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My Name and My Face

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My Name and My Face¹

In the fall of 2000 I published a short autobiographical piece entitled “Memoirs of a Commodity Fetishist.” It wasn’t particularly personal, and was primarily an account of my emerging ideas about American consumer culture, a subject I’ve written and lectured about extensively over the years. But the memoir contained one relatively personal sentence that gave rise to what was, for me, an unexpected and unforgettable encounter.

Here is the sentence. “Immigrants from Poland and Latvia, my grandparents never fully relinquished their village mentality.”

Prior to publishing the essay I had distributed a draft to a number of friends and colleagues for suggestions and comments. Shortly after, I ran into one of these coworkers in the men’s room at Hunter College, where we both teach. Though not close friends, our relationship had always been good and we had known each other for several years.

And then, surrounded by graffiti scribbled walls, he turned to me and told me how much he had enjoyed reading the essay. As an afterthought, he inserted, “Are you a member of the tribe? I didn’t think you were.”

My name is Stuart Ewen. I like to think of myself as a citizen of the world but I am, among other things, a Jew. I am telling you this for several reasons. The first of these is my name. In the English-speaking world it is often assumed to be Scottish. When I lectured at a university conference in Glasgow recently, most of the people I encountered there took it for granted that I was a Scot or have Scottish ancestry.

The names Ewen, Ewan, McEwen, McEwan, and the like, are largely variations of a “Son of Eoin, or Ewen” clan that once ruled an area around Kilfinan on the Cowal peninsula in Argyll, in southwest Scotland, though some Ewen clans derive from other regions.

Though my family name is truly Ewen, and not the work of some narrow-minded name-giver at Ellis Island, I am not of Scottish descent. I am a Jew. In Europe, in the parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire where my father’s family came from, the name Ewen was a phonetic spelling of the Hebrew word for stone, אבן (pronounced eh-ven) which, in its Europeanized version, employed a “w,” which in

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German and some other languages is pronounced *vuh*. So when the “Eh-vens” or “Evens” arrived in Anglo-America we were reborn as the Scottish sounding Ewens. So much for the surname. The name Stuart was given to me by my parents in 1945, not long after they had given the name Phyllis to my sister in 1942, and ten years before they would name my brother Andrew in 1955. These first names, of course, cannot be explained genealogically, but were byproducts of another history. Stuart and Andrew are perfectly British. Phyllis is a name that appears in the ancient Latin poetry of Virgil and Horace and derives from the ancient Greek for foliage, but also was fancied by the Brits and took root there in the nineteenth century.

Rather than spend time going through the naming of the three of us, I will focus on Stuart which, combined with Ewen, suggests a “dour Scotsman.” (George Mosse, one of my history professors at the University of Wisconsin had used this phrase to describe his supposition about my roots and me until he learned differently.) In the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, from which I spring, my name is not Stuart. I have a Hebrew name, Shimon, which was the name of my paternal grandfather who died not long before I was born. I was named for him. Among Ashkenazis, naming children after the recently deceased—most often a grandparent—is the custom, to carry souls forward from generation to generation.

In America, where he arrived early in the twentieth century, my grandfather Shimon Ewen was known, formally, as Simon, though everyone called him Sam. Sam Ewen. That should have been my name. But in 1945, at least for my parents, that was out of the question. Any emphasis of a Jewish background, particularly when offered the lifeline of a surname that suggested an Anglo-Saxon background, was like handing a child off to the Nazis and their death camps, to the mass killing of Jews and other designated undesirables that was accelerating at the moment of my conception and surrounded me during most of my days in my mother’s uterus. No, I would not become fuel for anyone’s ovens. I don’t know whether this was in my parents’ conscious minds at the time, but thoughts like these haunted the existence of millions and millions among my parents’ generation,

and not only Jews. In a world of darkness and organized murder, what can be done to protect a child?

So I became Stuart, not Sam. Sam Ewen would reappear in the person of my second son. Shimon was never used. Even though my parents always thought of themselves as Jews, and always told us that we were Jews, at least in terms of our cultural heredity, being a Jew for us was like being a member of a group that cared for the downtrodden and had a universalist love of humankind. We were the spiritual landsmen of Albert Einstein, a Jewish socialist whose philosophical reveries refused to be inhibited by the ghetto wall. Jews, as I understood us, identified particularly with those members of the human community who suffered prejudice and brutality because of who they were. (This belief has become more and more marginalized, engulfed by a compulsive, at times virulent, Jewish nationalism—particularly in the aftermath the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six Day War) For me, however, subjugated people were, according to my mother's milk, our historical brothers and sisters. Such a notion of a hereditary bond linking us to others was not uncommon among a large number secular American Jews throughout much of the twentieth century.

But alongside of this I kept being Stuart, a name I wore uncomfortably for many years, but I don't know why. It never felt like my name. From early on, other Jews often saw me as a non-Jew. In the brief time I attended Hebrew School, not my idea, I had a teacher who repeatedly referred to me as "McEwen," a clear message that I didn't belong among those whose names were more revealingly Jewish.

This apparent distinction between me and other Jews was not simply about my name. There was something else that has repeatedly left my identity open to question among a number of people I have encountered. One of the earliest examples of this is a still vivid memory from my early childhood in Elmhurst, Queens. In 1948, at the age of three, I remember going outside with my mother in a navy blue coat with brass buttons, and a matching peaked cap. There on Elmhurst Avenue, where we then lived, I would stand on the sidewalk and play at directing traffic,

imitating a local policeman who stood daily on the street doing the real thing. Aware of my admiration of him, the cop took a shine to me, though I don't think he knew my name, and always greeted me as his "Little Irishman." He saw my dark hair, my blue eyes, and my fair skin with freckles, and intuitively included me among his tribe.



The Little Irishman, 1948.

(Truth be told, I have no idea whether he was Irish, though in those days the New York police department was overwhelmingly comprised of men of Irish descent.) Even before I knew anything about being a Jew, or being anything in particular, when I asked my mother about this she explained to me that I looked Irish, detailing aspects of my physiognomy that might lead one to this conclusion. Even as a toddler, then, my indefinite facial anatomy was becoming vaguely evident to me. Though my family moved from Elmhurst when I was five, this memento of early childhood remains in my conscious life.

