



## INTRODUCTION What's in a Name?

The photograph shows a petite young woman in boxing trunks and sweatshirt, her dark hair cropped short, leaning on the taut ropes at the corner of a boxing ring. She scowls slightly but maintains her poise, draping her arms over the ropes, small hands weighted down by massive gloves. Her feet—angled like a ballerina's on the dirty, bloodstained canvas floor—sport lace-up boots.

Behind her in the ring stands a taller woman wearing long pants, a T-shirt, and sandals. Her left hand dangles languidly over the top rope, and her head tilts toward the figure of the fighter. She strikes the supportive pose of a trainer but with a hint of sensuality. To the left, just outside the ring, is an elegantly

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*Judy Chicago as a Boxer*, to announce her name change and show  
at Cal State Fullerton, 1970. Photograph by Jerry McMillan.

dressed and groomed young man, wearing a geometrically patterned bow tie and a sports jacket, its sleeve pulled back to reveal a stiff white cuff pierced with a cuff link. With arms crossed, one leg raised above the lower rope, the other foot planted on the floor, he confidently plays the role of manager.

Above and behind the ring, visible on the wall, appear two cut-out figures of black male boxers with chests bared. The larger, who postures in fighting stance, jabbing his fists in the air, is the charismatic Sugar Ray Robinson. The smaller is a profile of the legendary Jack Johnson, who in 1908 was the first black man to win the heavyweight boxing championship of the world. His victory prompted race riots; his penchant for white women provoked prosecution under the Mann Act for transporting women across state lines for “any immoral purpose.”

The scene staged for this photograph in 1970 Los Angeles also flouted custom and law. Boxing was traditionally a male domain—“part circus act, part performance art, part psych job, part street hustle.”<sup>1</sup> California, like many other states, still barred women boxers from the ring. It would license women as boxers only in 1976, and only in 1979 would it allow them to go more than four rounds.

The figure draped on the ropes wears a sweatshirt emblazoned JUDY CHICAGO. The natty manager is her art dealer, Jack Glenn. The alluring trainer is Alona Hamilton Cooke. Glenn orchestrated the photograph to advertise both a coming show of Chicago’s art at California State College at Fullerton, and a change in her name, from Gerowitz, inherited from her late husband, to Chicago, where she was born.

For the Fullerton show she declared: “JUDY GEROWITZ hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name JUDY CHICAGO.”<sup>2</sup> By legally changing her name, Chicago publicly embraced her female identity in growing awareness of issues of gender and sexuality as the women’s liberation movement gained momentum.

Other factors also favored the change. “I’m a nice Jewish girl from Chicago,” she told an interviewer, who added: “She chose the name Chicago because friends tended to identify her as ‘Judy from Chicago’ (‘I couldn’t avoid it. I had a very distinct Chicago accent.’).”<sup>3</sup>

Credit for the new name may belong to her previous dealer, Rolf Nelson, who had given her a solo show in 1966, her first, when she was just twenty-six.<sup>4</sup> Struck by her pronounced midwestern accent, he began calling her “Judy Chicago.”<sup>5</sup> At the time it was an in-joke among L.A. artists to use “underground names,” such as “Ben Luxe” for Larry Bell; “Eddie Russia” for Ed Ruscha; and “José Bueno” for Joe Goode.<sup>6</sup> Some, like Chicago, even listed their pseudonyms in the telephone book, though she alone went on to make the change legal.<sup>7</sup>

The change and the defiant manifesto fit the character still recalled by Cooke: “Judy was very grounded . . . she would stick up for whatever she thought . . . she wouldn’t back down.”<sup>8</sup> Cooke, who studied art and industrial design at Cal State Long Beach, met Chicago through mutual friends, the artists Laddie John Dill and Chuck Arnoldi (then Cooke’s boyfriend), who recalls her as very good looking; he fantasized that “Judy had the hots for Alona.” He describes Judy as “huggy and feely and touchy; she had lots of energy; her ambition was kind of a pain in the ass . . . very aggressive. She was really trying to make a name for herself.”<sup>9</sup> Cooke recently reflected that Chicago “was a minor thorn in the side of these guys, but I have the impression that they really respected her. . . . They respected how hard she worked.”

