

# ESSAY

## For My Name's Sake

By Robert L. Cohen

**T**O WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: I am writing to you because I would respectfully request your assistance in locating a gentleman by the name of Bobby Cohen, whom I met 17 years ago. Mr. Cohen, at that time, was conducting a longitudinal research study of which I was one of the subjects. . . ."

Yes, well, I wish I could help. Fact is, though, I'm thinking of conducting a longitudinal study myself of all the Robert Cohens whose mail and phone calls I've gotten over the years, and for whom I've otherwise been mistaken.

My research subject's cover-the-whole-field letter was, at least, easy to put out of mind. (She had written all the Robert, Bob, and R. Cohens in Brooklyn, on the dubious assumption that Brooklyn natives—I'm not one—stay in Brooklyn.) As was the amusing, and predictably pleasant, letter from the folks at Lands' End, a mail-order company of which I'm a frequent customer, thanking me for interviewing with them and informing me, "We have made our selection for the Orderfiller position opening" and "you were not chosen." I'm a teacher, editor, and writer and have never been to Dodgeville, Wisconsin, where the company has its headquarters, but I appreciate their interest anyway. Perhaps I should apply for a job with them; I assume I'd get a staff discount.

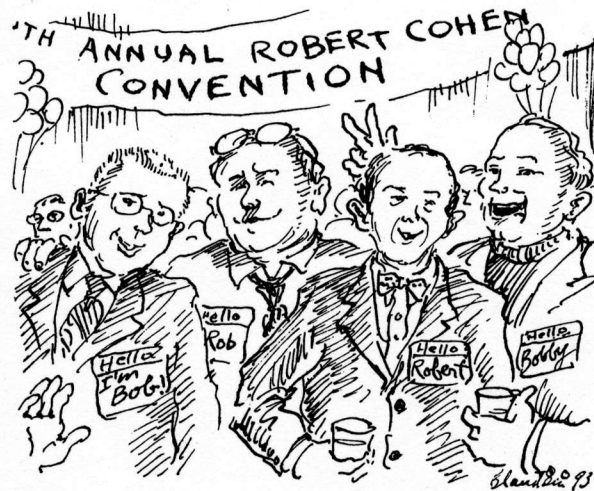
Decidedly *less* pleasant was a letter from the *Atlantic*, not only rejecting a submission of mine but making clear, through an incorrect inside address, that they had "returned" my manu-

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*This Robert L. Cohen, who attended the College in 1966-67, is the one you've heard wonderful things about—in regard to his Jewish- and folk-music lectures, New School courses, and other essays in Columbia. He lives in Brighton, Massachusetts.*

script to another Robert Cohen—a novelist whose most recent book occasioned half a dozen inquiries to me as to whether I was he. I consoled myself with the thought that perhaps he'd been turned down by the *Atlantic*, too.

The *wrong* Robert Cohens have haunted me, it seems, all my life. There was one in my high school, for whom I once received a chatty message on my answering machine, regretting that I hadn't made it to our class's 25th



reunion—which I had just attended. There was one at summer camp and one at a drug company I worked for, and there was a Bob Cohen doing a folk-music show on the radio in New York while I was hosting a weekly Jewish-interest show; I still remember being woke up at some ungodly hour one Sunday morning by a phone call from one of *his* listeners.

I lecture on Jewish music (among other things) and have been asked if I'm either of two cantors—"Are you the famous Robert Cohen from the Plainview Jewish Center?" was one inquiry. One rabbi suggested that I write his cousin—Robert Cohen!—in western Massachusetts, as he might be interested in having me speak at his synagogue. (He was.) Speaking of music, I'm a devotee of that fast-van-

ishing species the long-playing record, so I was pleased to learn that a Robert Cohen is one of the co-owners of Final Vinyl, an East Village store specializing exclusively in LPs. If you're a CD fan for whom those are fighting words, keep in mind that, according to the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, Robert Cohen won the world bantamweight boxing championship in 1934 and held that title for 23 years.

A Bob Cohn (without the *e*) edits one of the Jewish newspapers I've written for; when he runs my stuff, he appends a note to the effect that "the author is *not* the editor of this paper"—which I take pains to read as a simple clarification rather than a repudiation. A *Wall Street Journal* article on the cash crunch at McGraw-Hill quoted "Robert Cohen, a publishing consultant" with respect to the company's prospects; I sent the article to several friends at McGraw-Hill, assuring them that I'd do my best to retain their positions. And I enjoyed a vicarious thrill when the *New York Times* announced my marriage—or at least that of some

Robert Cohen, son (like me) of Lorraine. Having ascertained that he wasn't me, I proceeded to get engaged myself—after clarifying to my fiancée that I was *not* the lawyer (Robert L. Cohen, right down to the middle initial) in her small town (he's richer).

Less gratifying was an NBC News exposé on a state legislator namesake who took bribes—and was subsequently recruited by the FBI to "sting" other crooked legislators. But the nadir in my history of namesakes was surely reached when I received a call from a company in Pittsburgh, asking whether I just might be the Robert Cohen that owed them money—followed by two calls from collection agencies on the same, uh, account.

MEMO TO ALL ROBERT COHENS: Kindly protect our good name.