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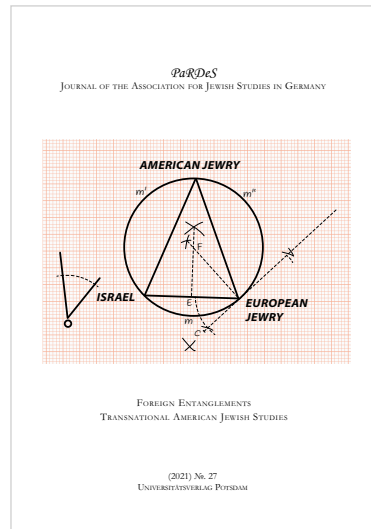
### Foreign Entanglements: Transnational American Jewish Studies

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# Mobile Jews and Porous Borders: A Transnational History in the Nineteenth Century

*by Shari Rabin*

## **Abstract**

This article explores the multi-directional geographic trajectories and ties of Jews who came to the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, working to complicate simplistic understandings of “German” Jewish immigration. It focuses on the case study of Henry Cohn, an ordinary Russian-born Jew whose journeys took him to Prussia, New York, Savannah, and California. Once in the United States he returned to Europe twice, the second time permanently, although a grandson ended up in California, where he worked to ensure the preservation of Cohn’s records. This story highlights how Jews navigated and transgressed national boundaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the limitations of the historical narratives that have been constructed from their experiences.

## **1. Introduction**

Henry Cohn was born in 1831 in Dobrzyn, in the Russian empire; he was naturalized as a US citizen in California in the late 1850s; and in 1915 he died in Stettin, then part of Germany but now in western Poland and known as Szczecin. These might at first glance appear to be the mundane facts of an obscure and unremarkable life. And yet they gesture toward a richer story that sheds new light on the transnational dimensions of American Jewish history. Historians have amply documented the cultural, religious, and economic ties that 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Jews maintained with relatives and coreligionists across the Atlantic, but in terms of physical movement, the period has mostly been portrayed in terms of one-way “German” migration, followed by mobility within US borders.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For example: Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976); Rudolf Glanz, “The Immigration of German Jews up

Cohn was in many ways a classic exemplar of this era, except for the fact that he came from the Russian empire, not the German lands, and he returned to the European continent twice, the second time for good. Two of his nephews settled in Utah and his grandson and son later moved to California themselves.<sup>2</sup> Cohn's story is one of multi-directional movement, which highlights how 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jews created a web of linkages to far-flung locales, even as they navigated shifting national boundaries.<sup>3</sup> This movement was different in degree rather than in kind from the urbanization and westward migration occurring within the European continent, and was in fact often continuous with it.<sup>4</sup>

Historians working on the period after 1881 have already troubled the idea of an inevitable and permanent migration from Russia to the United States. Forty years ago, Jonathan Sarna described a "myth of no return" among eastern European Jewish migrants to the United States. He found that return migration blurred the boundaries with return travel and occurred more often than previously assumed: the return rate was as high as 26% between 1891 and 1900.<sup>5</sup> More recently, historians have highlighted the barriers Jews faced

to 1880," in *Studies in Judaica Americana* (New York: Ktav, 1970); Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Note that Diner has since argued for a more expansive "century of migration," between 1820 and 1924, in *Jews of the United States 1654–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter Magnes), Henry Cohn Papers, BANC MSS 2010/675.

<sup>3</sup> Adam D. Mendelsohn, *The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Adam Mendelsohn, "Tongue Ties: The Emergence of the Anglophone Jewish Diaspora in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *American Jewish History* 93 (June 2007): 177–209; Tobias Brinkmann, *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Maria T. Baader, "From 'the Priestess of the Home' to 'the Rabbi's Brilliant Daughter': Concepts of Jewish Womanhood and Progressive Germanness in *Die Deborah* and the *American Israelite*, 1854–1900," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 43 (1998): 47–72.

