

## DIRTY LINEN

My mother Bella Cohen was born in Newark, NJ in 1907, the youngest of four children born to Abram Cohen and Mara Klein. Her father's clan (originally Chuwens, Kuvins, Fleishfarbs) originated in Tarnopol Province in Galicia (Ukraine today) and had immigrated to America during the 1890s. My grandfather eked out a living as a grocer but couldn't afford to educate his older children beyond elementary school; he didn't consider it important to educate women. But Belle was ambitious and a gifted pianist so during summer vacations she earned the \$100 annual tuition to enroll in college by accompanying dance troupes in public playgrounds. She used to commute from Newark to New Jersey College for Women in New Brunswick (Douglas College), but at the end of each month her train pass was a few rides short. So after the conductor punched the ticket and moved on, she retrieved the "chad" from the floor and pasted it back.

Chafing at her culturally stifling life in Newark, Belle yearned for adventure in the glamorous Big City that beckoned from across the Hudson. When on a blind date she met Sam Nevins, a dashing dental student from Brooklyn, he must have seemed like an ambassador from a foreign world. They married on her 23rd birthday and, no doubt, Belle figured this would be her ticket out of confinement in Newark — but not right away. Her escape was delayed by the Great Depression but that's another story so now fast forward to paradise in the Bronx.

Mom was an avid reader and a faithful subscriber to The Book of the Month Club. As best I can interpret our complex family tree, her father's sister-in-law was a great aunt of the famous novelist Philip Roth which, I fantasize, made us multi-removed "cousins." Although we never met, both of us were born at Beth Israel Hospital in Newark — he in 1933, me in 1936. My mother used to devour Roth's semi-autobiographical novels, hunting for references to her family's less than admirable stories that she suspected her cousin sometimes disclosed. This was particularly evident in his novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979) and the extract that follows next, not only is vintage Roth, but is a reasonably accurate account of our family's gossip — our dirty linen.

*A great-aunt of mine, Meema Chaya, had left for the education of her two fatherless grandsons the pot of money she had diligently hoarded away as a seamstress to Newark's upper crust. When Essie, the widowed mother of the twin boys, attempted to invade the trust to send them from college to medical school, her younger brother, Sidney, who was to inherit the money remaining in Meema Chaya's estate upon the conclusion of the boy's higher education, had sued to stop her.*

*For four years Sidney had been waiting for Richard and Robert to graduate from Rutgers — waiting mostly in pool rooms and saloons so he could buy a downtown parking lot with his legacy. Loudly — his way — Sidney proclaimed that he was not about to postpone the good life just so there could be two more fancy doctors driving Caddies around South Orange. Those in the family who detested Sidney's womanizing and his shady friends immediately lined up in support of the boys and their dignified aspirations, leaving Sidney with a phalanx consisting of his ill used, timid wife Jenny, and his mysterious Polish tootsie Annie, whose scandalously florid shmatas were much discussed, if never once seen, at family weddings, funerals, etc. Also in the phalanx, for all it was worth to him, was me.*

*My admiration was long-standing, dating back to Sidney's Navy days, when he had won four thousand dollars on the homeward journey of the battleship Kansas, and was said to have thrown into the South Pacific, for the sharks to dispose of, a Mississippi sore loser who at the end of an all-night poker game had referred to the big winner as a dirty Jew. The lawsuit, whose outcome hinged on how exhaustive Meema Chaya had meant to be in her will with the ringing words "higher education," was eventually decided by the judge — a goy — in Sidney's favor, though within only a few years the Raymond Boulevard parking lot bought with his inheritance became such a hot piece of real estate that it was nationalized out from under him by the Mob. For his trouble they gave Sidney a tenth of what it was worth, and shortly thereafter his heart broke like a balloon in the bed of yet another overdressed bimbo not of our persuasion.*

*My cousins Richard and Robert were meanwhile being put through medical school by their iron-willed mother. After she lost the lawsuit, Essie quit her job at a downtown department store and for the next ten years went to work on the road selling shingles and sidings. So iron-willed was she that by the time she had finally bought carpeting and venetians for the new offices leased by Richard and Robert in suburban North Jersey, there was hardly a working-class neighborhood in the state that she hadn't left encased in asphalt.*

