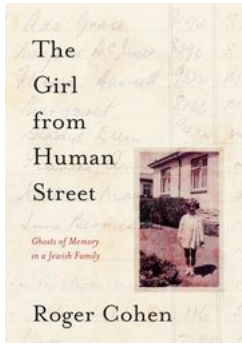


# Cohen writes of his mother's mental illness

Barry Singer , Special for USA TODAY 2:02 p.m. EST January 25, 2015



## The Girl from Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family

by Roger Cohen

(Knopf)

in Memoir

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### USA TODAY Rating

It is impossible not to share Roger Cohen's pain in his new memoir, *The Girl from Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family*.

Cohen, a foreign affairs columnist for *The New York Times*, takes as his ostensible subject his mother's chronic depression, and the excruciating impact of it on those closest to her, including her son, Roger.

The son cannot rest, however, with a mere unraveling of this tale of bipolar suffering. His "excavation of memory," as he characterizes it, ultimately digs deep into Europe and the Holocaust, South Africa and apartheid, Israel and Palestine, the inescapable anti-Semitism of seemingly tolerant Great Britain, and the minutiae of the Cohen family's extended place in all of this.

It isn't that Cohen wishes to merely touch on these histories as they tangled with his family's own. Rather, he seems determined to plumb the very depths of assimilation, apartheid, Nazism and anti-Semitism itself, plotted on the trajectory of his family's immigration journey and the bouts with depressive mental illness that he presents as one price of their dislocation.

Dizziness can set in as Cohen dives omnivorously, and unconstrained by chronology, into the lives of his parents, their parents and grandparents. The largely unspoken acceptance of apartheid, for example, by his Jewish South African ancestors is one of the book's more powerful narrative strands. As Cohen mordantly points out, in South Africa, "Having a plentiful underclass of (black) pariahs constituted protection for a people, the Jews, who were used to playing that role in Europe."

This disconcerting observation is worthy of a book all its own. Cohen elaborates on it fascinatingly, but in service to a thesis that unintentionally reduces Jewish acquiescence in apartheid to a subterranean echo in his mother's psyche.

He grapples similarly with Israeli-Palestinian relations, tracing Israel's torturous history, from Herzl through Hamas, with passion and with conscience, but framed as a factor behind the depression-driven suicide of one of his distant cousins.

"Rena, I will call her," he begins, shielding her real name. Cohen then launches into a novelistic reconstruction of "Rena's" manic-depressive life and death. Fiction-like first- person flights of fancy and bipolar madness are ascribed to Rena, often seemingly in her own words. (Cohen seems to have conducted extensive interviews with her survivors and to have been granted access to her journals and letters.)

What, however, is one to make of passages like this?

"Perhaps everything would be all right. Rena, in the presence of beauty, could convince herself at times. The conflict would find a resolution. Palestinians would stop blowing themselves, and anyone near them, to pieces. ... Dueling Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms would decouple themselves from the engine of myth, giving up some part of the past for the future. ... Her mind which raced at night, would quiet itself, too. She would get off the awful medication, the pills she hated. She would see herself in her eyes again rather than some creature caught like a deer in headlights."

Who is speaking here? Are these the words of Rena or Roger? Did Roger Cohen ever, in fact, meet his cousin Rena? His desire to bring her back to life is honorable. His resurrection of that life, however, and especially of her death, is at best confusing and, at worst ... well:

"On the escalator into the tower, she notices surveillance cameras," Cohen writes. "So there will be film of her. ... Now she stands on the second-floor terrace. The warm wind is in her face. ... It will be quick. It will be better. It will be over."

One feels compelled to ask Roger Cohen, but how do you know?

There is so much to admire in *The Girl from Human Street*. Cohen delineates his mother's story with love. His suggestion that certain depressive natures are triggered, or more to the point, haunted, by their immigrant history, is profound. His memoir will linger in any reader's memory. Unfortunately, the reasons for this may tend to blur.

### The Girl from Human Street: Ghosts of Memory in a Jewish Family

By Roger Cohen

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2.5 stars out of 4

Barry Singer is the author of *Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill*.