<sup>4</sup> Steven M. Lowenstein, "The Rural Community and the Urbanization of German Jewry," *Central European History* 13 (September 1980): 218–236; Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The Eastern European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Marion A. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Myth of No Return: Jewish Return Migration to Eastern Europe, 1881–1914," *American Jewish History* 71 (December 1981): 256–268.

in gaining entry to the US, the infrastructure required to facilitate emigration, and the multiple destinations available to migrants.<sup>6</sup>

Cohn's experiences serve as a useful guide to transnational Jewish mobility in and beyond the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, showing how Jews regularly transgressed borders, even as they remained acutely aware of their importance.<sup>7</sup> While return travel and migration were not widespread phenomena, they usefully help us to understand 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jews as participants in what Peter Sloterdijk has called the "kinetic imperative of modernity."<sup>8</sup> Women and families could engage in movement, but in this period it was closely associated with men and in many ways constitutive of a certain kind of Jewish masculinity. Not only did Cohn move, but his movement – as well as the forms of communication that followed in its wake – worked to extend and connect far-flung geographies.

## 2. The Multiple Migrations of Henry Cohn

We know about Cohn's life from a memoir he authored in 1914, a year before his death, titled *Jugenderinnerungen*, or Recollections of My Youth, and a handful of personal documents housed in one box and one oversize folder at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California.<sup>9</sup> In the memoir, Cohn

<sup>6</sup> Britt Tevis, "The Hebrews Are Appearing in Court in Great Numbers: Toward a Reassessment of Early Twentieth-Century American Jewish Immigration History," *American Jewish History* 100 (July 2016): 319–347; Rebecca Kobrin, "Current and Currency: Jewish Immigrant 'Bankers' and the Transnational Business of Mass Migration, 1873–1914," in *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History*, eds. Ava F. Kahn and Adam D. Mendelsohn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 87–104; Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and its Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Devi Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> A number of essays in *Transnational Traditions* do address this era. Adam Mendelsohn describes an Anglophone diaspora, while Ava F. Kahn and Suzanne D. Rutland consider connections between Australia and California. Tobias Brinkmann's important essay considers the German ties of "German" Jewish migrants. Adam Mendelsohn, "The Sacrifices of the Isaacs: The Diffusion of New Models of Religious Leadership in the English-Speaking Jewish World," 11–37; Ava F. Kahn, "Roaming the Rim: How Rabbis, Convicts and Fortune Seekers Shaped Pacific Coast Jewry," 38–63; Suzanne D. Rutland, "Creating Transnational Connections: Australia and California," 64–83; Tobias Brinkmann, "'German Jews?' Reassessing the History of Nineteenth-Century Jewish Immigrants in the United States," 144–164.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, "Mobilization of the Planet from the Spirit of Self-Intensification," *TDR/The Drama Review* 50 (2006): 36–43.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Cohn, "Memories from Yesteryear," May 24, 1914, trans. Lisette Georges, Magnes, Henry Cohn Papers, BANC MSS 2010/675.

is remarkably frank about his own limitations, admitting to “my weak memory” and confessing, “Of course I deleted some disagreeable happenings.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful for understanding the broad strokes of his movement and gives us some sense, however altered, of his experience of place. Cohn described his hometown of Dobrzyn as a Jewish space, split between Hasidim and their opponents. It was a Pomeranian river town, home to around 1,610 Jews, probably around half of the town’s population in 1857.<sup>11</sup> He was the sixth of eight children born to a tanner, and their home was a traditional one; his parents observed the Sabbath, which Cohn remembered fondly, and sent him to *heder*, against which he eventually rebelled, leaving as a teen to become an apprentice furrier.<sup>12</sup>

Dobrzyn was at the western edge of the Russian Empire, within the Pale of Settlement and sixty kilometers north of Wloclawek (Leslau). It was separated from Prussia by the Drewenz River, so Cohn learned early on about the significance – and the fungibility – of borders. In the late 1840s, when urbanization had already begun to deplete the Jewish community, he fled to neighboring Golub in Prussia to escape draconian Russian conscription policies.<sup>13</sup> Cohn went next to Strausberg, a west Prussian town with a tiny population of Jews, where an uncle lived. He continued to train as a furrier, studied a bit of Polish, and, he recalled, had a bit part in an amateur production of the Friedrich Schiller play *Wilhelm Tell*.<sup>14</sup> Before he joined the mass migration to the United States, then, Cohn first joined the migration of Jews westward within Europe. Leaving a Russian Jewish context defined by the institutions of the *heder* and the army, he began to linguistically Polonize and culturally Germanize.

