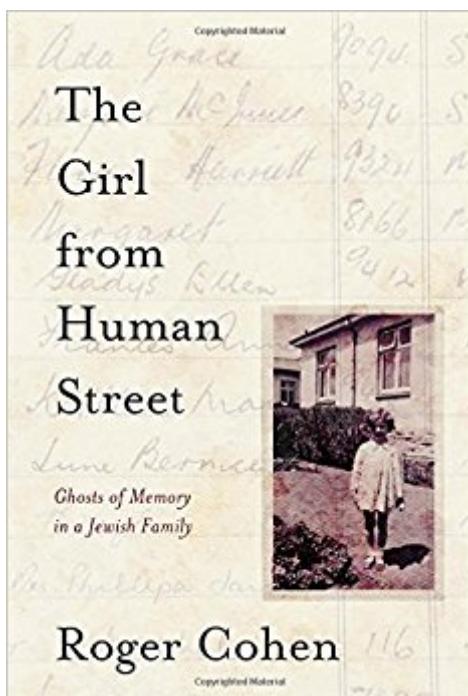


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# The Girl From Human Street: Ghosts Of Memory In A Jewish Family



## Synopsis

An intimate and profoundly moving Jewish family history—â•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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Empathetic and far-reaching... The imaginative empathy that he brings even to the secondary figures depicted here...is sometimes breathtaking... Cohen's book is written with a generosity that is truly humane." — The New York Review of Books — "Beautifully crafted." [Cohen] reveals how the threads of [his] legacy of displacement are woven together, all the while making visible tears in the fabric never to be fully mended. — The Washington Post — "There is so much to admire in — The Girl from Human Street. Cohen's suggestion that certain depressive natures are triggered, or more to the point, haunted, by their immigrant history, is profound. His memoir will linger in any reader's memory." — USA Today — "Cohen places the particular experiences of his family in a large historical frame." In his instructive meditations on history and Jewish life, Cohen catches virtually the entire twentieth century. — The New York Times Book Review — "Impressive." [Cohen's] moving, beautifully written book may be a — story of the 20th century —, but it also explores how Jewish identity might evolve in the 21st. — Ian Critchley, The Sunday Times — "The Girl from Human Street has important things to say, things that can perhaps only be said by a Jewish author. Cohen's book is brave, honorable and enlightened. It is also beautifully written." — The Telegraph — "A moving, complex story that traces a family's century of migration." — The Financial Times "By tracing where his mother came from...[Cohen] speaks universally in this disarmingly raw narrative, and his lovely but haunted mother even more so — not least in her refusal to give up trying to love." — The Guardian — "[As with] Amos Oz's A Tale of Love and Darkness — we are in the hands of a master stylist." As a writer [Cohen] is peerless among his journalist colleagues. — Haaretz — "Cohen...explores the tentacles of repressed memory in Jewish identity." Thoughtful, wide-ranging, he muses on his own migrations spurred by — buried truths. — Publishers Weekly — "Exquisite." [Cohen] writes with a poetic fragility — always striving for moral clarity, even when his own inner contradictions and complexities impede him. — The Jerusalem Post — "Many others have written stories of their family's roots and journeys, but Cohen's work stands out for his poetic and powerful prose." — The Jewish Week — "Cohen knows the pleasures and also the loneliness of diaspora. In writing his stirring memoir, in constructing a past with which he can live, he wrestled with demons both historical and personal." — The Huffington Post

Post-*Vibrant, unusual and staunchly poignant*. It is in fact not one, but many books: a lingering, evocative memoir, a gripping narrative, a shrewd socioeconomic history of South Africa, Britain, Israel, the US and Eastern Europe, a piercing philosophical analysis of the ethics of memory, of belonging to a story. It is quite unflinchingly an inquiry into the moral prerequisites of being human.

•Bookanista “Honest and lucid” With limpid prose, Cohen delivers a searching and profoundly moving memoir.

•Kirkus, starred review “Insightful, sometimes controversial commentary on crucial contemporary issues.”

•Booklist “A gifted journalist, who has powerfully conveyed the grief of the bereft in various international trouble spots, here wrestles with his own grief for a mother who suffered through episodes of suicidal depression. This turns into a quest for core values in a family history spanning three continents, in which one uprooting led to the next.”

Many readers will find a mirror in Roger Cohen’s layered, ambitious, haunting book.

•Joseph Lelyveld, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Move Your Shadow: South Africa, Black and White* “Roger Cohen has given us a profound and powerful book, gripping from start to finish.”

The story of his Jewish family’s suffering and success, from Lithuania before the Shoah to South Africa, London and Tel Aviv today, features fierce battles against external demons (Hitler, Stalin, pervasive anti-Semitism) and the internal demons of depression and displacement.

Wise and reflective, *The Girl from Human Street* is memoir at its finest.

•Fritz Stern, author of *Five Germanys I Have Known* “Roger Cohen captures a century’s upheavals in his moving, thoughtful, and well-written family saga.”