Moving forward, or back, to the “McEwen” period of my adolescence, I should add that the apparent non-Jewish extraction of my name didn’t really concern me that much. I disliked going to Hebrew School—and was an incurable troublemaker—so my teacher’s taunts, the significance of which I didn’t even understand, rolled off my back. I knew that I was a Jew and as long as Jewish girls accepted me as Jewish, I was fine. (In the long run I stopped caring about whether the girls and, later, women who were interested in me were Jewish. But as a kid growing up in a largely Jewish community on Long Island, it mattered.) I need to add that while the roots and assumptions that stood behind my naming process were tinged with anti-Semitism, or concerns about anti-Semitism, the ancient hatred of Jews was not an immediate part of my growing up experience, nor was it the experience of my Jewish friends, most of whom were not as linguistically protected by assumptions about my nominally Scottish ancestry. My name, in spite of its historical roots and the conditions that spawned it, never afforded me any conscious sense of protection from the forces of evil.

At the age of eighteen, shortly after graduating high school, I had an experience that enlightened and chilled me to previously unidentified realities about being Jewish and being myself. It was the summer of 1963 and, prior to attending college at the University of Wisconsin, a friend of mine and I went on a trip, travelling cheaply around Europe. His name was Mark Rabinowitz.

Our first stop was London, and I had booked the two of us a room in a pension in the Tavistock Square neighborhood of the city. We arrived at the inexpensive little hotel in the late afternoon, dropped off our passports with the woman at the desk of the establishment, and brought our things up to a small, somewhat shabby room on an upper floor. After grabbing a quick dinner nearby, we returned to our room and, exhausted from our trip, went to sleep.

Early the next morning we got up and went off into the city for a day of sightseeing. I have no memory of what we saw and I can’t right now locate the diary of the

trip that I kept that summer. What I do remember, something that was burned deep into my memory, and struck me like a knife in my heart, was what happened when we returned to the pension after our day of wonders.

Walking into the small hotel, I saw that our luggage (two rucksacks) had been taken from our room and stood in the hallway next to the reception desk. I asked the concierge what was going on? She pulled me aside and whispered into my ear, “We don’t take in Jews here.” My name had gained her confidence. Mark’s had elicited her disgust. She spoke to me as if I were one of her, and Mark was one of them, an odious them. I immediately disabused her of this assumption, saying that we were both Jews.

We were dumbfounded. I don’t know what the right word for it was. It was like someone informing us that, after a lifetime of assuming ourselves to be human, we learned, to our surprise, that we were vermin. Alone in a strange city, 18 years of age, we were also oblivious about how to deal with this unexpected and cosmological assault. Out of some sense of desperation, I turned to the woman. “How can you do this? What are we supposed to do?” In a matter-of-fact way she told us that there was a Hillel House, a Jewish social center, a few blocks away. She told us where we would find it.

I had never been to a Hillel House before. I don’t think I’ve been to one since. But on that day in June of 1963 Mark and I, both in shock, carried our luggage down the streets, looking for the spot to which we had been banished. Shortly we were there, standing in front of a large brick home with a wooden door. Walking up the path, we knocked. After a short time, a large man, perhaps in his sixties answered the door. My memory is that he had steel rimmed glasses wore a tweed blazer, a plaid vest and neatly creased slacks. More clearly in my mind, even today, was his refined British accent and kindly reserved manner. Most clear was the fact that I’d never met a Jew who looked or, more importantly, spoke as he did.

“First we define and then we see,” wrote Walter Lippmann many years ago, and for me this was not a recognizable member of the tribe I sprang from but, rather, my mental picture of a cultured English gentleman. In other words, a WASP. My vision of “elderly” Jews—I was only eighteen at the time—had been shaped by the elder generation of my family, Eastern European immigrants in America who spoke with Yiddish accents. While my parents had been cleansed of such markers in New York public schools, where “standard English” was required of all immigrant children of their generation, I had never—until that moment on a street near Tavistock Square—associated a British accent with anyone who bore any racial connection with me.

Nonetheless, after being invited into the warm and comfortable interior, and being introduced to several other apparently genteel English gentlemen and women who were spending time together at the Hillel House, it occurred to both of us that these people might, in fact, be Jews. Immediately, Mark and I unfolded our tale of what had happened at the pension, and our hosts listened with sympathy and interest.

We repeated the story several times in great detail, each time as if it was a first telling. Perhaps this was because we thought our listeners wouldn’t believe us, but more probably a reflex response to the unacknowledged trauma that had attacked our inner membranes. Once we were done for the fourth or fifth time, the man who had first greeted us at the door began to speak.

“This is a problem here,” he said. “There is a long history of anti-Semitism in Great Britain, an embedded class-bound society where human inequality is a deeply rooted way of life.” Then he, and the others, unfolded for us—for the first time in my case—an ancient injustice that I had heard a great deal about, but which I had not, until then, experienced.

In the cradle of post-World II New York where I grew up, where Jews abounded, such humiliations were hard to find but, upon reflection, I also think I must have

been watchfully protected from those that might come my way. I knew about anti-Semitism, but it was a folklore; a fact but not an occurrence. My Hebrew School teacher had mocked me as “McEwen,” a non-Jew, because of my name (or other as yet undiscovered aspects of my being) but being a Jew had never been a problem until that June day in 1963.

Not that I was in a total daze. I was, relative to most of my peers, a socially aware teenager. I, and a small, uncharacteristically diverse coterie of students, had—with the spiritual encouragement of Martin Luther King and others in the American South—engaged in early Civil Rights activities even in high school. But, in truth, my awareness was more a result of lessons I had been taught from early childhood. These came primarily from my mother who was a staunchly moral woman with socialistic sentiments. They were about the poisons of injustice and how it was the born duty of all Jews to fight unfairness wherever we encountered it, and to identify with the causes of all oppressed people, not just Jews. In fact, particularly in the safe world that she and others desperately tried to construct for us, Jews were not the primary targets of race hatred. With Hitler dead and apparently no more Nazis in the world, that problem had—at least for now—subsided.

The effect of that day in a Hillel House in London, on me, was not transitory. It did not turn me into a Zionist, or into a person who saw himself as a victim, but it helped to give substance to my sense of myself as a citizen of the world. I was now a person whose identification with the injuries of injustice had been, in a brief encounter, substantiated in the course of human events. The people who took us in at the Hillel House, whatever their intentions, had affirmed in me a sense of my common humanity, and a sense of connection to both the pleasures and perils that this condition brings. By being so unrecognizably Jewish, so British and so genteel, they—combined with our recent eviction from our hotel room—had instructed me as to the risky illusions of human difference, the spectral objectivity of fixed categories.