*Out canvassing one hot afternoon during the twins' internship, Essie had decided to spend an hour in an air-cooled Passaic movie theater. In her thousands of days and nights finding leads and closing deals, this was said to be the first time ever that she stopped to do anything other than eat and call the boys. But now residencies in orthopedics and dermatology were only just around the corner, and the thought of their advent, combined with the August heat made her just a little light-headed.*

*In the dark movie theater, however, Essie hadn't even time to mop her brow before a fellow in the next seat put his hand on her knee. He must have been a very lonely fellow — it was a very stout knee; nonetheless, she broke the hand for him, at the wrist, with the hammer carried in her purse all these years to protect herself and the future of two fatherless sons."*

I can't vouch for all the details, but, they reasonably match family legend and, except for the made-up names, Roth's references to the aspiring doctors "Richard" and "Robert" was accurate. Both went on to have distinguished careers as physicians, one as a psychiatrist, the other as an infectious disease specialist. In the Appendix attached below is the Superior Court Ruling in 1953 that decided in favor of the brothers in their suit against their sister — their paying for college tuitions would be enough since graduate school was not specified in the boys' grandmother's will. The burden of medical education would be the responsibility of their "iron-willed" mother, a policewoman.

Several years ago, I wrote a medical history essay about polio that began with Philip Roth's novel *Nemesis* which described an epidemic in Newark in 1944. It turned out to be his last novel and the protagonist seemed to me like a dead ringer for my Uncle Lou — my mother's brother-in-law — so I sent a copy to Roth thinking that he might be amused. I wasn't surprised that the famously reticent novelist didn't bother to reply, but in 2014 there was a postscript to this narrative when Philip Roth was given an honorary degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary's commencement exercises in New York.

According to his official biographer Blake Bailey, Roth had recognized the proffered degree as a "peace pipe" with the Jewish community and he was hailed as being "a giant of modern literature." He was especially moved when during the ceremony all the parents were asked to stand; as he said, "I have about twelve honorary degrees and I have never been at a commencement where parents were applauded for the success of their children."

At that time my son was Dean of the rabbinical school at JTS, so when handshakes and congratulations were being exchanged on the reception line after the ceremony, he had the chance to greet the honoree and told him he believed that they were distantly related. Roth appeared surprised, but seemed pleased, remarking "I didn't know that I had a rabbi in the family." The next day a headline in *The Forward* read "PHILIP ROTH, ONCE OUTCAST, JOINS JEWISH FOLD."

I wondered whether this encounter at JTS might prompt some literary stirring in Roth's mind, but by this time he'd officially retired from creative writing so we need not have worried that our tenuous connection might become grist for some future work. If it had, and if she were still around, Mom surely would have spotted it and said, "He's done it again."

Although Philip Roth withdrew from writing fiction, he remained a caustic observer of the cultural and political scene: "Just a citizen like anybody else." In early years he'd been a harsh critic of Republican presidents, but that was nothing compared to his dismay over Donald Trump: "ignorant of government, of history, of science, of philosophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency, and wielding a vocabulary of seventy-seven words that is better called Jerkish than English." Citizen Roth then remarked, "I'm eagerly awaiting my White House tweet" — apparently one never came.

After Newark's favorite son died in May, 2018, Cynthia Ozick, in *The Wall Street Journal*, took a swat at the Swedish Academy that had denied him a Nobel Prize: "How should those obtuse northland jurors, denizens of a frost-bitten society, highly ranked for alcoholism and suicide, warm to the emotional temperature of the postwar Jewish Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, N.J., out of which the grandson of immigrants might emerge to become one of the most renowned American literary masters of his century?" The BBC agreed, hailing Roth as "arguably the best writer *not* to have won the Nobel Prize since Tolstoy." No doubt Belle Cohen would have been very pleased.

