



The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi

Edward Cohen

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Edward Cohen grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, the heart of the Bible Belt, thousand of miles from the northern centers of Jewish culture. As a child he sang "Dixie" in his segregated school, said the "sh'ma" at temple. While the civil rights struggle exploded all around, he worked at the family clothing store that catered to blacks.

His grandfather Moise had left Romania and all his family for a very different world, the Deep South. Peddling on foot from farm to farm, sleeping in haylofts, he was the first Jew many Mississippians had ever seen. Moise's brother joined him and they married two sisters, raising their children under one roof, an island of Judaism in a sea of southern Christianity.

In the 1950s, insulated by the extended family of double-cousins, Edward believed the world was populated totally by Jews--until the first day of school when he had the disquieting realization that he was the only Jew in his class. At times he felt southern, almost, but his sense of being an outsider slowly crystallized, as he listened to daily Christian school prayers tried to explain his annual absences to classmates who had never heard of Rosh Hashanah. At Christmas his parents' house was the only one without lights. In the seventh grade, he was the only child not invited to dance class.

In a compelling work that is nonfiction throughout but conveyed with a fiction writer's skill and technique, Cohen recounts how he left Mississippi for college to seek his own tribe. Instead, he found that among northern Jews he was again an outsider, marked by his southernness. They knew holidays like Simchas Torah; he knew Confederate Memorial Day.

He tells a story of displacement, of living on the margin of two already marginal groups, and of coming to terms with his dual loyalties, to region and religion. In this unsparingly honest and often humorous portrait of cultural contradiction, Cohen's themes--the separateness of the artist, the tug of assimilation, the elusiveness of identity--resonate far beyond the South.

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