The idea of posing Judy as a boxer had come from the photographer Jerry McMillan.<sup>10</sup> They had met through his sometime model and her friend and neighbor, Janice Johnson, when both women lived in Topanga Canyon in the early 1960s. “I was at the deli up the street from my studio with Joe Goode, telling him I had to do something for Judy Gerowitz and that she was changing her last name to Chicago,” he recalls. “We both had known her for years, and our discussion was around what a scrapper she was—maybe I should dress her like a boxer?”<sup>11</sup>

The role fit the figure she cut at the deli, Mayer’s, where she could “embarrass a sailor who had just gotten into town,” McMillan recalls, with her typical friendly greeting, “Ah, there’s my three motherfuckin’ artist-friends”—McMillan and his artist buddies from Oklahoma City, Ruscha and Goode, who all had studios on Western Avenue in Hollywood. “She was blunt and abrasive; that was the charm; she wasn’t mean.”<sup>12</sup>

When Nelson closed his gallery, Chicago migrated eventually to Glenn, who arrived from Kansas City and opened his gallery in May 1970. Whether Glenn or Chicago asked for the publicity shot the photographer cannot recall; but since Chicago liked his proposed theme, he encouraged Glenn to dress her in complete boxing attire, including a customized robe, to be made especially for the occasion at a sporting goods store. Meanwhile McMillan approached Howie Steindler, a notorious boxing manager who owned the Main Street Gym downtown, which was the most prominent training site for local boxers. Its alumni included Muhammad Ali, Rocky Marciano, and Jack Dempsey.<sup>13</sup>

The cantankerous Steindler (thought to have inspired the gruff trainer played by Burgess Meredith in the 1976 movie *Rocky*) grudgingly agreed to the photo shoot but only after being convinced that it was not a big commercial shoot and that he would receive a cash payment in advance.<sup>14</sup> Steindler carried a large wad of cash in his pocket and was often generous with the guys working

out when they had hard luck, recalls McMillan, adding that Glenn agreed that the gallery would pay Steindler's fee, which was large for the time, "maybe \$100 or \$150." As for the robe, either it would take too long to produce, cost too much, or cover too much leg. Instead they ordered the sweatshirt labeled JUDY CHICAGO.

The second-floor gym was already open when Jack, Alona, Jerry, and Judy got there, but Steindler was late and his staff would not let them in. Tension grew when Jerry learned that Judy had just flown in from Fresno, where she was teaching, and had to catch a noon flight back to meet her afternoon classes. While waiting for Steindler, Jerry posed Judy, Alona, and Jack out front under the awning that read, MAIN STREET GYM WORLD'S LEADING BOXERS TRAIN HERE DAILY. He had ventured a few shots when Steindler drove up and saw them working. "He was madder than hell," Jerry remembers. He gave them only ten minutes for the shoot in the ring itself, ordering the men in training to step down. "Judy," he remembers, "seemed a little scared . . . you could tell that she was pretty intimidated." But she got her act together, and he got the photograph that would become an icon.

The name change led at least one writer to accuse Chicago of a "public erasure of her Jewish identity . . . [switching] from the ethnically marked Gerowitz to the more ethnically neutral Chicago."<sup>15</sup> The evidence tells a different story. In the catalog for the Fullerton show, where Chicago explained the change, she chose to include, along with her own brief statement, quotations from three women: the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth, and the English novelist George Eliot. The latter two had also changed their names (Isabella Baumfree to Sojourner Truth, Mary Ann Evans to George Eliot).

The quote from Eliot bears directly on the issue of Jewish identity, since it comes from the 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*, which is noted for its sympathetic treatment of Jews. The novel features a crafty but generous pawnbroker named Ezra Cohen, his son Jacob Alexander Cohen, and the rest of their family. This would be an odd work to cite if one were trying to hide the fact that one's family name was Cohen, as Judy Chicago's was.