Michael Nevins  
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APPENDIX: (Epstein v. Kuvin. 25 N.J. Super. 210 (1953). 95 A.2d 753) From the last will and testament of Mrs. Fannie Kuvin:

*Should I die before my grandson, Sanford Kuvin, has completed his college education, then and in that event I direct that my son Samuel Kuvin, contribute the sum of \$600. per annum toward the expense of a college education for my grandson Sanford Kuvin, and that my son Herbert Kuvin contribute the sum of \$400. per annum toward the expense of a college education for my grandson, Sanford Kuvin. The sums shall be contributed as aforesaid until my grandson, Sanford Kuvin, completes his college education."*

*The sons of testatrix made the required contributions until their nephew completed his four-year undergraduate course culminating in the degree of bachelor of arts. He has now begun another four-year course leading to the degree \*212 of doctor of medicine. The testatrix directed her sons to contribute toward the expense of her grandson's college education. What did she mean by that expression? Is the cost of medical school included?*

*The trial court received, over objection, testimony of the draftsman of the will, relating conversations with testatrix, in which she mentioned her strong wish that Sanford become a doctor, and said that she was making provision in her will so that her sons would contribute to his education "until he became a doctor." Sanford's mother was allowed to testify that a month or two prior to the date of the will, testatrix told her "that she would see to it that the boy got an education," and the witness added, "Yes, she said it was a medical education." And that later testatrix told her "that she had made provision that this boy would become a doctor." Testimony of this sort was received from several other witnesses. Clearly it was incompetent.*

*Our statute of wills requires a will to be in writing. N.J.S. 3A:3-2. The rules touching the admission and use of extrinsic evidence in aid of the interpretation of a will were summarized in Fidelity Union Trust Co. v. Noll, 125 N.J. Eq. 106 (Ch. 1939):*

*"I. The testator's declarations regarding his testamentary intentions are inadmissible except in case of latent ambiguity in the naming of a person or thing in the will, when such declarations may be proved to identify the person or thing.*

*II. Proof is generally admissible of the situation existing when the will was made the surroundings of the testator, his property and the condition of the persons taking under his will. Such proof is used to enable the court to understand the meaning and application of the language found in the will.*

*III. But extrinsic evidence is not allowed to override the will or to set up an intention inconsistent with it. Where the intention of the testator, as disclosed by the will, is entirely clear where, as it is sometimes put, there is no room for construction the court will disregard or may even refuse to hear evidence of surrounding circumstances. In other words, the court will not reform a will under guise of construing it.*

*The receipt of evidence of a testator's declarations of what he intended by the language used in his will and how he \*213 intended to dispose of his property, was condemned very recently in *In re Armour*, 11 N.J. 257 (1953). Little proof was submitted concerning the situation existing when Mrs. Kuvin made her will. She had two grown sons, one of whom had received a high school education and the other had taken an engineering course, and later had studied law at night while working in the daytime. Testatrix also had a married daughter, who worked as a police matron.*

*The daughter and the latter's two sons, Seymour and Sanford, lived with testatrix. Sanford was a senior in high school at the date of the will, and at the time of testatrix' death, he was a freshman in New York University. According to the evidence, testatrix was very fond of her grandson Sanford. By her will testatrix devised to her grandchildren, Seymour and Sanford, a parcel of land in Newark, subject to a life interest which she gave to their mother; to her also she left her personal property, and to the two sons of testatrix, the residue of her realty. Such is the general outline of the will. The value of testatrix' estate or the various components thereof is not shown.*

*The extrinsic evidence aids little, if at all, in interpreting the will, so we must adopt what we believe is the meaning commonly attached to the term, "a college education." Traditionally, a student in New Jersey climbs the educational ladder from grammar school, through high school, to college, in which a four-year course leads to a bachelor's degree in liberal arts or science, or to an engineering degree; and last, the youth may enter a graduate school, such as a school of medicine. We are aware, of course, of many variations in the scheme and in the use of the word "college."*

*Yet we believe that the great majority of people, when they say that this member of the family or that acquaintance had a college education or has a college degree, mean that he has taken a regular course of study on the undergraduate level that is open to students coming directly from high school; and that he has been awarded the bachelor's degree to which the course leads, and so completed \*214 his college education. It is in this sense, as we are persuaded, that Mrs. Kuvin used these terms in her will. Her sons are not obligated to contribute to Sanford's medical education.*