The transatlantic journey to the United States was a significant undertaking that required both individual preparation and a developing infrastructure of emigration.<sup>15</sup> Cohn offers no specific explanation for his decision to move to the United States, but at some point in the early 1850s, he joined a growing stream of young Jewish men whose economic and political options were

<sup>10</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 1, 65–66.

<sup>11</sup> Shmuel Spector and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 318, 439–40.

<sup>12</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 5–7.

<sup>13</sup> Spector and Wigoder, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, vol. 1, 439–440.

<sup>14</sup> In this period, Strausberg had less than 70 Jewish residents. Spector and Wigoder *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, vol. 3, 1251.

<sup>15</sup> Kobrin, “Current and Currency”; Cian T. McMahon, *The Coffin Ship: Life and Death at Sea during the Great Irish Famine* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

restricted by state policies in Russia, Prussia, and the German lands. Although usually treated separately by historians, in both central and eastern Europe young Jewish men faced limited opportunities for work and mobility and looked to the United States as a favorable destination.<sup>16</sup> Phillip Whitlock, also from western Russia, was sent for by a brother and recalled the excitement “of going to a new country of which I sometimes heard through some people thus returned.”<sup>17</sup>

For Cohn, the first step was preparing his family. His parents objected strenuously and his mother “cried bitterly and begged me to change my mind.” They likely had personal and religious concerns; letters from the period document the unease older relatives had about the ability to practice Judaism in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Cohns eventually agreed to provide their son with the resources for the voyage. They hosted a farewell party, but as Cohn recounts, “I bade my father farewell across the river Drewenz,” from a different country. He traveled to the port at Hamburg, where, despite the presence of rapid new steamships, he only had funds to pay for a less expensive sailing ship ticket.<sup>19</sup>

Now Cohn began the Atlantic Ocean voyage. Over six decades later, he recalled of his 64-day journey, “The passengers got along well and time was shortened by several interesting natural occurrences, jokes and fun.”<sup>20</sup> Not all were so lucky: in 1854 Bernhard Felsenthal, later to become a prominent Chicago rabbi, spent a full month on board “so sick, so terribly sick, and [with] such a bad bed, no medication, no water, nobody to take care of me.” Although there were occasionally sea animals, shipwrecks, and spectacular sunsets, Felsenthal paraphrased Deuteronomy 28:67, a classic text describing the state of exile, “I idle about, on deck, wishing in the morning it were evening, and in the evening, it were morning. Oh, God, when will this long sea-trip end?”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Philip Whitlock, *Recollections*, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS), Richmond, VA, Mss 5:1 W5905:1, 38; Biography of William Flegenheimer, VHS, Mss 7:1 F6255:1, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 16; Benjamin M. Roth, “An Ethical Letter: Benjamin M. Roth to His Son Solomon, 1854,” trans. Albert H. Friedlander, *American Jewish Archives* 6 (1954): 6–12.

<sup>19</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 17.

<sup>20</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 19.