Three years later (in 1973) Chicago would manifest her regard for Eliot's novel again in a set of drawings, which she intended as studies for lithographs and called *Compressed Women Who Yearned to Be Butterflies*. She dedicated the third drawing to Madame Deronda and fully transcribed her bitter protest: "You are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out—this is the Jewish woman! This is what you must be;

this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet."<sup>16</sup>

This quote is obviously self-referential, implying that Chicago too identified with male artists who had a "force of genius" while rejecting stereotypical restrictions imposed on women, including those of orthodox Judaism. Chicago was, however, proud of having been reared in the secular Jewish culture that figures repeatedly in her memoir, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, published in 1975. There she recounts how, when she was still a small child, her mother's stories of going "to the Jewish People's Institute," where she had mingled with "creative people," became the context through which May Cohen encouraged her young daughter's love of drawing and nurtured her desire to become an artist.<sup>17</sup>

By adopting the name of her native city rather than a familiar name with Anglo-Saxon associations, Chicago replicated a practice long traditional among Jews. Examples of city-based Jewish surnames include London and Berlin, as in the case of Meyer London, the early twentieth-century American labor leader, who became the first Socialist Party member elected to Congress; the philosopher and historian Isaiah Berlin; and the songwriter Irving Berlin, to cite just three prominent examples. Though she may not have considered this parallel, she clearly did not choose a name that would mask her Jewish identity.

Chicago's militant stance for McMillan's photograph mingles the strains of traditional Jewish and new feminist identities, both emphasizing the courage to stand up for deeply held beliefs. Her life reflects typical patterns of Jewish activists in America, as she began in the civil rights movement campaigning for equality for African-Americans and moved on to the struggle for equal rights for women.

The photograph appeared not only on the announcement for the Fullerton show but as an ad in the magazine *Artforum* in December 1970, where it ran for free, since the editor Philip Leider had admired the photograph but could not convince Glenn to pay to run it. Chicago brought a copy of the *Artforum* ad to a party given by Laura Lee Woods celebrating Goode's calendar of L.A. artists, which featured various male friends whom he had photographed in their cars, Joe Goode recalls. When Goode learned that she really had changed her name, he thought she did so to seem more "macho, like a boxer."<sup>18</sup> The artist Billy Al Bengston quipped to her that she should have changed her first name, not her last. As for McMillan, he reveled in the intensity of the moment and credited Judy's "cool sense of humor" and "quick wit" with the success of their endeavor at the gym: "Judy Chicago! What an opening punch!"<sup>19</sup>



## Early Childhood in Chicago

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Judith Sylvia Cohen was born on July 20, 1939, the first child of a couple who typified the secular idealism of a generation that struggled to forge a new kind of Jewish identity. They not only rejected the religious strictures of immigrant parents who themselves had fled czarist anti-Semitism, but they also battled injustice in American society. Judy's mother was an eldest daughter who sacrificed her own artistic development to help support younger siblings; her father was a rabbi's independent-minded youngest son who was pampered by his older sisters; both were reared by strong mothers who sustained households when their husbands proved less able than they to cope with the new world. The birth took

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Family Passover seder, Chicago, c. 1921. Arthur Cohen, Judy's father, is second from the right, seated next to his father, Rabbi Benjamin Cohen.

place in Michael Reece Hospital, which German-Jewish philanthropists had founded in 1880, before the massive Jewish flight from czarist oppression and which had been “inundated by the poor” during the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

Poverty had long fueled political and cultural ferment among the immigrants, who attacked new injustices with ideas and actions tested against the czars; and their activism went with them when they migrated from the squalor of Chicago’s near West Side to neighborhoods farther north and west, like Lake View (where Judy Cohen would grow up), Humboldt Park (where her father’s family settled), and North Lawndale (a focus for her mother). Humboldt Park recalled Brooklyn’s Brownsville, a place where the local Jews were vested strongly with Yiddish culture and radical philosophies.<sup>2</sup> Among the speakers on soapboxes who could be heard at the corners around the park were secularists and Zionists; leftist-oriented schools (a legacy of Eastern European radicalism) and Yiddish theater contributed to the ferment.