I have only recently revisited the details of that day and, as I did, other moments from other pasts came to mind. After I finished my freshman year at the University of Wisconsin, I withdrew from student life to become an organizer—first as a volunteer, then as a staff member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—in Mississippi. While this period of my life cannot be spiritually partitioned from matters already discussed, I won't write about them here, perhaps some other time. I must add, however, that my life in Mississippi had an effect that is still with me, far more profound than the incident in London, and further rooted my convictions in the ground of lived experience.

After an eight-month interlude working in the Deep South, I returned to Wisconsin to continue my studies—increasingly interested in the lessons of history—and, as it turned out, to become increasingly engaged in a mix of passion, awareness and activism. In the midst of this return, I met Liz.

I had known of Liz from afar since I was about thirteen. Though she was two years ahead of me, we had gone to the same junior high and high school. From the first time I saw her I was struck by a sense of her intelligence, spirited irreverence and her extraordinary and natural beauty. In a school where pretension was cultivated to the level of an art, she was unaffected. She was a *wild girl*. Upon graduation I knew she had gone to attend the University Wisconsin and, or so I had heard, had gotten married to an offspring of a prominent Communist family.

When I arrived there in 1963, I learned this was true. She was a married woman, still striking, and she—more than her husband—had emerged as a leading figure in the political left, which at Wisconsin was a population of considerable influence. Though I was immediately drawn to that active and stimulating campus subculture, attending socialist club meetings, reading forbidden texts, and participating in local civil rights demonstrations, my connection with Liz remained distant. She was an acquaintance but we had no significant connection.

When I returned to the university in 1965, she was still married, still very attractive and politically engaged. But something was different. I had somehow caught her

eye. Although she had never previously showed any knowledge of me one way or the other, Liz suddenly exhibited a considerable interest. I didn't know if it was politics or what but her attention, whether she was married or not, pleased me considerably.

In early 1965 I returned South, on what ended up being a hapless bus ride to join marchers in Selma, Alabama. Before arriving we were directed to Washington, DC, where people were being sent as the numbers trying to enter Selma were getting out of hand. Following this, when the bus returned to Madison following that unlucky pilgrimage, Liz was there waiting and, when she saw me step down from the bus, she came up and kissed me. It was a deep kiss.

Shortly after, following the beginning of United States bombing of North Vietnam, I ran into Liz at an all night vigil at the Wisconsin Capitol Building in Madison. I came with another woman, her name was Nancy, but spent the entire time walking circles with Liz and a friend named Pallo—presently a major figure in the ANC in South Africa—hugging, crafting political lyrics to rock and roll tunes, trying to keep warm on a frigid Midwestern night. For me, I must apologize, Nancy had disappeared, and Liz had entered my life.

My reason for telling this story is that it, too, related to issues of mistaken identity, preconceptions of who I am and who people are. Liz and I spent more and more time together, engaged in passionate conversations about the world, and I learned then that an assumption I held about her—that she was probably Jewish—was not correct. Since we had gone to the same junior high and high schools, where there was a large percentage of Jewish students, and since she had been a “popular” girl there, I figured that this was her background as well.

As we talked, and got to know each other first in late night rendezvous, then naked in bed, I found out that her parents came from divergent backgrounds. Her father was proudly “American,” coming from a Protestant English background, though his thinking was anarchistic and ecumenical. Liz's mother was the child of

Italian immigrants from Bari, at the heel of the boot. Both maternal grandparents were born Catholics, though her grandfather bolted from the Church after an acrimonious moral dispute with a priest.

Though Liz was much closer to her father than her mother, she always described herself as Italian. These roots were very important to the identity she wanted to project. Meanwhile Roger, her father—who was her most influential mentor—would never have acknowledged any relation to Italians. Though Liz’s mother, Frances, had been a great beauty and had obviously smitten the young Roger, he routinely bandied anti-Italian epithets around the dining room table. He also had great ambivalence towards Jews who, like Italians but unlike himself, didn’t fully belong here. We were guests whose behavior he watched with a wary eye.

That said Liz and my relationship grew into an intense love affair, assisted by the fact that her marriage turned out to have been in a state of disintegration for some time. Both she and her husband had been looking for, and finding, ways out. For her, I was the final way out.

Liz’s father’s response to me was fascinating. He knew that I was Jewish and, in spite of what I just said, he had good working relations with many Jews, but as I moved in the direction of becoming his darling Lizzie’s new husband, his descriptions of me to her, to me, and to others, bypassed my ethnic roots. Because of my work as a Civil Rights organizer, he saw me as a brave hero of democracy, a man of courage more than I deserved. But there was something else. There was something about my face, my physiognomy that provided him with a way of describing me that allowed him to avoid the fact that—among other things—I was a Jew. He saw my features as cultivated and elegant in ways he could relate to and often characterized me as looking like European royalty, a prince. This theme was repeated again and again during the early years of Liz and my marriage.

On my family’s side, Liz’s being Italian yielded certain benefits. My maternal grandmother, Anna Berson—an immigrant from Riga in Latvia—had come over

on a boat filled with Jews and Italians. These groups permeated her experience in the Bronx, part of an Italo-Jewish culture that emerged in New York during the great migrations from Eastern Europe and the *mezzogiorno* of Italy between 1890 and 1920. Her next-door neighbors were Italian immigrants. While Anna, a secular Jew and a socialist, was very aware of distinctions between *us* and *them*—and routinely used Yiddish words like *goy* and *shwartze* to describe people unlike herself—to her, Liz was not a *goy* or a *shiksa*. To Anna, and to my mother Scotty, Liz was one of us. Liz’s relationship with both of them, and theirs to her, was extremely loving to the end.

For my father, Sol, whose intensely tribal Jewish upbringing never fully escaped him, things were different. He never warmed to Liz and, particularly in his later years, often accused me of being a “non-Jew,” I expect, in part, because I had married her. Liz never warmed to Sol either. She disliked him intensely. His offensive and psychologically numb demeanor towards her, which continued into the last days of his life, well earned this enmity, though she never exhibited it directly to him.

To be fair, Roger’s princely imagination of me began to fade in his latter years. As a number of personal family tragedies mounted, he became increasingly bitter about the world and his once fiercely democratic self-description as an “American” began to take on racist tones. Despite his early embrace of the Civil Rights movement, negative comments about black people began to enter his monologues and he became increasingly and vocally anti-Semitic. He derisively described Judaism as a relic, a fossil religion that was caught in an irrelevant past. On one occasion, when I spoke critically about American policies under Ronald Reagan, he told me to “go back to the *shtetl*,” an old world term for Jewish towns in Poland.

But the bitterness that encroached on his spirit is less significant to me than his voice in happier times, and his earlier descriptions of my physical presence as akin to that of the nobility of Christian Europe. The issue of my face, and its perceived

insinuations, is something that I've encountered elsewhere on numerous occasions.

