

Lawrence B. Cohen was born in Pottstown Pennsylvania on February 12, 1916. His father, Robert Cohen, had immigrated to the United States from Poland in the late 1880s, and his mother, Cecelia, was born in Pottstown to immigrant parents from Lithuania. His mother and her sister had started working in a factory at an early age, and his father was a traveling watch salesman.

From an early age, Lawrence showed a great affinity for languages. He spoke Yiddish at home and English on the street and he learned Hebrew as a matter of religious education. The first person in his family to go beyond the eighth grade, he focused upon language and linguistics for his bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania (1936), and he earned his master's degree from Penn one year later. One year he studied eleven different languages, including elementary Hittite, and as an adult he was fluent in English, Hebrew, French and Yiddish.

He became interested in labor Zionism through the influence of his linguistics professor Zellig Harris, and he became president of the student Zionist organization Avukah.<sup>1</sup> After getting his master's degree he moved to New York City where he met his future wife, Naomi Epstein, at a meeting at her mother's house. They were married on November 24, 1938. It was during this period that he met lifelong friend Seymour Melman who would become his colleague in the Industrial engineering department at Columbia.

Shortly after getting married, he got a job in the textile industry at a plant in Putnam Connecticut. While there he became friendly with members of the local union, and he left his management job to become a researcher for the Textile Workers Union of America. His involvement with the trade union movement would become the center of his working life, first with the TWUA and later as an academic and consultant.

He had three children, Edward (1940-2002), Jonathan born in 1943 and Frederic born in 1956. Edward was a composer who taught music at Brandeis, Harvard and MIT and composed some forty pieces of music including two operas. Jonathan is a professor of mathematics at DePaul University. Frederic works in the film industry and was the recipient of several awards for his documentary about a famous guitar maker.

In 1947, Cohen went back to graduate school at Columbia University in the department of Industrial Engineering, receiving his Ph.D. in 1950. The topic of his dissertation was worker decision making on production, a process that Professor Cohen observed taking place at a textile plant in Connecticut. He stayed on at Columbia as an instructor, later being moved to the tenure track where he would become a full professor and chairman of his department.

In 1952, the United States government was committed to the post war recovery of Europe and he was hired by the Truman administration to work with the European trade union movement. In his first trip abroad he spent the summer in Vienna as a United States liaison with the trade unions of Europe. He would later be sent to Norway as well as doing several stints in Paris. With his background in organized labor, his remarkable facility with language, his knowledge of engineering, and his understanding of social systems, he was a natural for the work. He continued to teach at Columbia throughout this period, while doing additional consulting in the United States as well.

In 1960 he was hired by the City of New York to study the feasibility of staggering work hours to alleviate subway congestion. Several well-known sociologists including Terence Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein and Amitai Etzioni participated in the study which

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Barsky discusses the life and work of Zellig Harris, as well as the history of Avukah, in his book *Zellig Harris: From American Linguistics to Socialist Zionism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

took almost six years to complete. A seven-hundred-page book entitled "Staggering Work hours to alleviate subway congestion" was published soon after detailing the results of his study.

Lawrence and Naomi Cohen had considered moving to Israel when they first got married but after the war, with two small children to raise and a budding career in academics to build, they decided to stay in New York. In 1966, they took their first trip to Israel and Professor Cohen was offered a year's visiting position at the Technion in Haifa. In July of 1967, a month after the six day war, Professor Cohen, his wife and his youngest son Fred moved to Haifa for the year where he became involved with the Histadrut.

The Israel connection had been nurtured earlier by a role he had played at Columbia. Following the War of Independence in 1948, the Israeli government sent a number of its soldiers to the United States to further their education. Partially to further the intellectual development of its citizens, and partially as a reward for their contributions to the war effort, a number of them were sent to Columbia University. Due to his fluency in Hebrew, Columbia made him the school's liaison with the Israeli students. This led to the development of several friendships that would be reestablished in the late 1960's when he made the first of many visits to Israel.

Over the years he would return frequently to Israel, particularly to Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, for visiting academic appointments. Though he had several offers of permanent jobs in Israel, his connection to his family and to Columbia University led to his staying in New York. In the 1970's he served two terms as chair of the Industrial Engineering Department and he retired from Columbia on January 1, 1984.

Cohen had an active professional life. His work included extensive consulting with trade unions, the United States government, and the Histadrut in Israel. His work took him to many different countries including Austria, France, Norway and Israel as well as to many places in the United States. He worked as an arbitrator, adjudicating such different issues as the dissolution of a lie detector agency and the administration of aptitude tests in the building trades. He published one book on the staggering of work hours and a second book on worker decision making on production may be published posthumously.

No discussion of Lawrence Cohen's life would be complete without a description of his hobbies and outside interests, most notably his musicianship. He studied the violin as a child, and took up the viola as an adult. Practicing the viola was part of his daily routine, and he maintained a busy schedule as an amateur chamber music player for much of his life.

In the 1960's, he became interested in oriental rugs, which he would find at thrift shops and garage sales. Ever the student of his interests, he became very knowledgeable about the designs of the rugs and took up restoring rugs as a hobby. Later on he would become an expert on Chinese pottery, and developed a real talent for identifying the history of a wide variety of Chinese porcelain. The interest in Chinese pottery would occupy many hours during his retirement years. He got interested in computing shortly after the introduction of home computers. His home was soon filled with computers and accessories and the countertops were covered with computer manuals and magazines.

Lawrence and Naomi moved to Westport Connecticut several years after his retirement where they lived most of the last twenty years of his life. Though he suffered on and off from ill health, his last years were marked by a renewed interest in leading a Jewish life. Lawrence and Naomi became involved with a Conservative synagogue in Westport. As two of its earliest members they were very active in its development and growth. With his religious background and extensive knowledge of Hebrew he was an invaluable resource to the growing congregation.

Lawrence Cohen passed away on April 21, 2007, at the Meadow Ridge retirement community in Redding Connecticut. He was 91 years old. He will be remembered by all who knew him for his intellect, his compassion and above all for his sense of humor.