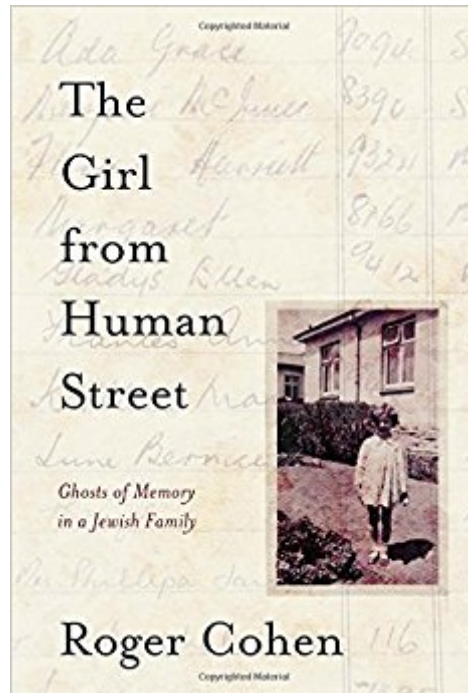


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# The Girl From Human Street: Ghosts Of Memory In A Jewish Family



## Synopsis

An intimate and profoundly moving Jewish family history—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

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Knopf; Stated First Edition edition (January 13, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307594661

ISBN-13: 978-0307594662

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.1 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (80 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #654,021 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Women & Judaism #543 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > History #549 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Jewish

## Customer Reviews

Here's the conundrum I faced with this book: I loved reading it and yet some of the chapters seemed disconnected from both the title and the main themes implied by that title - Jewish identity, experiences, memory, alienation and belonging. When author Roger Cohen addressed these topics, he made many thought-provoking points. He noted that memory may be tailored to fit our political and emotional needs, and often focused on aspects of belonging versus a sense of "otherness." He wrote very poignantly about how he missed meeting "the last Jew in Zagare, Lithuania by only months ". This was in 2011). I struggled to imagine how it must feel to be the sole Jew left in a town once known as "a center of of Jewish learning and Kaballah." However, there are also chapters which focus only the the author's family members and seem less clearly connected to the other parts of the book. One chapter, titled "Madness in the Brain, centers on the author's mother, a woman who suffered from manic-depression. Because issues of mental illness and treatment interest me, my attention never flagged while reading this chapter. I was often moved by the author's description of his mother's devastating ordeal and his conclusion that " Mental illness is a charnel house from which nobody escapes unscathed." But I did wonder if other readers might be confused or find these sections less cohesive than the rest of the book. The bottom line? I found this to be a thoroughly engaging book. For those looking solely for a memoir focused on family and individual Jewish identity, history, and related themes, it might be helpful to know that some chapters strongly veer from those topics and address mental health issues, particularly manic-depressive illness.

This takes the reader on a compelling journey through varied territory: from Italy at the end of World War II to Lithuania at the time of the horrific mass murders of Jews, to South Africa where tens of thousands of Lithuanian Jews relocated in the wake of pogroms and intolerance, hoping to get in on the gold rush near the turn of the twentieth century; to England where the author lived, to the United States; and eventually, to Israel. Roger Cohen, a New York Times correspondent, covers a wide range of topics as he tells the complex stories of his family members over the last century. We learn along the way about his family, the war, the particular brand of hideousness with which the Lithuanian Jews were systematically eliminated, the conditions for Jews in South Africa back then and through the twentieth century (he discusses apartheid, Jewish silence about apartheid, Jewish activism, and more recent political forces) the challenges of relocating anywhere, whether as a refugee or not; conditions in Israel, a bit of history about the Israeli/Palestinian situation, a comparison of that conflict with conditions of apartheid, Cohen's modified take on Zionism, what it was and is like for people to live so close to regular terrorist bombings, Israel's retaliation and its

effects on Palestinians, and the need for a healthy, democratic Jewish state where all are treated fairly and with respect. We also read about his mother's very unfortunate mental illness and various struggles that other family members endured. That's a lot of material for one book, and the writing bogs down a bit here and there with intricate detail, particularly in the detailed stories about Cohen's extended family. However, I really was particularly grateful to read about Lithuania, having read extensively about the countries surrounding it. The chapters on the Jewish community in South Africa are fascinating, and I found Cohen's opinions about Israel compelling, well thought out, and beautifully communicated. Cohen's writing is sometimes matter of fact, sometimes a bit melodramatic, sometimes poetic, and almost always gripping. This book takes a bit of patience to get through, but in the end, it is well worth it. I feel that I learned a great deal from reading "The Girl from Human Street," and look forward to reading some of the sources referred to in the notes.

This is a quest; a story of displacement of place and identity, and a search for meaning. This is also the story about the author's search for answers about his mother's bipolar mental illness; her unexplained absences when he was young; the stays in asylums and sanatoriums, her depression and her suicide attempts. Cohen writes, "She veers from the shrill to the shrinking. My mother could be impossible; when she was not impossible, she was heartbreaking." Author, Roger Cohen was born in London, taken to South Africa as an infant and returned to London 18 months later and he grew up there and became an American and moved to New York. Cohen's grandparents emigrated to South Africa in the late 1800's from small towns in Lithuania whose Jewish residents were later murdered by the Nazis. The author tells in excruciatingly details, the story of his family and the history of the times and places that shaped them. He visits what's left of the Lithuania towns as he seeks stories from those who lived through the Nazi and Russian rules, and who still remain. Cohen writes of atrocities in his grandparent's former town; how the women were forced to abort pregnancies; how Jews were rounded up; how Jews killed newborn infants. Cohen's family looks to the future and tries to forge new identities diluting meaning from their pasts. We learn about Jews in South Africa who migrated there at the same time that many Jews came to the United States. We learn of their struggles and successes. Cohen writes about Apartheid and how most Jews looked the other way. When a rabbi Unger, a Holocaust survivor condemns white supremacy in the South African Jewish community, it makes them uneasy. He is ordered by the Interior Ministry to leave South Africa. "The Jewish community does not lift a finger over his expulsion." 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. Roger Cohen is brave for telling this highly personal story. He writes, "The only way back to mindfulness and wholeness has been writing down the world as I see it. Words alone bring me to a single voice, a unified being, and an inner peace." Through Roger Cohen's story we learn about the journeys and the struggles that it took for him to arrive at this place of peace.

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