<sup>21</sup> Bernhard Felsenthal, Translation of travel notes, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, (hereafter AJA), Bernhard Felsenthal Papers, MS-153, Folder 15, Box 3; See also, William Frank, “William Frank: Pilgrim Father of Pittsburgh Jewry,” in *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–*

Migrants faced extreme meteorological conditions, including oppressive heat during the summer and frightening storms.<sup>22</sup>

Cohn remembered that there were 20 Jews among 200 people on board, “who of course kept to themselves and paid little attention to the others.” He kept kosher on the trip – he does not explain how but recalls that the food was “not very good” – and the group was given permission to cook a festive meal of meatballs and plums in honor of the holiday of Shavuot.<sup>23</sup> Other mobile Jews also lingered in their memoirs on the shipboard experience, and several remembered the formation of ad hoc Jewish communities. Phillip Whitlock’s ship had enough Jews to gather a minyan, a prayer quorum of ten men, so that a mourning in-law could recite the appropriate prayers.<sup>24</sup>

As Paul Gilroy has written of the Black Atlantic, “ships were the living means by which the points within the Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected.”<sup>25</sup> The ship linked Jewish migrants’ European pasts to American futures. Jewish ties persisted on board and after landing. While historians have mostly cast these gendered networks as ethnic or familial in nature, they were also geographical, in some ways extending the reach of the tiny towns in Russia, Prussia, and elsewhere in central Europe that Jews came from.<sup>26</sup> Once in the United States, Cohn stayed in New York with a family from Dobrzyn and made his way economically with assistance from people he knew from there and from Strausberg. Other Jewish emigrants had similar experiences. When Abraham Kohn first arrived in New York, he “passed

1865, vol. 1, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (Brooklyn: Ktav, 1974), 303–308; Abram Vossen Goodman, ed., “A Jewish Peddler’s Diary, 1842–1843,” *American Jewish Archives* 3 (1951), 81–111, here, 88–95.

<sup>22</sup> See Whitlock, *Recollections*; Goodman, “Jewish Peddler’s Diary”; Felsenthal, Translation of travel notes; Isaac Leeser, “Discourse pronounced at the funeral of the Revd. Isaac B. Seixas by the Revd. Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia. Aug. 12 1839; Elul 3 5599,” Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives, Richmond Virginia, Isaac Leeser Papers [Original in American Jewish Historical Society (hereafter AJHS), New York, Isaac Leeser Papers, P-20, Folder 100].

<sup>23</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 17–19.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Whitlock, *Recollections*. See also Goodman, “Jewish Peddlers’ Diary”; David Mayer to family, October 19, 1839, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, Bremen Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, David Mayer Family Papers, 02–039 V/FM.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Mendelsohn, *Rag Race*; Michael R. Cohen, *Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).



through Grand Street where, to my great joy, I met my old friend Friedmann." He peddled with his brothers and acquaintances from Fürth, his hometown, each going in a different direction and agreeing to meet up in one month.<sup>27</sup> Jews continued these hometown ties, but they also began to root themselves in their new locales; Cohn, for instance, became a mason.<sup>28</sup>

A run-in with another acquaintance from Strausberg convinced Cohn to start peddling, itself an important transnational economic strategy among Jewish men, as Hasia Diner has shown.<sup>29</sup> He began in New Jersey but was soon on the lookout for new places to go.<sup>30</sup> First he sailed southward to Georgia, traversing regional boundaries that were becoming increasingly significant. In his memoir he described it as "a totally other world" with plantations, where "we often saw gruesome, but also very humane treatment of the negroes."<sup>31</sup> Unsatisfied with the climate, he returned north:

"This was the time when a great many people immigrated from New York, to California and Argentina and so we were considering a change of climate for the next fall. We were hesitating between the two countries, but finally decided on California."<sup>32</sup>

Mobile Jews regularly traversed regional boundaries and they also contemplated national and hemispheric ones.<sup>33</sup> Twenty years after Cohn, Solomon Kahn, an immigrant from Ingwiller, in French Alsace, relocated across the Mason-Dixon line in search of a place to run a dry goods store. After getting into financial trouble, he also contemplated heading off for California or Brazil, where one of his brothers had already moved.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Goodman, "Jewish Peddler's Diary," 96, 104. See also Mayer to family, October 19, 1839.

<sup>28</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 37–45; Masonic Certificates, Magnes, Henry Cohn papers, BANC MSS 2010/675, Box 1, Folder 5.

<sup>29</sup> Hasia Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 20–27.

