

JERRY COHEN
Memorial Tribute
Brandeis, December 8, 2023

I am honored to present this remembrance of Jerry Cohen, one of Brandeis' truly legendary professors. Jerry passed away in October at the age of 89. He was not only my American Studies colleague of almost 40 years, but also, when I was a student at Brandeis in the early 1960s and Jerry was just starting his teaching career, my professor. I took Jerry's first course at Brandeis, on modern U.S. history. I don't know if it was a coincidence, but I did become an historian.

Jerry was born in Newark, N.J. in 1934 and later moved to Somerville, N.J. His father, who ran a hardware store, was a part-time cantor who loved opera, and his mother was a homemaker. It was assumed that Jerry would either go into the hardware business, which he didn't want to do, or that he would be a lawyer, because in his own words, he talked a lot and had been an actor in high school. He went to Rutgers University for his undergraduate training.

Jerry thought he'd go to law school after college until he met Will Herberg, a visiting lecturer at Rutgers. Herberg had once been a Communist and left-wing agitator, but had become disillusioned and now called himself a conservative. Jerry described his encounter with Herberg as "shattering." Herberg demonstrated to Jerry what an intellectual really was. To become such a person became his aspiration.

Jerry went on to graduate school at Yale, and began his teaching career there. After a few years, he heard about a job opening at Brandeis University and, he said, "to their amazement, and Yale's amazement," and to his own, he was offered a job as an Assistant Professor in the History Department. Abe Sachar used to refer to Jerry as one of Brandeis' founding faculty, even though Jerry came here some 12 years after the university was established. Apparently even President Sachar could not conceive of Brandeis without Jerry Cohen.

Jerry took a leave from Brandeis in the early 1960s to work with CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. During the three years he was gone, he helped write the book, *Freedom When?* with James Farmer, CORE's national director. He was also instrumental in developing a pilot summer and later year-round program for students from underserved communities; it became the nationally influential Upward Bound program. When he returned to Brandeis, Jerry helped found a full-year program here for such students, known as TYP (the Transitional Year Program), and became its first director. In 1968, he joined a new program in American Civilization (later called American Studies).

Jerry introduced several courses in American Studies that became the basis of his teaching and scholarly career, among them, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, *The Idea of Conspiracy*, *Sports in American Culture*; *Violence in American Culture*, *The Future as History*, and *The Sixties*. For many years, Jerry taught the department's introductory

course.

The passion Jerry exuded as a teacher kept the students coming—he provoked, challenged, instructed, and encouraged. College guide books mentioned him as **the** Brandeis teacher not to be missed, and his classes often enrolled hundreds of students.

Students speak of the extraordinary effect that Jerry had on them. For example: "Prof Cohen is one of the most engaging, awe inspiring, passionate and enthusiastic lecturers I've ever heard... He loves to have students challenge his ideas in and outside of class... He is able to connect to his students and to their generation in a way that I have never seen another professor do."

Students praised Jerry as "an amazing teacher," "charismatic," "a Brandeis institution," "an icon on campus," "incredible ... a mensch." "His passion, his storytelling, and his genuine joy to be an educator were beautiful things to see." "Jerry" was all you needed to say," commented one student, "when someone asked what class you were heading off to next. It was always enough."

Jerry played major roles within the American Studies department and the university. He chaired American Studies several times. He served on the Faculty Senate, chairing it twice. He also twice chaired the Faculty Committee on Admissions and Financial Aid, and wrote a faculty report that prompted the university to divest its holdings in South Africa.

Jerry's scholarship focused on short essays, one of which won a Best Essay award from *Commentary* magazine in 1993. Much of his writing and thinking was in the area of the idea of conspiracy in American history and culture. He was frequently called on to share his expertise about the Kennedy Assassination, the Alger case, the Rosenbergs case, and Sacco and Vanzetti.

Outside Brandeis, Jerry loved to spend time with his wife Helena Vesterman, a Russian-American pianist; his sons, Joshua, Benjamin, and Casey; four stepsons; seventeen grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. He had many enthusiasms, opera and baseball among them, and could easily sing you a fragment from your favorite opera or regale you with a play-by-play account of last night's Red Sox game.

A gifted lyric tenor, Jerry often sang the Kol Nidrei prayer at Brandeis' Yom Kippur services. He performed in recitals with his wife, Helena. In 1998, he participated in a concert of Russian music at Carnegie Hall.

Jerry was an intense and passionate man; he could be fiery. But if he got mad at you, he never stayed mad. Rather, he offered friendship, support, and loyalty on the very deepest level.

Jerry taught at Brandeis for 57 years until his retirement in 2017, a record equaled by only one other colleague. His classes were the largest in Brandeis history. According to

the registrar, no one has taught more Brandeisians.

Since his passing, generations of students have paid tribute to the myriad ways in which Jerry nurtured and inspired them. Many spoke of their association with him as life-changing. As one former student said about him, Jerry Cohen was "the essence of Brandeis."

May his memory be for a blessing.

JOYCE ANTLER