

# Recollections of a Southern Jew

Edward Cohen

Back in the sixth grade in Mississippi, I read a chilling tale, “The Man Without a Country,” about a man condemned to live forever adrift on a ship, never to come home to his native land. My fellow sixth graders, I imagine, took comfort that they were still on the shore and would always be. But I, being both Southern and Jewish, identified with the man who had no home.

The Protestant South I grew up in was more of a Bible Blanket than a Bible Belt. It didn't constrict so much as smother everyone in commonality. Fitting in is the First Commandment of childhood, and for no one does this seem more imperative than for a child who can't. I dreaded the High Holy Days because I would have to explain why I wasn't in school. We'd built our temples to look like churches, we'd moved our Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, we'd expunged Hebrew from our services. Yet every December, in the midst of a uniformly Christmas-lit neighborhood, our dark house couldn't have been any more conspicuously different than if, like the Israelites in Egypt, we had swabbed blood over the door.

Still, we were few, and we almost fit in. Then came the civil rights days, when the two halves of the Southern Jew were pulled apart. We were Southern, and that meant we closed ranks against the Northern invaders, many of whom had Jewish names. Then the temple was bombed, and the rabbi's house. Fitting in, while remembering that we too had been slaves in the land of Egypt, was a psychological contortion then and is not a comfortable memory now.

I left the South for college, seeking my own kind. I submerged myself in an all-Jewish universe, but I again found myself an alien, with no shared knowledge of Nathan's hot dogs, the City, or in which direction you cut a bagel in half. I was with Jews, but they were a different tribe, one to which I didn't belong. To them the South was exotic, unthinkable, a bumpkin patch. I saw that I had another secret self, and that self was Southern.

Now I've left the South again, for California, no more to have to spell out C-o-h-e-n when I give my name, no more a darkly foreign speck in the Anglo-Saxon gene pool. Jews, according to my Talmud, don't fight, fish, follow football, or use firearms, and I don't miss those Southern sacraments. But it's taken two exiles to see how much of the South I carry with me. Back home there's

gravity, and it holds you tight to the earth. I miss strangers waving on country roads. I miss voices that cradle you. I miss people who remember my grandfather. Out here, I'll hear a Southern accent and know if I need help, that's who I'd ask.

It seems that a few generations in the South exert almost as much pull as an Old Testament of time, and I'm hard put to say where the Southern leaves off and the Jewish begins. I may be a Man Without a Country, but I carry two passports.

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*Edward Cohen, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, is a freelance screenwriter, novelist, and filmmaker. He has written several PBS documentaries on Southern and Jewish culture, including Hanukkah and Passover, narrated by Ed Asner, and Good Mornin' Blues, narrated by B. B. King. His work has received numerous international film festival awards, as well as two CINE Golden Eagles. His novel, Israel Catfish, received an America's Best Award, and his screenplay, Imminent Peril, a Southern courtroom drama, is to be an ABC movie starring Joanne Woodward.*



*Moise and Sam Cohen emigrated from Romania to Mississippi in the 1890s. They married two Cohn sisters, Etta and Nell, and raised their families together. Three generations of Cohens, all living in Jackson, celebrated the families' double 50th wedding anniversary in 1959. Because siblings married siblings, all cousins are double cousins. The author is seated in the first row, second from the left.*

Photo courtesy Cohen Family Archives