Judy’s mother frequented the Jewish People’s Institute in North Lawndale. From the moment in 1927 when the institute moved into a new building that was remarkable for an exterior that showed Byzantine influence (visually interpreting the Middle Eastern origins of Judaism), it became a focal point for one of the nation’s largest Jewish communities.<sup>3</sup> Its social, recreational, and arts activities attracted children and adults. Lectures and classes, a library, an orchestra, museum exhibits, and plays performed by a resident company drew left-leaning, secular, Yiddishist Chicagoans like Judy’s parents. Dancing on the roof garden every Sunday evening sparked many a romance free from the traditional control of family and religious arrangements.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the hardships of the Great Depression, Arthur Melvin Cohen and May Levinson married on March 14, 1936.<sup>5</sup> He was twenty-six, she was twenty-four. May’s mother, Bertha Casan Levinson, had left Poland for the United States in 1906, at the age of twenty-three, only to suffer in an arranged marriage that proved unhappy.<sup>6</sup> Bertha’s husband, Judy’s maternal grandfather, Harry E. Levinson, left little impression on Judy as a child. She recalls her father telling her that Harry was known “to take off from time to time, walking across the country.”<sup>7</sup> Despite this family lore, the United States census implies a somewhat different story.

Harry Levinson, who was nearly four years younger than his wife, took the trouble to specify to the census taker in 1920 that he was born not just in Russia, but in the province of Kurland, in the city of Riga. The Russian Empire had annexed Kurland, which had been a part of Latvia, in 1795. By 1897, Kurland was home to more than fifty thousand Jews, despite the fact that it was not part of

the area in the Russian Empire called the Pale of Settlement (the former Polish territories of central Poland, Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Lithuania) where Jews were allowed to live. Kurland's Jews proudly blended secular Western culture from Germany and Jewish religious education from such renowned Lithuanian yeshivot (religious academies) as Slobodka, Mir, and Volozhin.<sup>8</sup> Even poor Jews were said to educate their children well, and most were said to have a command of the German language. Jews in Kurland were well placed to participate in the Jewish intellectual and literary movement known as the Haskalah, or "enlightenment," which began in Germany and by the mid-nineteenth century was spreading through Eastern Europe. Its proponents believed that Jewish emancipation and equality would result if Judaism could be reconciled with modern Western ideas and customs. Increasingly, they produced secular literature in both Hebrew and Yiddish.

When the Russian Revolution of 1905 began, it soon spread to Riga, the industrial center where Levinson lived.<sup>9</sup> Jewish youth took an active role in this antigovernment upheaval. About eighty strikers were killed in Riga and, a few days later, the government shot dead a hundred protesters in Warsaw, then also part of the Russian Empire. The government sent in troops to execute Latvian peasants and Jewish revolutionaries, causing Jews to rally together to form self-defense forces. The assassination of government officials caused retaliation and executions of Jews and others. The uproar sufficed to prompt both Harry Levinson and Bertha Casan to emigrate. Yet their meeting in the new world, the product of a *shadchen* (matchmaker), was not destined for harmony.

According to the U.S. census for both 1920 and 1930, Harry worked in the leather goods business. During his lengthy absences, however, his wife and three children had to fend for themselves. Bertha supported her family for a time by making silk flowers—an occupation that would pique the interest of her artist granddaughter.<sup>10</sup> Needlecraft like Bertha's had been frequently practiced in such cities as Minsk, Vilna, or Riga by Jewish women, who carried these same arts to the new world, often continuing the work in New York or Chicago.<sup>11</sup> Sewing skills figured in many a Jewish immigrant's visual memories of life in the old country, such as "a wall covered with pictures that Mother had embroidered as a girl."<sup>12</sup>

May Cohen told her daughter about the time when she saw her mother go out in the snow to sell her silk flowers; May knew then that as the eldest child she had to leave high school after only two years and go to work to help support her siblings—her sister, Dorothy, who was four years younger, and her brother, Herbert, who was eleven years younger. He would grow up to become an orchestral musician, while May would have to subordinate her interest in dance to



help keep the household afloat. By 1930, she was already working as a stenographer in the advertising industry.

May was “a tiny person, slim and lovely . . . very clothes and style conscious,” recalled a friend of her daughter, who remembered her as “a warm, exceedingly bright, direct, and interesting woman—a former dancer I believe . . . part of a large group of artistic intellectual left-wingers who remained friends from their twenties until members of the group died.”<sup>13</sup> The daughter could identify with her mother’s artistic side.<sup>14</sup>

While May was the eldest in her family, Arthur Cohen was the youngest (ninth surviving) child of his immigrant parents—Benjamin (Benjamin) Guttman Cohen (1862–1934), already forty-seven, and Anna Landau Cohen, forty-five, when their third son came on June 23, 1909. His older sisters adored the baby of the family, showering him with attention and considering him the brightest of their three brothers. Arthur proved to be very sensitive and caring, to the scorn of his older brothers, who resented their sisters’ preference for the youngest.