One of the most memorable occurrences as regards the apparent ambiguities of my face took place in the 1980s, shortly after I was appointed to the faculty of The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the home of all of CUNY's doctoral programs. The episode involved a meeting I had with Harold Proshansky, a founder of the field of Environmental Psychology, who was then president of the Graduate Center. As I recall, the meeting took place in 1988.

The precise agenda for our conference escapes me, but I do know that it was the first time that Harold Proshansky and I had ever met and spoken at length. As our meeting drew to a close, and business was taken care of, we stood up in preparation for my departure. Suddenly he turned to me and he said, "Ewen. Are you related to Frederic Ewen?" "Yes," I responded, "he was my uncle." (Actually, great-uncle.)

Proshansky had known Fred Ewen from Brooklyn College, where Proshansky had taught before moving to The Graduate Center. Proshansky had arrived as a lecturer in psychology at Brooklyn College in 1952, just as Fred was being forced to resign in the wake of his refusal to testify before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, one of the major instruments of a red scare promoted by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy, among others.

There was no mention of politics that day in 1988, however, only an inquiry into my family lineage. Once I acknowledged the relation, Proshansky began to muse aloud. "You Ewens," he began. "You're just like Fred. Those fine features. None of you look Jewish." This was coming from a man who believed that he did look Jewish and happened to be Jewish. To him he was Jewish in name and face; we were Jewish in neither. His spoken reverie didn't come with any tinge of resentment as far as I could tell, or any political hostility to either my uncle or me. It was said as a simple observation. There are Jews with thicker more prominent features

that, to his mind, looked like Jews. And then there were those whose faces escaped the filter of instant categorization, or left categorization off of the table of initial encounters.

It was as if I weren't there. I and my family, or those of us he knew, had become a subject in the ongoing discourse about what makes someone something, what constitutes a Jew, or anyone for that matter. I said nothing. I thanked him for his time and left, but the incident remained in my mind.

More recently, something momentarily surfaced in the media circus that chronicles American politics reminded me of that day. A new book had come out, *Game Change*, which describes events that led to the first election of President Barack Obama and was crammed with allegedly inside gossip about many of the players in that campaign season. Among all other stories that were covered by journalists and commentators, one occupied their attention for the astoundingly extended duration of two or three days. In the book it was reported that Harry Reid of Nevada, the Senate Majority Leader who had encouraged the freshman Senator Obama to run, and championed his candidacy, had made a comment about Obama's electability.

According to the book's authors, John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, Reid was "wowed by Obama's oratorical gifts and believed that the country was ready to embrace a black presidential candidate, especially one such as Obama—a 'light-skinned' African American 'with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one,' as he later put it privately." [36]

For days I was astonished by the attempts of media pundits to turn this statement into a controversial issue. Right-wingers argued that it revealed the inherent racism of Senator Reid, in spite of his legislative record, and liberals spoke about how unfortunate it was that Reid had chosen to speak the way he had. Amid the pseudo-environment that was being whipped up, Reid publicly apologized for the intemperate nature of his statement.

And then my day with Harold Proshansky came to mind. The way even Jews, not to mention non-Jews, harbor a very narrow spectrum of ideas about what it means to be a Jew. Or what it means to be anyone, or anything. Reid had made the mistake of telling an American truth.

I recalled my time as an organizer living in, and protected by, the black neighborhoods of Columbus and Tupelo, Mississippi in the 1960s. There I became black, because only black people could live there. No, that's not right. I became a person among people, because only people who accepted each other as people could live there.

There I was educated into the invidious lexicon of distinction that permeates the inner life of African-American culture: "good hair" versus "bad hair," "bright skinned" versus "blue black," and I encountered the varieties of appearance and self-presentation that ran through the black American south, as they do through any group that is supposedly easily identifiable. They provide a visual foundation for unspoken pecking orders. How far away is this from President Proshansky's remarkable soliloquy on who can most rightly lay claim to being a Jew?

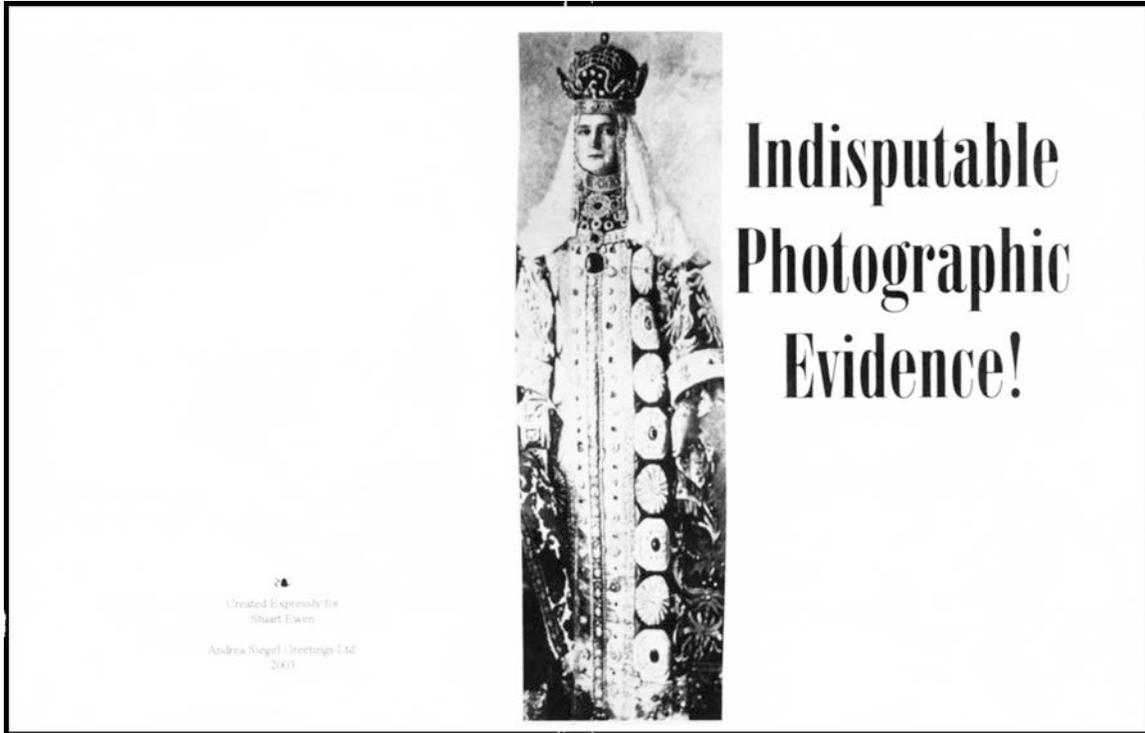
No wonder that as media mouths wagged over Reid's reported comments, Obama quickly responded that it was no big thing. It was no big thing. Reid, like Proshansky, like my Hebrew school teacher, like Roger and Anna and Sol, and like the heartless concierge in the pension in London all participated in a world where people hold on to what Lippmann called a "universe of fixed impressions," and anything that suggests that variety is more important than type is a threat to the foundations of that universe.