•Henry A. Kissinger “Roger Cohen’s great-grandfather once expressed the wish that every person might truly know that all of creation – from the sand granule to the shining star – is connected like one chain.”

I wish he could read his great-grandson’s book and experience how powerfully it initiates us into that extraordinary awareness. Beautifully written and deeply moving, *The Girl from Human Street* is at once a love letter to a lost mother and an unflinching account of devastation and displacement. How can a story of such sweeping scope also be so tender and so intimate?

Roger Cohen turns personal and historical excavation into symphony.

•Mary Szybist, winner of the National Book Award “I am moved by this book. I find fascinating the fusion of the private, even intimate family story with the history of European Jews in the twentieth century, the marriage of a subtle memoir with an essay on Jewish identity, tradition and assimilation, various diasporas and Israel, Israelis and Palestinians, humanism vs. fanaticism.”

•Amos Oz “Roger Cohen has written an absorbing, haunting voyage around the Jewish twentieth

century. A book full of loss and love, it charts the intense, universal need to belong. •a need so great, it can lead to despair and even a kind of madness. It is more than the story of one family. It is the story of a need that makes us human. •Jonathan Freedland, columnist, The Guardian

ROGER COHEN is a columnist for The New York Times, where he has worked since 1990: as a correspondent in Paris and Berlin, and as bureau chief in the Balkans covering the Bosnian war (for which he received an Overseas Press Club prize). He was named a columnist in 2009. He became a foreign editor on 9/11, overseeing Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage in the aftermath of the attack. His columns appear twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays. His previous books include *Soldiers and Slaves* and *Hearts Grown Brutal*. He lives in London. [@NYTimesCohen](https://twitter.com/NYTimesCohen)

I found this book a page turner, beautifully written with superb research and reporting. It is impossible to grasp fully such complex, multi-layered narrative in a single reading. On one level I found it an extraordinary saga of a Jewish family's history--displacement, assimilation, prejudice, survival, and expressing human love and anguish. Cohen dwelt on lost memories and how families often kept silent about familial history. One might wonder why he dwelt so heavily on the Lithuanian heritage that his family had left and seemingly ignored generations before Cohen was born. I found this essential to the overall story of an uprooting and the resettlement principally in the pre-and-post-Boer War South Africa. The irony was that Jewish assimilation in South Africa was accompanied by a general willingness to acknowledge acceptance of whites in a society where blacks were systematically discriminated against. More than one, even after apartheid, the theme was 'if the blacks weren't the targets of discrimination, it would be us Jews.' Cohen's extended family generally flourished in South Africa. For various reasons, many of them migrated to England, where the social structure was less accommodating to Jews. While Cohen's extended family did well in England, it experienced some discomfort in fitting into England where anti-Semitism, though less virulent than in much of Europe, was prevalent. Cohen's family history was told in vignettes, The flashbacks to Lithuania highlighted the Jewish experience from the pogroms to Hitler and Stalin and to neighbors who occasionally saved Jews at great risk, but more often participated in the Final Solution. Cohen wove Zionism and Israel into his sweeping narrative. Some of this related to explaining his personal view that Israel must obtain some two-state solution or cease to be a democratic state. Another constant theme was the nature of his mother's manic depression. I found

this, as well as vivid recollections of a South Africa he had left before age 3, rather disconcerting. I can appreciate his struggle to seek closure on this turbulent phase of his life. I wonder why Cohen dwelt at length on his Israeli cousin, Rena, whose manic depression ultimately led to suicide. How does this Jewish narrative relate to (atheist) Cohen as a person? At the outset he wrote "I have grown suspicious that all of the running around in my peripatetic life might not have been towards something but away from something. Stillness feels like the most dangerous state of all." Much later he quoted Frost: "Home is the place, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Cohen mentioned that taking American citizenship was a liberating experience, in part because America was a nation of immigrants in which he could belong. Cohen clearly is an exceptional individual with a broad range of friends and acquaintances. I would whether Cohen feels that he truly belongs anywhere.

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.

Cohen succeeds in conveying the history of his family as it relocates from a small shtetl in Lithuania to South Africa at the turn of the century. He does so with accurate depiction of Jewish life in the new country against the background of the Afrikana control of the vast black population. Into this story he weaves, skillfully, the descriptions of family members, their personalities, foibles and differing attitudes to their new homeland. After World War II, a new chapter opens as the Cohen family leaves for England and he explains in most personal terms, his parents decision to move out of South Africa and make their home in London. His keen eye describes the personal toll suffered by his severely depressed mother and its effect on him. This is contrasted with a meteoric rise of his physician father in the British scientific community. Years later, he returns to his family's shtetl in Lithuania to research the fate of its Jews, who mostly remained there and meticulously recounts the horrors experienced at the hands of the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. Overall, the book offers a careful historic analysis with deep understanding of the impact on Jewish family life as it tries to navigate to a better and safer world. Cohen's prose is superb making the reading a joyful literary experience. I am so happy that I listened to my wife who told me to ignore the Times review reminding me that critics not always get it right.

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