The family name Cohen belongs to the rabbinical class—*Cohanim*—in Jewish custom; and Arthur’s father (Judy’s grandfather), Benjamin, was a practicing rabbi, said to be “the twenty-third in an unbroken tradition.”<sup>15</sup> Short in stature, he had expressive eyes, dark hair, and a beard. Both his parents—Abbe Moishe Avrum (Abraham M.) Cohen and Chiah Pippa Landau—came from relatively prosperous families who lived in settlements around Kovno, which under czarist rule was the provincial capital and administrative seat for much of central Lithuania and was said to be a beautiful, clean city full of nice shops, even equal to those in some German towns across the border.

The Jewish community in Kovno supported an active embroidery trade and the klezmer music of Elyokum Zunser.<sup>16</sup> There were freethinkers, writers, and poets, drawn in part by a fine library named after a beloved fellow townsman, Avraham Mapu, the secular Jewish novelist and author of *Ahavot Tzion* (*Love of Zion*); they were influenced too by the Haskalah movement.

Although Kovno offered an urban life, with all its allures, worldly pleasures, and secularizing temptations, Benjamin Cohen, with his eight siblings, actually hailed from Slobodka, which was an impoverished little shtetl (small town), across the banks of the River Vilya from Kovno. Most of the residents led simple, working-class lives, earning meager livelihoods from hard work on the river, loading and unloading barges with merchandise, or from driving log-rafts. But some, such as Benjamin’s rabbinical family, earned their living from the many boys who flocked there to study in the town’s yeshiva (rabbinical academy). In addition to their income from religious education, the Cohens raised their own

food and were better off than many families struggling under restrictions that the czar imposed on Jews.

Benjamin's younger brother Meyer liked to tell how he had learned about farming as a boy in Slobodka and that chickens ran through the family house.<sup>17</sup> He told of opening the door for the imagined visit of the Prophet Elijah, a tradition on the spring holiday of Passover, only to see their goat wander in, provoking laughter.

A boy like Benjamin received a Jewish education in two stages: elementary Hebrew language study in the *kheyder* beginning sometimes as early as age three, but surely by the age of six, until the age of twelve or thirteen, then the yeshiva, which stressed a rigorous intellectual discipline and what is sometimes referred to as a "Talmudic bend of mind" that would ponder any problem from multiple perspectives. Such a religious upbringing emphasized social responsibility and the "striving for moral ideals."<sup>18</sup>

Yeshiva education itself, however, was the object of a religious reform movement known as the Mussar (Moral) School, motivated in part by the secular humanistic challenge of the Haskalah. Reformists urged moral and ethical rejuvenation and emphasized the ethical and homiletic strain of teaching and preaching in Jewish tradition.<sup>19</sup> The Mussar's founder, Israel Lipkin Salanter (1810–83), stressed humility and taught the precepts of leading a "perfect ethical life, exemplified by compassion for the poor."<sup>20</sup> Salanter's doctrine embraced "the teachings and the path of the *gaon* of Vilna." The *gaon*, or "eminence," was Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720–97) who had helped to shape the course of modern Jewish history. Like his illustrious eighteenth-century rabbinical predecessor, Salanter "championed the centrality of Torah study," the Jewish scripture—the five books of Moses, in the form of a handwritten scroll read in the synagogue each year from start to finish.<sup>21</sup>

Many stories of Salanter have come down. Once, during a cholera epidemic, he commanded his congregation to eat on the holy day of Yom Kippur, when fasting is required. In the hagiographic version of the story, the rabbi ate at the pulpit in order to set an example that life is more sacred than ritual and rules.<sup>22</sup> To overcome resistance to violating the ban against Sabbath work, which is permitted to save life, Salanter worked tirelessly seven days a week against the cholera outbreak. Salanter also advocated vocational training for Jewish youth and favored translating the Talmud (the authoritative body of Jewish tradition comprising the once oral law of the Mishnah and its commentary, the Gemara) from its original Babylonian Aramaic into Hebrew.