As an ambiguous Jew, to myself and others, assumptions about my name and my face continue to follow me. The hint of European royalty remains a comment I encounter.

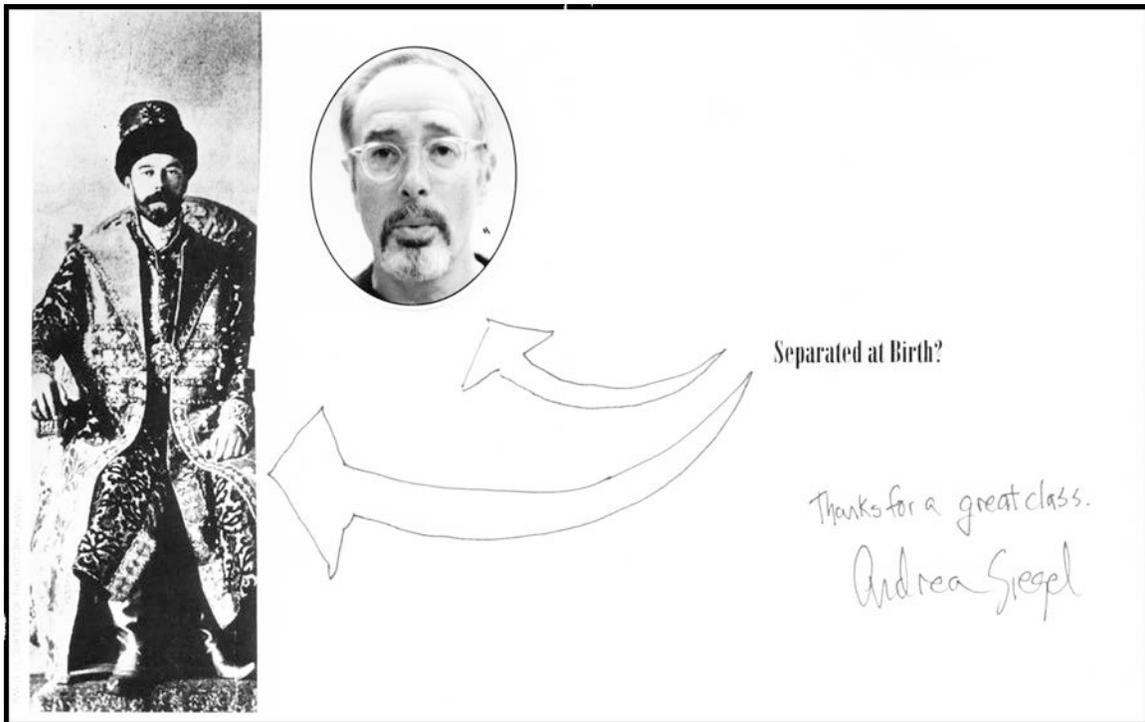
One vivid example of this arrived in my mailbox in a not-so-distant past. It happened in 2003. Having participated in a seminar of mine, Andrea Siegel—who would become my doctoral advisee at The Graduate Center—sent me a thank you note for the course.

The seminar had explored, among other things, the rise of photography as an index of truth in the contemporary world, and the hand-made greeting card she sent me (see below for a pictures of the outer and inner elements of the card) was a commentary on this phenomenon, comparing my face with that of Czar Nicholas Romanov the Second of Russia, who had been overthrown and, along with his family, subsequently executed by the Bolsheviks in an attempt to bring to an end to the royal bloodline forever.

Looking at the card and the definite physical resemblance between my face and that of a Czar whose regime had promoted the organized killing of Jews who had settled in the Pale, for the first time I saw a bit of what people had repeatedly said to me in regard to my countenance. It was, for me, an uncanny encounter with the optics of my identity and a cause for greater reflection.



Outer back and front of the card.



The inside of the card, opened up.

One last story. It occurred during a period when some of the life events and experiences addressed in this memoir had, though not consciously, emerged as a subject of my ongoing scholarly inquiries. I, collaborating with my wife and occasional co-author, Liz Ewen, was working on a broad history of stereotyping as a particular obsession in the emergence of modern European and American societies. The rise of empire, slavery and an increasingly mobile world all figured in our work. This eventually led to the 2006 publication of a book, *Typecasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality*. The book addressed a number of interwoven social and cultural developments which have contributed to the “repertory of fixed impressions” (as Lippmann defined it) that encourage people to define the world before seeing it, to observe their environment and its occupants through preset filters which buttress their particular “position” in society, their snug sense of identity, often at the expense of others.

As has been the case over my years of writing history, in 2002 I began teaching an undergraduate course built around the broad subject of my current research. For me, this has been an invaluable opportunity to test drive my ideas with students—rather than professional academics—who could more ably help me discover whether my ideas and growing knowledge translated well into a critical but accessible vernacular. I prefer to be understood.

I believe it was the second time I offered the course when an interesting interchange with a student occurred. The day was St. Patrick’s Day and the streets around Hunter College, which is located two blocks from the parade route, were bustling with people in green. As I entered the classroom, and was putting my notes in order, a very bright student named Jay Gregg asked me aloud whether I was Irish. For a brief moment Elmhurst Avenue may flashed before my eyes, but my response to him and to the class of thirty-five was, “I am everything. And I am nothing.” I had never said it before, but my unexpected—even to me—response was doubtless the child of an acutely embedded reflex.

On a mundane level, it was consistent with the content of the course, the notion that psychically implanted or assigned notions of identity are often fictions created by a world that insists upon them. But my words that spurted out that day came from someplace deeper in my soul.

Some time back I posted a brief comment on my facebook page about this essay I am writing, and which you are now reading, describing it as “an exploration of my sense of identity in terms of being a Jew and in terms of being a human being.” Almost immediately I received a posted response from a young woman who works in my department office at Hunter College whom I’ve known fairly well for a number of years. “I had no idea you were Jewish, Prof. Ewen,” were her precise words. The haziness surrounding my ethnic identity, it appears, is poking me even as I am writing this little memoir.