<sup>31</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 27–29.

<sup>32</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 30.

<sup>33</sup> Anton Hieke, *Jewish Identity in the Reconstruction South: Ambivalence and Adaptation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013); Adam Mendelsohn, "Tongue Ties," Suzanne D. Rutland, "Creating Transnational Connections: Australia and California," in *Transnational Traditions*, eds. Kahn and Mendelsohn, 64–83.

<sup>34</sup> Solomon Kahn to Lazard Kahn, March 24, 1874, and others from March to May, 1874, AJA, Lazard Kahn Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, MS-174.

These kinds of second or third migrations often involved returning to the water. Before the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad, the trip to California required a steamboat trip via Panama, where Cohn was laid over for fourteen days. After arriving in San Francisco, he took another steamer upriver to the Gold Country town of Marysville.<sup>35</sup> Having already sailed from Hamburg to New York to Savannah and back, he now ventured to new ports in Aspinwall, San Francisco, and inland river towns, where he continued to work as a peddler and merchant.<sup>36</sup>

This whole time, letters and objects were going back and forth across the Atlantic, acting as proxies for their senders and vehicles of extending local geography across borders. Cohn remembered, "I regularly sent my parents letters as well as small presents, which gave me much joy. So I had sent every Easter to my father who was a tobacco smoker a beautiful but simple pipe, which pleased him greatly."<sup>37</sup>

Letters could function as an extension of their authors. In February 1862, Dr. Israel Moses would write to his sister in New York from a U.S. Army camp in Maryland, "On this Sunday evening I propose to visit you by proxy in the shape of a small note."<sup>38</sup> Objects too were seen as capable of transporting emotion and connection across space; to give one example, it was not uncommon to ship slices of wedding cake to loved ones.<sup>39</sup>

Sending his father a pipe allowed Cohn to provide him with a piece of America in Russia, burnishing the masculinity of both men.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, following a visit to Cohn, a friend "wrote home to his parents in Dobrzyn

<sup>35</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 32–37.

<sup>36</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 37–45; Masonic Certificates, Henry Cohn.

<sup>37</sup> Cohn, "Memories," 64; David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Israel Moses to Lionel Moses, February 2, 1862, AJHS, Moses Family (of New York City) Papers, P- 1, Box 2.

<sup>39</sup> "We sent you a wedding cake by express, it will not leave San Francisco till the steamer of the 30th." Rosa Levy Newmark to Sarah Newmark, November 21, 1867, Magnes, Rosalie Meyer Stern Papers, BANC MSS 2010/604, Carton 4, Folder 4. "Receive piece wedding cake from David from San Francisco." Diary Entry, April 21, 1867, AJA, Lemann Family Papers, MS-383, Folder 4.

<sup>40</sup> On gender in this period, see Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Idana Goldberg, "'Sacrifices upon the Altar of Charity': The Masculinization of Jewish Philanthropy in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 20 (2010): 34–56.

of our encounter and how he found me baking bread. When my mother heard of this, it seemed she was very upset.”<sup>41</sup> She was not the only parent to reassert proper gender roles across distant geographies. The parents of Jewish migrant Mendel Loewner regularly sent him assertive letters attempting to guide his decisions in business and in his personal life. They instructed him to “move to a larger city where a better religious life is possible and where people don’t ask what a Jew looks like,” apparently without success.<sup>42</sup>

Letters and objects were not always enough though, and in 1859 it was Cohn himself who crossed the Atlantic to visit family and escort a local woman traveling to relatives in California; Jewish women’s mobility was dependent on family or trusted friends. Once home, Cohn again found reminders of the significance and fungibility of borders. He was detained by the police, which he noted was “not to my liking at all; I was no longer used to these depressing and unfree conditions, even in Prussia, where it was somewhat less restricted.” At the same time, he found that he “was assailed by everyone with questions about relatives in America, mostly about people I did not even know.” His parents expected him to stay, but were reassured when he told them that he would return permanently within the next few years.<sup>43</sup> This time he travelled to the United States on a 15-day steamboat trip: “the company was most agreeable and so we had a wonderful time.” He tried to find his old friends in New York but “found only a few of them,” indicating that they too had moved on.<sup>44</sup>