Salanter's principles inspired the new Yeshiva Knesset Yisroel, founded at Slobodka in 1882 as an advanced school for graduates of other schools, such as

the yeshiva where Benjamin had been studying.<sup>23</sup> The new academy gave Benjamin, who was then twenty years old, a rare opportunity to pursue further studies without leaving his hometown. Despite Slobodka's short, muddy lanes and small, one-storied wooden houses, the new academy quickly became world famous wherever Torah study was revered.

The teachings of the new yeshiva were designed to complement the intellectual study of the Talmud and to encourage students' moral self-examination. Benjamin's exposure to such altruistic Judaic humanism, which is acknowledged to contain "potentially radical values," eventually enabled him to pass them on to his children, especially his youngest son, Arthur.<sup>24</sup>

Within those peripheral communities around Kovno, the families of Benjamin's father (the Cohens) and mother (the Landaus) were relatively well off. It was among his Landau cousins that Benjamin found his future wife, who lived just a few miles away in Kedainai (today Kedainiai)—like Slobodka, a shtetl. Through what may have been an arranged marriage, he wed his mother's niece, his first cousin, Khana (Annie) Etel Landau (1864–1950), a daughter of his mother's brother, Arye [Arthur David] Landau.<sup>25</sup> The couple's shared grandfather was Haskell Landau, and both prided themselves on descent from the Vilna *gaon*. Her Jewish name, Khana, was the same as that of the *gaon*'s first wife, perhaps reflecting the Jewish custom of naming children after deceased relatives, thus passing names down for generations. Her own father's name, Arthur, would pass to her last son, the father of Judy.

The young couple benefited from the comfortable dowry that the bride's family could afford to offer and the support they continued to provide. The Landaus were in the business of manufacturing ladies' clothing. They had taken the untraditional step of educating their daughter; as a result, Annie could read Yiddish well. In quite traditional fashion, however, she bore Benjamin three children in quick succession—Gertrude in 1884, Rose in 1886, and Tillie in 1888.

So many daughters posed a potential problem, for how would the young couple ever provide dowries at a time when economic prospects for the Jews under the czars looked increasingly bleak as political unrest grew? Already in the mid-1870s, the Jews' discontent with their status had begun to contribute to revolutionary ferment,<sup>26</sup> which the government vainly attempted to check. After the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881, conditions for the Jews deteriorated under his son, Alexander III. Pogroms began—organized killing sprees aimed at reducing the number of Jews by death or by flight. In 1882 a government policy known as the "May Laws" further attempted to drive Jews from the countryside. More and more of the Jews in the Russian Empire were being reduced to extreme urban poverty.<sup>27</sup> They faced harsh working condi-

tions, long hours, and low wages in the factories and small workshops where many of them labored as artisans.

By 1886, when the Cohens produced their second daughter, socialist propaganda was flourishing among the masses and radical political activity increasing year by year. Clandestine groups of five to ten people, known as “circles,” met in private homes to drink tea, read, and discuss revolutionary ideas.<sup>28</sup> They studied radical writings smuggled illegally from Western Europe and produced Yiddish pamphlets to organize their fellow workers. It has been suggested that Jews were “less docile, more argumentative, and keener on what they perceived to be their rights and their dignity and, perhaps above all, more liable to form cohesive groups for common action. Jewish workers, notably in Lithuania, had a tradition of self-help and pooling of resources in bad times.”<sup>29</sup> The workers were beginning to learn that they could strike for economic benefits or better conditions such as shorter working hours.

By the beginning of the 1890s, “emigration fever” took hold among the Litvaks, as the Jews in Lithuania were known.<sup>30</sup> The decision to emigrate and risk an uncertain fate in the new world reflected a desire to escape the continual dangers of the growing revolutionary movement and the increasing misery of their daily lives under the czars.