I have never denied being a Jew, though I would never wear a T-shirt saying “Kiss me, I’m Jewish.” In discussions with people, students and others, I have often talked about being a Jew and what that has meant, and not meant, to me. But at the same time, that word has never sufficed to explain to me who and what I am. It is a descriptor that falls far from the mark of how I understand and live with myself.

Part of this has to do with the evolution of the Ewen family from my generation forward. First, I have spent more than two-thirds of my life living with a woman who when pressed defines herself as Italian, but for whom ethnicity and religious background are relatively insignificant aspects of her identity. Other parts of her being, most notably a congenital physical disability, have had a much more powerful impact on how she sees herself, and how she assumes—rightly or wrongly—other people see her. She is also a sophisticated intellectual whose teaching, research and writing have repeatedly traversed ethnic boundaries. Her capacity to empathize with people from many different backgrounds and conditions stands at the essence of her being. Like me, she teaches at an institution that, by any standard, is remarkably diverse in terms of its student body—many of whom are immi-

grants or children of immigrants from around the world—and for both of us this has provided a remarkable opportunity to imagine what a heterogeneous, mutually respectful human community might look like.

Neither of our children, Paul and Sam, self-identifies himself as a Jew. And technically they aren't, since according to Talmudic tradition this category travels through the mother line. They are both aware that their family background includes a mix of Jews, Catholics, Protestants and iconoclasts, people whose recent ancestry came from Italy, England and Eastern Europe. Both of them refer to themselves as “mutts.”

Neither of my siblings married Jews—a fact that may, for some, indicate a stain on our upbringing, and none of their children identify themselves as Jews. Since the time of my childhood, as my wider family has evolved, the extended Ewens, or hyphenated-Ewens, now include people of Japanese, Mexican Indian (Purepecha), German, Norwegian, English, Chinese, Irish (Finally!) and unknown or indeterminate ethnic backgrounds. But this expanding list of categories kind of misses the point of this loosely woven cloth of stories. Like more and more people, *we are everything and we are nothing*.

In the face of this identity crisis, this crumbling of once-fixed tribal designations, readers' responses are unpredictable. Given the widespread resurgence of a desire to connect or reconnect to a particular category of being—ethnic, sexual, and so forth—many may read this memoir as marking the footprints of irrevocable loss and dissolution, signaling a grave collapse of meaning, a dire threat. Among Jews, there are some who would go so far as to say, “Hitler tried to wipe us out, but what Hitler didn't accomplish, intermarriage might.” These were the precise words of one man quoted in the *Hartford Courant*, in reaction to his two daughters' impending marriages to non-Jewish men. (April 5, 2008) To people with such a view, my and my family's history is little more than a poisoning of the sacred bloodline, a perspective ironically close to that of Hitler and Goebbels, who saw intermarriage

as something that was polluting the purity of the Aryan race. Yet the thought that Jews who intermarry are “finishing Hitler’s work” continues to be uttered.

Those with missionary inclinations may see some possibility of redemption, prescribing an immersive journey into my genealogical past, a golden opportunity to recover and mend the torn fabric of my existence. Such journeys have become increasingly common in the United States and elsewhere over the past fifty years, though I have severe reservations about the consequences of such self-rediscoveries here and globally. Still others may hesitate to pass judgment, seeing something of themselves—whether Jewish or not—in the stories I’ve pulled together in the preceding pages.

For me, however, the enduring riddle of my name and my face, and the experiences it has afforded me, has provided useful and edifying instruction on what it is to be a person, and has—over a lifetime—highlighted the choices that each of us faces as we wander among the assorted multitude of human travelers, of which each of us is a portion. Beyond my family’s particular history, other occurrences—some of them recounted here—have offered me a close look at the alternative ways of seeing that each of us confronts when choosing how we will identify ourselves in this dark and untidy world. My studies as an historian over a period of four decades have only added to my perspective on this question. And on this I am not ambivalent.

Being a Jew undoubtedly had an impact on me, more in terms of values than religious doctrine. I have never been a particular fan of monotheism—the One God theory—or of explanations of any kind that reduce causation to a single defining force. This is how I think about spiritual matters, and it also applies when thinking about the nature of everyday life. Truth is mischievous, a goal more than an outcome, and it is infused by a multitude of thorny factors. While some crave singular explanations, to imagine the form of God, or to describe the molecular underpinnings that, they declare, explain the essence of human life, my own sensibility rejects what Joseph Wood Krutch once termed “the phantom of certitude.”

In spite of these caveats, there are things about my experience as a Jew that I carry around with me, though not on my sleeve. The first of these is the importance of ethics. This is not to say that Jews are intrinsically ethical. As in any group, many are not. But as a kid, hearing about what it meant to be a Jew, something I was told about again and again was something called “Jewish Ethics.” I heard about it in the meager formal religious education I received, but more importantly it was something that Jews in those days couldn’t stop talking about. While monotheism was about God, and I couldn’t wrap my brain around why it was so important that there was one God and that the “Lord is One,” the persistent reference to ethics appealed to me as an admirable approach to the secular world. It was about doing no harm, but it was also an activist notion, one that taught that life is a precious gift and that it should be driven by a sense of purpose. It should be dedicated to being engaged with the well being of other people, regardless of their origins, and fighting to undo the rules of an unjust world. In truth this is not a uniquely Jewish code. Many Jews—along with many others—violate it on a habitual, sometimes self-righteous, basis. But as a child I kept hearing about “Jewish Ethics” and I came to think, at least for a while, that Jews brought a certain sense of responsibility into the world, and that that sense of responsibility was linked to the oppression that had followed the lives of Jewish people for millennia.

It was only much later, as a young adult, that I learned that this extended history of injustice and suffering could provide a rationale for wreaking injustice and suffering upon the lives of others. So I guess “Jewish Ethics” is a somewhat anachronistic brand name I associate with simple human decency, and the extent to which it has to do with being a Jew depends on what kind of a Jew or, more precisely, what kind of person you are.

