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Book Review: The Peddler's Grandson: Growing up Jewish in Mississippi

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Book Review

Cohen, Edward. The Peddler's Grandson: Growing up Jewish in Mississippi. New York: Random House, 1999. 195 pp.

Edward Cohen's heartfelt memoir is an emotional account of his divided identity as a Jew and a southerner growing up as part of a small Jewish community in the "bible belt" (or as Cohen says, "bible blanket") of Jackson, Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s. As soon as he leaves the insulated world of his extended family to begin school, Cohen realizes that his religion, culture, and lack of southern roots add considerably to the angst of trying to fit in with his peers and community at large. As he writes at one point, "I realized how much easier everything would be if I weren't Jewish." The theme that runs throughout the book is "worlds in collision," the title of one of the chapters, as it becomes clear that the Jewish and Christian worlds, black and white worlds, Northern and Southern worlds, are at odds in Jackson and in Cohen's life. Cohen's account is unsentimental and well written, and is valuable not only for its firsthand account of Jewish life in Mississippi in the 20th century, but also for its description of the civil rights movement in Jackson, and the universal themes of difference, divided loyalties and reconciliation.

The memoir begins with Edward Cohen's grandparents' arrival at Ellis Island in the late 19th century from Poland and Romania, whereupon their surnames were involuntarily changed from Kahane to Cohen. Initially peddlers, Cohen's grandfather and great uncle eventually opened a clothing store. Situated at one end of the main street in Jackson was Cohen Brothers and at the other end was the Old Capitol building where Jefferson Davis declared secession from the Union. Cohen writes that all of Jackson's Jews lived in one area of town where the synagogue was located, next door to a club which didn't allow Jews, down the street from the high school that didn't allow blacks, south of the country club which allowed neither.

The two Cohen brothers and their families lived together in the "Big House" where children were raised, Jewish holidays celebrated, and the horrors of the "old country" almost never referred to again. From this world Edward

Cohen ventured out to begin school, and quickly realized that being Jewish meant being different. He describes the school cafeteria as "the site of my most profound clash with southern culture," where, unable to force down fatback collards and "white-grease gravy," he immediately drew attention to himself as an outsider. Cohen writes about other instances where he felt isolated from his Christian classmates, such as having to pray to Jesus during school prayers, deliberating about what role to choose in the school Christmas pageant, and giving a note to his teacher regarding an absence from school during the High Holy Days.

The most interesting part of Cohen's memoir concerns his experiences during the civil rights era in Jackson. Torn between ethical teachings of Judaism and the beliefs and practices of their Christian neighbors, Cohen reveals that Jews in Jackson "had to try to balance everything carefully to see which way we would lose less." Although Cohen Brothers was the only white-owned business with an integrated restroom and water fountain, the store was boycotted by its nearly all black clientele, which eventually led to the closing of the store. In 1967, the KKK bombed the Jackson synagogue as well as the rabbi's home.

Eager to leave Mississippi, Edward Cohen attended college at the University of Miami. Hoping to fit in with the large Jewish population, he changed his clothing style, lost his southern accent, and avoided admitting he was from Mississippi. However, once again, Cohen feels isolated, this time because he grew up Jewish in a southern town with experiences worlds apart from Jews raised in the Northeast. After graduation, Cohen was determined not to go back to Jackson, but felt he did not belong in Miami. Eventually returning to Jackson, the book concludes with Cohen's acknowledgement that reconciliation between his two "selves" is not possible, and his acceptance that each half contributes something vital to the person he is. Sadly, the story of the Cohen family in Jackson has also come to an end. As of 1996 there were no descendants of the Cohen brothers living in Jackson, Mississippi.

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