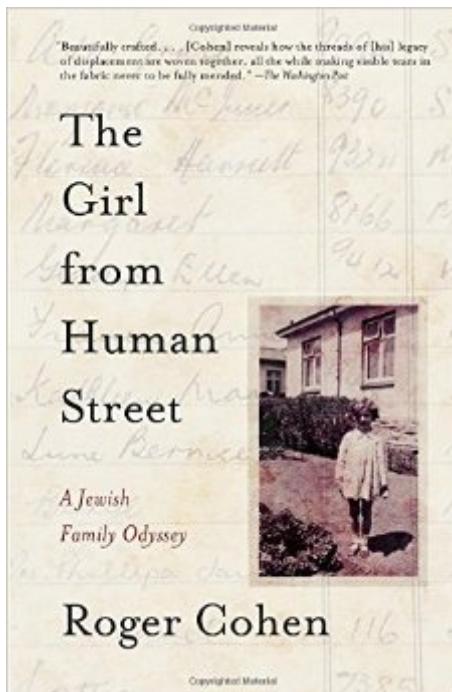


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The Girl From Human Street: A Jewish Family Odyssey



Synopsis

In his intimate and profoundly moving Jewish family history "a memoir of displacement, prejudice, hope, despair, and love" award-winning New York Times columnist Roger Cohen turns a compassionate and discerning eye on the legacy of his own forebears. Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through to the present day, Cohen tracks his family's story of repeated upheaval, four generations of wandering from pre-Shoah Lithuania to apartheid-era South Africa, and then to England, the United States, and Israel. At the heart of Cohen's story is the powerful bond he had with his mother, the "aegirl" • forced to travel far from home. Tormented by a deep depression yet stoic in her struggle, she embodied her son's complex inheritance. Graceful, honest, and sweeping, *The Girl from Human Street* is a remarkable chronicle of the quest for belonging across generations, a gripping saga, and a resonant portrait of identity and memory in the modern age.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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