In terms of rituals, most of the endless parade of Jewish holidays means little to me. While I am an historian, and have many tools for knowing, I have never sought to know what the majority of these days are about. There are two exceptions, though for me their connection with Judaism is increasingly circumstantial. One is Chanukah, the festival of lights celebrating a legendary occurrence when a

one-day supply of lamp oil burned for eight days. In commemoration, many Jews light candles for each day, beginning with one and ending with eight plus another candle to do the lighting in a menorah, a candleholder designed specifically for the holiday. Hebrew prayers are sung during the lighting. They are prayers thanking God, but for me they are familiar music, tunes that, like earworms, are implanted in the inner recesses of my mind. I light candles and sing each year when the holiday comes. In the last years of my father's life, I would call him on the phone and we would sing together while each of us lit the candles. It was a rare moment to bond, the prodigal "non-Jew" son and the father who was dreaming more and more about the Kabbalah. My father died in 2004, but in subsequent years this telephonic tradition has carried on. Now I am the father, and the songs are sung with my son, Paul, my daughter-in-law Gretel and my grandson, Henry, who—though none of them is Jewish—light their lights in Brooklyn.

But the main thing for me is the candles and the small iridescent blaze they transmit. In that time of year, usually December, the dark comes early and cold is setting in and people of all backgrounds, particularly in cold regions, tend to use light to add warmth to a month that, in the absence of its ancient festivities, would undoubtedly be less joyous. I light the candles, I sing the songs, and the room is bathed in a fiery glow. Liz looks on, singing along, enjoying the moment as I do. The story that occasioned this rite receives no attention. No gifts are given. No other Chanukah rituals or feasts, those that many Jews partake in, take place. It is a simple and beautiful time to celebrate fire, a beloved and dangerous mother of our human existence. While I happen to be a Jew, it is not about being a Jew. It is about a person seeking warmth and a radiance. If anything, it is a primeval longing that is being served, touched by a circumstance of ethnicity.

Over the years, the only other Jewish ritual that has occupied my attention is Passover, a tableside service that commemorates the legendary—some would argue mythical—escape of Jewish slaves out of bondage in Egypt. My memories of Passovers past go back to early childhood. In old and faded photographs, brown with age, I also saw past generations of Ewens at the Passover table. In these pictures,

the men wore dark coats and broad brimmed hats or *yarmulkes*, skullcaps. The women, sitting or standing separately from the men, caring for the children, wore long skirts and shirtwaist blouses. Among the women in one of these photographs was a young Mollie Barach Ewen, my father's mother, standing proudly beside my very young father. She was very beautiful with a distinctly Asian visage. (While no one can confirm it, family lore was that her high cheekbones and narrow eyes derived from Tater or Mongol ancestry.) She, like the others in the picture, were Orthodox Jews conducting their Seder (Passover service feast) in Hebrew, carrying on informally in Galitziana Yiddish, a tongue particular to people coming from the southeastern region of Eastern Europe. The men in the picture were writers and intellectuals, but Mollie held to an archaic sort of Judaism, which included dark magic.

By the time my immediate family conducted the Passover Seder, with none of the older generation included, the ritual had become perfunctory. Leading the proceedings, my father would rush his way through the Haggadah—the book of prayers, stories, explanations and questions that guides the traditional pre- and post-dinner Pesach service—reading at a barely intelligible clip and skipping a large numbers of pages.

Let's get it over with was his attitude and my sister and I, and later my brother who is ten years younger than me, were perfectly happy to make it to the food. My mother, who came from a secular background, seemed fine with this, dutifully lighting the candles and reading a prayer in praise of their glistening fire as the service began.

The only pleasant part of the ritual for me was the children's search for the afikoman—a piece of matzo hidden somewhere in the home—which took place at the end of the meal, after dessert. This was a treasure hunt game and whichever of us found the prize all of us were given a small amount of money as a reward for our efforts. As the years went on, my father's conduct of the service grew shorter and

shorter and the food, more and more, took center stage. Those parts of the service that persisted invariably involved eating certain ritual dishes.

When I left home at the age of eighteen, Seders evaporated from my life for a time. When they returned, the significance of our Passover had become less and less Jewish, more and more a festival of the oppressed. By the time Liz and I had our children, in 1966 and 1969, the number of Jews at the table began to dwindle and the number of non-Jews at the table began to grow. At last count, I was the only one left.

Over time, these demographic changes—in tandem with my family’s sensibility—left a profound mark on the nature of the celebration itself. By 1991, a profound shift had taken place. Some of it had to do with my father’s declining health. In the years after heart bypass surgery, and in true patriarchal tradition, he relinquished the role of Seder leader to me, the eldest son.

We continued to hold Seder at my parents’ home on Long Island until the mid-1990s, when my mother found preparation of the meal too arduous, when the feast was moved to my apartment in Manhattan. But even before this, as I assumed leadership of the proceedings, I made the decision to produce a new text to read at the table. I entitled it “The All People’s New Millennium Passover Haggadah,” and it had the look and feel of a *zine*, an underground publication. There were a few elements of the traditional service left, but they were interwoven with ideas, texts and images that drew from a wide range of sources, all devoted to the principle of human freedom and equality, few bearing any direct relation to Judaism.

Words from Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “Declaration of Sentiments,” issued at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention for women’s rights shared space with a communitarian reinterpretation of the Bible’s story of creation lifted from Gerard Winstanley’s “True Levellers’ Standard Advanced,” a radical democratic pamphlet from the English Revolution of the 1640s. Here repressive landowners’ power, rather

than poverty, was the mark of original sin. W. E. B. DuBois' vivid description of the emancipation from slavery in the United States, taken from his masterwork, *Black Reconstruction*, described a collective jubilation that filled the hearts of former bondsmen at the moment of freedom. Thomas Paine's rally cry for revolution, from *Common Sense*, was also there, as were the universalist ideas of some secular Jews, including Freud and Marx. The words of Jesus Christ, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth," from the Sermon on the Mount, also appear, as do those of Martin Luther King.

Underground commix artists Robert Crumb's "Keep on Truckin'" and Bill Griffith's "Zippy the Pinhead" characters became illustrations for the relatively short ceremony, and the words "Let the Wild Rumpus Start," from Maurice Sendak's children's classic, *Where the Wild Things Are*, served as an impertinent conclusion, a dividing line between the service and the beginning of a non-Kosher meal. This was an internal family document, and not intended for publication, so copyrights were neither requested nor granted. Perhaps this, too, was an unconscious gesture toward the principle of freedom, though I actually just made that up.