Europe was not an abandoned “old world” but a place of ongoing relationship. Jews traveled back and forth across the Atlantic for varying amounts of time, motivated by considerations of business and family. In his 1911 autobiography, Henry Seessel, who had emigrated in 1843, described returning to the Rhineland in the late 1840s, soon after the death of his sister in a yellow fever outbreak in New Orleans. He felt compelled, he wrote, to check up on his other sisters. While there, he met “the niece of Mr. Rose, just seventeen years old, and knowing the whole of her family from my childhood, I at once made up my mind to ask her to become my wife and come with me to this

<sup>41</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 53.

<sup>42</sup> Leib and Breindl Loewner letters to Mendel Loewner, 1850s, AJA, Loewner Family of Harrisonburg, VA, MS- 458, Folder 5.

<sup>43</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 54–55.

<sup>44</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 56.

country.”<sup>45</sup> Marrying a local woman brought him companionship and aid, but also a piece of home, back to Louisiana.

Others returned with male relatives to help with their business endeavors. This was how Julius Weis migrated to New Orleans in 1844, from a village near Landau in the Rhineland-Palatinate; later, he made plans to move to California, but changed course at the request of his parents. In 1857 Weis visited his parents, who had themselves moved southwest, to the village of Ingenheim. Weis “provided them with means with which to live comfortably,” bringing American prosperity to their village. He returned again ten years later with his wife and children; a niece and nephew accompanied them back to the United States.<sup>46</sup> Joseph Seligman went to Europe in the late 1850s “for the purpose of establishing a banking house there.” In the 1860s Seligman brothers also set up business in London, Paris, Frankfurt, and Berlin.<sup>47</sup>

Scattered though it is, the evidence makes clear that, even before the Civil War, migration to the United States was not necessarily a one-way ticket. Soon Cohn did return to Europe permanently, thinking “of my parents and the promise I had made to them to return.”<sup>48</sup> This was not a common choice, although according to Cohn two of his relatives had already returned to Europe.<sup>49</sup> It helped that the bloom was off the rose of the Gold Rush and the Civil War was underway, which of course set up a new national boundary that Jews also crossed, licitly and illicitly. Cohn’s decision was apparently an emotional one: according to him, he had a “tearful farewell” with two Mexican men, Pedro and Juan, who worked on the crew of his mule pack-train, and he recalled, “[after] solemn farewells accompanied on horseback by ten friends I bid goodbye to the Sierra Nevada Mountains forever.”<sup>50</sup> He describes the departure wistfully, linking it to the fellow men who had helped him and to the place itself.

Traveling to New York during wartime was dangerous and required special precautions, but eventually Cohn made it to New York and arrived in

<sup>45</sup> Henry Seessel, “Henry Seessel,” in *Memoirs of American Jews*, ed. Marcus, 363–364.

<sup>46</sup> Julius Weis, *Autobiography*, n.d., Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University Special Collections, Ida Weis Friend Collection, MSS 287, Box 7, 14.

<sup>47</sup> “Jesse Seligman: The Making of a Financier,” in *Memoirs of American Jews*, ed. Marcus, 351.

<sup>48</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 58–59.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Cohn and Fritz Ludwig Cohn, “Saint Louis and Poker Flats in the Fifties and Sixties,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 19 (December 1940), 289–298, here 292.

<sup>50</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 59–60.