Benjamin Cohen watched his three older brothers, Isaac, Eber, and Louis, emigrate to the United States, where they worked as peddlers out of Topeka, Kansas, a city founded in 1854, when it catered to wagon trains heading west to California.<sup>31</sup> Often a pair of Jews would journey to America and lay the groundwork so that their families, friends, and neighbors might later join them. The brothers’ decision to settle in Topeka may have been the legacy of a settlement of Jews initially sent to Kansas during the 1880s by the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society, a failed attempt to establish a Jewish agricultural society for immigrants from Eastern Europe.<sup>32</sup> Anticipating mass Jewish migration to the United States, urban Sephardic and German Jews who had arrived earlier feared that the poor, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews, so visible in their distinctive garb, would settle in crowded urban tenement houses and only barely eke out a living. One distinguished Sephardic Jew published this warning in 1887: “If 500,000 Jews come into the city within the next thirty years, there will creep up a spirit of enmity . . . as in old Europe today. There will be no safety, there may be dishonor, disgrace, and misery on every side.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fears harbored by Jews who had settled in America earlier, news of a better life there circulated in Lithuania and fueled further emigration. Tales of life in America entered Yiddish fiction. In one novel, a woman interjects: “they really say . . . that the very poorest people there eat meat and rolls every

day.” The man’s response tells us volumes about what men in his milieu thought of women: “Women speak only nonsense! You mere woman, you,—where are your brains? How could you believe such folly? Now listen, . . . if he eats meat and rolls every day, what does that show? That he is not a poor man. And if he *is* a poor man, then he can’t eat meat and rolls every day. Fool!”<sup>34</sup>

Word came back from the older brothers that there was indeed opportunity in America. Benjamin determined to make the journey, hoping perhaps that the growing Jewish community in the new world would need rabbis and be able to support him. The painful decision was made for Benjamin to emigrate in advance of his wife and daughters, so that he could earn money to bring them over. He entered through New York’s Castle Garden, joining his older brothers in Topeka about 1892. The town did not yet have a synagogue.<sup>35</sup> Benjamin had to work with his brothers as a peddler.

Annie and the three daughters followed Benjamin to the United States in 1893. Gertrude (1884–1950s) was nine, Rose (1886–1973) seven, and Tillie (1888–1964) five.<sup>36</sup> It was a year of depression and unemployment that prompted Yiddish poets to respond with poems of social protest to the hardships of American immigrant life.<sup>37</sup> For Annie, who had lived among her parents and siblings in relative comfort, the new circumstances must have come as a shock. In the culture she knew, it was considered a *mitzvah* (good deed) when a wife worked so that her husband could take part in the religious cultural elite. So Annie took charge of the family fortunes, putting to practical advantage her education and family business experience. She founded a store, Anna Cohen Clothing, which suggests that she produced or at least sold clothing, since ready-to-wear clothing was being manufactured already by this time.

Her enterprise allowed her husband to leave off peddling and return to traditional male occupations at home. Benjamin Cohen’s training had prepared him only to study religion, which did not contribute to the family economy in a town like Topeka, which had neither a yeshiva nor a synagogue where he could earn a living. Like Annie, many immigrant Jewish women supported their families and rabbinical husbands, but secular Jewish literature and socialist ideologies had begun to challenge the subordinate status of women.

The plight of women like Annie informs a satirical Yiddish song: “He runs to the synagogue / And reads all the laws” while “To market she must hurry, / Wood to buy and worry. / Bread she must bake; / kindling she must break; / the children she must care for . . . / A baby every year.”<sup>38</sup>

Scarcely a year after reaching Benjamin in Topeka, Annie gave birth to their fourth baby, the first of six born in America and their first son, Harry (1894–1949), who was born on January 23, 1894. He was followed in rapid suc-

cession by a brother Jack at the end of 1894 and sister Molly on December 23, 1895. Yet Anna also continued to run the store, above which the family lived. Inevitably some domestic responsibilities fell on little Gerdie and Rosie. Rose later recalled a time when she and her older sister were scrubbing the floor while their infant brother Jack's baby buggy was parked outside. A cat attacked him and "tried to suck the baby's breath" to get the milk he had been fed, she told her daughter, falling into the pattern of an old wives' tale.<sup>39</sup> Rose remained forever fearful of cats, which came to embody the many threats, imaginary and real, that the family confronted in the strange new land.

