The Man from Boston

A Friends' Personality

Where do one's formative years begin and end? For Martin Cohen, it all starts with the fine education that he received in Boston—the heart of much of the culture, history, and tradition of these United States. Martin was able to attend the three oldest schools in New England—Cotton Mather Elementary (founded in 1628), Boston Latin School (dating back to 1630), and, ultimately, the Harvard University, which was the first of the colleges open in the colonies—in 1636. From such roots came a lifetime dedicated to education, although his first teaching experiences in a local school (after earning an M.A. at the Boston Teachers College) did not seem to offer what he would later embrace with enthusiasm. As far as an end, well, read further.

As a partial escape from his first teaching experiences, Cohen, in May of 1940, joined the Massachusetts National Guard. In September of that same year, harkening to the war clouds threatening Europe and the Far East, national guard units were federalized, and this well-educated young teacher became an enlisted soldier in an artillery unit of the U.S. Army. After one rejection for Officers Candidate School due to his poor eyesight, he reapplied in a different specialization, transportation, and was sent to Mississippi for training. Some ninety days later, 2nd Lieutenant Cohen was reassigned to a Brooklyn army base. In May of 1943, he and 1,700 other GI's were sailing for Scotland aboard the Queen Elizabeth I which, despite the many sinkings then occurring because of U-boat attacks, survived the journey.

In England, Martin worked diligently as a railroad station manager at North Hampton, a supply point for the surrounding ring of 8th Air Force bases. Fortunately, he was billeted with an elderly couple who treated him as a son. He, in turn, was able to share rations such as coffee and sugar that were in short supply in war-torn Britain. With the taking of Cherbourg, many troops were moved to the continent, Martin along with them to serve as "real estate officer" for the Cherbourg area. His major responsibility was to find locations for all of the supplies that were flooding into the area to support the liberation of Europe. He utilized his education to review the ancient plat books that dated back to Napoleon in order to discover who owned a building or a piece of land and thereby insure that the space could be used by the armed forces.

Another major assignment came when he was sent as Port Landing Officer to Le Havre which, by that time, had been almost leveled by the military battles and bombings. Regardless, the port was one of the principal Allied supply stations, and the future educator's role was to find berthing space for the myriad numbers of ships and vessels that brought immense amounts of supplies to the area. Unfortunately, his eyesight began to cause major difficulties and he was sent to a hospital in Paris, and was there when the city celebrated its liberation. A short time later, he was given a medical discharge and returned to Boston in November of 1945.

Although, in one sense, Professor Cohen felt that he had almost lived a lifetime, he was still a young man with a long life ahead. He turned, propitiously, to a new career, and selected, as his training base, the library school found at Simmons College in Boston. There, in 1946, he was the first male student to be admitted to their advanced library education program. From Simmons, it was a short step into a reference career in the public libraries (the "universities of the people") of Newark, NJ, Decatur, IL, and Kalamazoo, MI. For anyone who knows anything about library history, these three libraries are especially noted for their superior library programs, state-of-the-art technology, and community commitment. Martin also married and his son and daughter were born during this period.

A new stage in his career as an information specialist and educator/librarian began in 1960 when he began teaching in the Humanities Division of the then-nationally recognized College of General Studies at Western Michigan University. One unique sideline to his library and teaching was his involvement with the Midwest Project on Airborne Telephone Instruction (MPATI). In this short-lived, but creative project, a DC-6 would fly large figure eight loops over Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio transmitting information to teachers on the ground. Technology quickly bypassed this somewhat unusual approach, but, at the time, it served a special purpose and sent key information to the folks who needed it. By 1963, Librarian Cohen became Instructor Cohen full-time at Western Michigan University, and, in short order, he was commissioned by the emerging School of Librarianship as a faculty member in its undergraduate/graduate programs. There, he served with remarkable success until his retirement in 1977 earning, in 1976, the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award. His teaching areas covered many facets of the field: book selection, government publications, administrative reference, communication. He had a special feeling for the introduction and use of media in library collections, and was an avid theater and cinema fan serving as a mainstay of a local film society, Nickelodeon, which sponsored the finest in foreign films.

Cohen was known for his dynamic teaching style and as a "resident punster" who, in another persona, could fascinate students studying library history by demonstrating manuscript lettering in the light of a candle while clothed as a Benedictine monk. He also operated his own printing press; was in charge of Operation Alphabet, an adult reading program, at WKZO; and managed WMUK for a year. Among his many enthusiasms, then and now, are bird-watching, worldwide trips with his wife Alice, and major roles in the Kalamazoo chapters of the International Torch Club and the Audubon Society.

Martin Cohen "retired" from Western Michigan University in 1977, but his presence on campus continues, and his interests, in addition to some already noted, are varied and intriguing. Seldom a week passes without his visits in and around Kalamazoo, and, of course, at the University Libraries, and he was a charter member of the Library Friends organization. Gardening is another special activity, and Martin unabashedly states that his "kiwi trees are producing fruit in commercial quantity." His enthusiasm for medieval scripts, printing, and calligraphy continues, i.e., he keeps his "hand" in practice; he volunteers as a tax assistant for the AARP; and he does free lance reference work for friends—truly, a man of many aptitudes. However, he always saves time to share with his daughter, Martha, and son, Zolton, who also live in Kalamazoo. And, of course, his reputation as a raconteur par excellence has not been diminished even as he celebrated his 80th birthday in December of 1995. Carpe diem, Martin, as always!

G.E.