Liverpool in 13 days. He brought with him a US passport issued two years earlier; it described him as five feet, six inches, with dark grey eyes, black hair, and a florid complexion. He was refused a Russian visa because he had become an American citizen but was granted French and Prussian visas. Cohn was very attuned to the particularities and powers of state regimes, and yet he recounted this state of affairs with frustration, indicating that he understood these spaces as continuous ones to which he should have unimpeded access. He traveled to Paris before heading eastward and soon found himself back in Dobrzyn, but unhappy, “feeling nowhere at home.” Likewise, in the 1880s Julius Weis would try to move to Frankfurt, but after 40 years living in the United States, he found himself “dissatisfied with the German mode of living.”<sup>51</sup>

Cohn was changed, perhaps bringing some of California back with him.<sup>52</sup> His original name was Chaim and he also used Heiman – including, notably, on his American passport – but apparently he used the name Henry after his return, indicating that an American layer of identity had been permanently added to already existing Jewish and European ones.<sup>53</sup> His experience must have given him local cachet because he was “burdened by many marriage proposals which troubled me.” In 1864 he married, and he and his wife, Rose, settled in Stettin, where he became a wine merchant.<sup>54</sup> Stettin, a Baltic port city, was home to a relatively new Jewish community that was growing rapidly due to migration from further east. In 1905 it had 3,001 Jews, amounting to two percent of the total population; demographically, then, it was much closer to his experience in the United States than in his Russian hometown.<sup>55</sup> Seven years later, Germany was unified, and its Jews granted political rights.<sup>56</sup> When he died in 1915, he was 230 miles west of his birthplace and less than 40 miles east of Strausberg, where he had initially settled in the 1850s.

<sup>51</sup> Julius Weis, *Autobiography*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 61–65.

<sup>53</sup> Cohn and Cohn, “Saint Louis and Poker Flats,” 289.

<sup>54</sup> Cohn, “Memories,” 65–66.

<sup>55</sup> Spector and Wigoder, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, vol. 3, 318, 1244.

<sup>56</sup> David Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History Across Five Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 172.

### 3. Transnational Afterlives

Cohn's memoir ends by describing a happy and fulfilling life that produced five children and 14 grandchildren. One of those grandchildren, Fritz Ludwig – his German name alone indicates a certain level of acculturation on the part of his parents – was born in 1903, moved to California in 1929, and was naturalized five years later.<sup>57</sup> The country he left was not the same one he had been born in; the Weimar Republic was created in the shadow of imperial Germany's defeat in World War I.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps he had heard stories of the American West at his grandfather's feet. He had lived in Berlin and emigrated via Houston, although it is unclear how he was able to obtain a visa just five years after the passage of the United States' newly restrictive immigration laws.<sup>59</sup> He studied at the University of California, Berkeley, where he became a German instructor and was married to a local woman, by a rabbi, in 1936.<sup>60</sup>

His father Carl, a woodworker, emigrated in January 1939. By that point, the Jewish community of Stettin had shrunk by more than half, to just 1,117; on Kristallnacht, just over two months before Carl entered the United States, the local synagogue had been set on fire, Jewish homes and businesses looted, and a group of Jewish men taken to the Nazi concentration camp at Sachsenhausen.<sup>61</sup> On his 1944 naturalization form, Carl's two other sons were listed as "in French Army, Morocco," and "Harbin, Manchuria."<sup>62</sup> This branch of the

<sup>57</sup> Naturalization Records, National Archives at San Francisco, San Bruno, California, Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685–2009, RG 21, NAI Number 605504, accessed May 13, 2021, via <https://www.ancestry.com>.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> Libby Garland, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> California, U.S., Marriage Records from Select Counties, 1850–1941, accessed via May 13, 2021, <https://www.ancestry.com>; "Oakland Girl to Wed Instructor," *Oakland Tribune*, October 28, 1935, 14; "Course to Be Started," *Oakland Tribune*, January 22, 1939, 40. He published a book review in the *Modern Language Quarterly* in 1945: Fritz L. Cohn, "Review of *The Vogue of Marmontel on the German Stage* by Lawrence Marsden Price," *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (September 1945): 350–351.

<sup>61</sup> Spector and Wigoder, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, vol. 3, 318, 1244.