Although life in the new world might be hard, news from their friends and family back in Lithuania was even more grim. By 1895 a small group of Jewish students in Vilna, who were in touch with similar Russian circles in St. Petersburg and Moscow, formed a group that identified with leading revolutionaries such as Prince Peter Kropotkin and Nicholas Chaykovsky.<sup>40</sup> The *Allgemeyner Idisher arbayterbund* in Lita, Poylen un Ruslând (General Jewish Workers Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia), known simply as the Bund, was founded in Vilna in 1897. Meeting secretly to avoid the vigilant police, eleven delegates (nine men and two women), came from Vilna, Warsaw, Minsk, Bialystok, and Vitebsk. Representatives of the movement's paper, *Arbayter Shtimme* (*Workman's Voice*), produced in Vilna by a secret printing press, were also present.<sup>41</sup> The new central committee issued a new and popular newspaper, *Der Bund* (*The Union*), aimed at the working masses. Jews, and Jewish women in particular, were active in revolutionary work. From March 1903 to November 1904, 54 percent of those sentenced for political transgression were Jews, but over 64 percent of the women who received such punishment were Jews.<sup>42</sup>

What began as an economic campaign soon became revolutionary in character, and Bundists joined very soon with Russians who sought political liberty and constitutional government. Risking arrest, imprisonment, and being shipped off to Siberia, the partisans began to hold their meetings in cemeteries by imitating funerals or in synagogues under the pretext of religious services.<sup>43</sup> As a result, even a devout Jew very slightly concerned with worldly matters was inadvertently exposed to revolutionary ideas and activity. Although opposed by rabbinical authorities, whom they considered "reactionary elements," adherents nonetheless came from circles of students and pious scholars who had been induced to give up the Talmud for the teachings of Karl Marx.<sup>44</sup> The Bund then saw itself as the "Jewish antithesis of Zionism," which was the search for a Jewish homeland either in Palestine or elsewhere; Bundists considered Zionism a "bourgeois and reactionary nationalism."<sup>45</sup>

Benjamin and Annie's immediate concern was not with politics but with

the survival of their own growing family. The struggle to support their children became easier when they moved from Topeka to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1896, where Benjamin was called to teach Hebrew by a group of Jewish settlers from Russia and Poland who had reached Cedar Rapids in 1895.<sup>46</sup> Calling themselves Eben Israel (Rock of Israel), the group had established a cemetery association to assure proper Jewish burial. Their next step was hiring a kosher butcher and a Hebrew teacher.<sup>47</sup>

Whether Benjamin Cohen was hired only as the group's Hebrew teacher or also as their rabbi remains unclear, but Cedar Rapids had no synagogue until thirty-seven families founded Beth Jacob in 1906, ten years after his arrival in Iowa. The new orthodox synagogue was located in a former Episcopal chapel, which the small congregation remodeled.<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Cohen became the first rabbi of this tiny community. The synagogue displayed for many years a drawing that he had made of praying hands, which symbolize the *Cohanim*, or rabbinical caste.<sup>49</sup>

After the Cohens moved to Cedar Rapids, their life was somewhat more settled. Annie continued to run a tiny store, this one selling "notions" and once again in the same building as their home, located at 43 16th Avenue West. While "Annie Cohen, notions" was listed in the city directory from December 1896, it was not until 1900 that the listing included Benjamin G. Cohen, with his wife, Annie, followed by the word *notions*, at this same address. Their eldest child, Gertrude, by then sixteen years old, is listed separately at this address as "Gerty, student."<sup>50</sup> This reflects noteworthy respect for educating girls, like that which Annie had enjoyed as a child herself, since many immigrant families, including Jews, required daughters to drop out of school (at least by the legal age of fourteen) in order to become wage-earners.<sup>51</sup>

Only in 1902 did the Cohens produce a fifth daughter (seventh child), Shirley (Sarah), who later told her son stories of the family's poverty. Since she never had any toys, she used the washboard as a sled. Among all the children, she considered herself her father's favorite.<sup>52</sup> By 1904–05, "Mrs. Anna Cohen, dry goods" is listed at 76 16th Avenue West, and the family's home was also at that same address, since they lived behind the store.

By that time all three of the eldest daughters, although still living at home, were listed separately: Gertrude, then aged twenty, was working as a "book-keeper" at Clark-MacDonald Co.; Rosa (Rose, spelled to conform to its Yiddish pronunciation), then aged eighteen, was a "clerk" at W. Howard; and Tillie, aged sixteen, did not yet have any listable employment.<sup>53</sup> A sixth daughter, Enid, who was originally called by her Jewish name, Esther, arrived on December 26, 1905. In 1906 Gertrude remained at the same job, but none is listed for