<sup>62</sup> Naturalization Records, National Archives at San Francisco; San Bruno, California, Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685–2009, RG 21, NAI 605504, accessed May 13, 2021, via <https://www.ancestry.com>. Cohn is listed as being married to Breindel, a native of Tarnow, Poland, but it is not clear if she also emigrated or naturalized. On Harbin, see Jonathan Goldstein, "No American *Goldene Medina*: Harbin Jews between Russia, China, and Israel, 1899–2014," in *Transnational Traditions*, eds. Kahn and Mendelsohn, 185–202.

family had left the European continent altogether. Genealogical documents in Henry's papers show that other members of his family ended up in Israel, and that one of his children died in Theresienstadt.<sup>63</sup>

Cohn crossed borders and waterways, entertaining various options for emigration before ending up close to where he started. Movement was not only a link between one place and another, but was an experience unto itself, one that required preparation and took time. Rarely were the places departed fully left behind. However much Cohn was personally changed by his experiences, he also set the template for his grandson to follow in his footsteps some 75 years later. It was Fritz, in fact, who ensured that his grandfather's papers would be preserved. He translated Henry's memoir and published a condensed version in the December 1940 edition of the *California Historical Quarterly* under the title "Saint Louis and Poker Flats in the Fifties and Sixties."

Although the last name "Cohn" would have communicated his family's Jewishness, Fritz never directly referenced it, instead emphasizing Henry's descriptions of everyday life and many adventures in gold mining towns. The footnotes describe a driving trip Fritz took in May 1940 to follow in Henry's footsteps; in the now sparsely populated towns, he found material ruins of his grandfather's store, including "two original iron doors lying in the grass." Saint Louis, he wrote, only had three residents, who "being without means of communication, knew nothing about the present war."<sup>64</sup> Just three months earlier, the majority of Stettin's remaining Jewish population had been deported.<sup>65</sup> Still a relative newcomer to California, at a time when his native Germany had become openly hostile to Jews but the US had not yet entered the war, Fritz was clearly invested in asserting his connection to the local Gold Rush mythology, whether in support of a personal or a political agenda.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, in the introduction to the memoir he changed the story of his grandfather's return migration, minimizing his preexisting intentions to leave California: "During a visit to his family in 1864, he married and decided to

<sup>63</sup> Family Tree, Magnes, Henry Cohn Papers, BANC MSS 2010/675, Box 1, Folder 1.

<sup>64</sup> Cohn and Cohn, "Saint Louis and Poker Flats," 296–297n2, 297n12, and 298n14.

<sup>65</sup> Spector and Wigoder, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, vol. 3, 1244.

<sup>66</sup> Barbara Berglund, "'The Days of Old, the Days of Gold, the Days of '49': Identity, History, and Memory at the California Midwinter International Exposition, 1894," *The Public Historian* 25 (2003): 25–49; Glen Gendzel, "Pioneers and Padres: Competing Mythologies in Northern and Southern California, 1850–1930," *Western Historical Quarterly* 32 (Spring 2001): 55–79.

stay in Germany.”<sup>67</sup> More recently, Cohn’s memoir was republished in *Jewish Voices of the California Gold Rush* as “I had the Intention to Emigrate,” including descriptions of his early Jewish life and his travel to California. Even this framing is rather limiting, however, in light of Cohn’s return to Europe and the subsequent global dimensions of his family’s story.<sup>68</sup>

Cohn’s story shows that Jews in the Gold Rush, and in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America more broadly, were embedded within a much broader and longer history of Jewish mobility, in which state borders were significant but rarely singularly determinative. Through Cohn, California becomes entangled with small towns in Russia and Prussia, with Liverpool and Paris, with Morocco and Manchuria, with Theresienstadt and Israel – in short with the major places and trajectories that make up the global Jewish experience in the modern era. Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish men like Cohn encountered and transgressed borders, reshaping Jewish communities and identities in ways that defy the often-parochial impulses of those who have written their history.

<sup>67</sup> Cohn and Cohn, “Saint Louis and Poker Flats,” 289.

<sup>68</sup> Ava F. Kahn, ed. *Jewish Voices of the California Gold Rush: A Documentary History, 1849–1880* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 127–133.