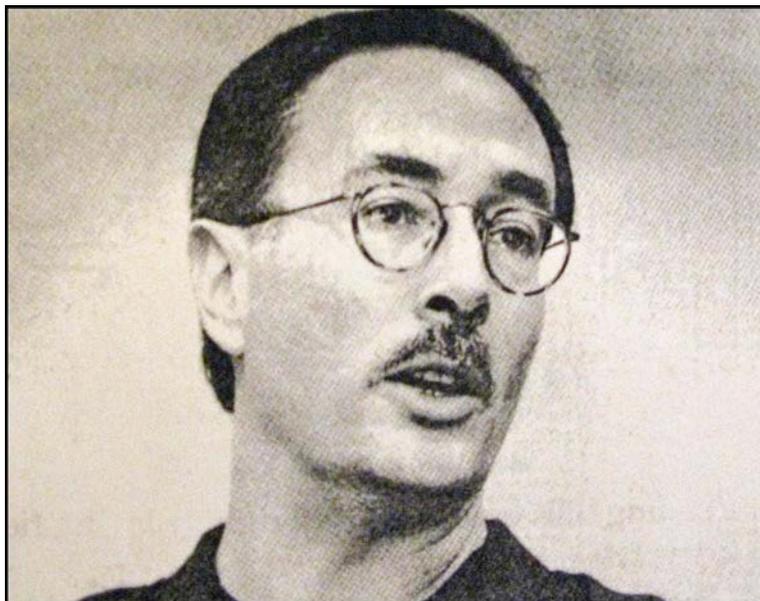
Cover of the 2005 edition, modeled after the *New York Post*, with text borrowed from the "Negro spiritual," *O Mary Don't You Weep*, a song from before the Civil War whose influence has been widespread. Its lyrics gave James Baldwin a title for his important 1963 book on race in America, *The Fire Next Time*.

Since 1991, the text has changed somewhat. Certain passages have been rewritten, new readings added, including one firsthand description of a furtive Passover, celebrated by despairing prisoners in 1945, in the Feihingen death camp in Germany. This was given to me by my late mother, given to her by a friend who—if I remember correctly—had survived the holocaust after seeing his father murdered by the Nazis in a town square. Or it might have come from another friend. None of them are alive to corroborate this memory.

While my family took a vacation from Passover in 2006, which took place shortly after my mother died, they have commenced once again. As I said, now I am the only Jew at the table, a Jew whose name and face and ongoing experiences contin-

ually challenge how I see what it means, and doesn't mean, to be a Jew. What it means to be a person. But given the transfiguration of the holiday among the Ewens and hyphenated-Ewens, who or what I am doesn't really matter. The travelers who gather around the table carry within them a diversity of national, ethnic and social histories. And there we are simply people among people, celebrating freedom. And only people who accept each other as people can sit there. A once religious ritual has been torn from its foundations, but it now resides in the friendly spiritual ground of people who honor past and future emancipations from bondage, rebellions against tyrants and tyrannies.

Being Stuart Ewen or Stuart McEwen—nee Shimon Ehven—has been and continues to be a most interesting trip. I have been a little Irishman. I have been an Anglo. I have been a scion of the Russian royal family. When I spent time in Japan, a dignified architect I met told me that I resembled certain Japanese people deriving from an area in the north. Probably it was the high cheekbones, and light reddish brown skin, inherited from my possibly Mongol grandmother. After an inscrutable photograph of me, lecturing at an arts center in Salina, Kansas, appeared in a newspaper, I was invited to join an organization of black scholars.



This photograph and an accompanying article, published in the *Salina Journal* (Kansas), February 5, 1990, led to an invitation asking me to become a member of an association of black academics.

And, of course, I have been a Jew. Whenever I am asked to identify my ethnicity on an official form, I check “other,” not because it is only recently and tentatively that Jews have been extended the privilege of being seen as “white,” or even “European,” but because I recoil from questions about *who we are* that focus on alleged biological bloodlines of distinction. Historically such categorizations have most often been a prelude to murder and enslavement, not opportunity.

In terms of my name and my face, the mix of physiognomy and nomenclature has tended to leave me ethnically indeterminate, a perceptual shape shifter who is a minor riddle and who, perhaps in part due to this, seems to encourage other people to see something of them within me, something of me within them. As a teacher in an environment that brings together students from all over the world, from all of the inhabited continents, this has often created an unusual level of comfort in my relations with students. They don’t always like me, but it is usually based on who I am, not who I appear to be. I view this as a great benefit; one that has allowed me to come close to people and one has taught me a great deal about the nature or the prospect of being human.

The evolving sense of self-awareness that runs through this memoir continues to percolate in my life. It began with cases of mistaken identity, or experiences where my name and my face didn’t easily corroborate people’s expectations of what it is to be a Jew. Rather than fixating on the issue of Jewish identity, however, my experience has amplified another issue in my life, the question of why such categories are so important to people, and the conviction that—in addition to giving people a comfortable sense of belonging—these habitual ways of seeing ourselves and others constitute a sometimes toxic element in the human condition.

Last semester I taught a seminar in which I voiced this opinion. Among the group of graduate students in the class, there were three who identified themselves as transgendered and part of a self-proclaimed “queer” subculture. When I raised my objections to “identity politics,” they and some other students vociferously chal-

lenged me, indicating that a sense of group identity is a pre-condition for the development of a voice for underrepresented, largely invisible, groups of humans within the arena of public expression. Of course this is right. A sense of group identification also provides people with a vision of the universe in which they—whatever human variation they voluntarily or involuntarily connect to—belong and feel validated. As much as any group of people, Jews have embraced this sensibility and nurtured it as an art form and a complex culture of stories and faith. I cannot dismiss this tendency and desire. As long as people find comfort with other people, and identify with them, they are responding to a foundational human need.

My problem, personally and historically, is that I don't find comfort amid these fixed typologies. They make me very uneasy, to say the least. I am a man, but there is a lot about ideas of masculinity that I find alienating and terrifying. With exceptions, I have found the company of women and gender ambivalent men more inviting and have never found consolation among the proverbial band of brothers.

I am a Jew but find the intolerance and violent self-righteousness that have come to mark the outlook of many Jews and Jewish institutions to be a repudiation of the values which, as a boy, I mistakenly saw as the inheritance of being a Jew. While others may see me as white, I have never felt this way, particularly since I was born on the cusp between a time when Jews were officially defined as people from "The East" or "Orientals" and a time when whiteness was provisionally bestowed upon them. As a person who has engaged in anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics since late adolescence, sometimes on the front lines, I have also seen the idea of whiteness serve as an unspoken license to kill. As an historian who has studied the history of dominant ideas regarding human inequality, I know that the rise of empire and the perpetuation of systematic subjugation has been a constant companion to the utilitarian invention of whiteness and has served to justify unspeakable acts.

On the positive side, many of the most human humans I have known over a lifetime derive from backgrounds far different than mine, and this has helped to make my ethnicity, or any other constricted idea about identity, a less and less important aspect of who I am or who I wish to be. In the end, my name and my face are not the true subjects of this little memoir. They only offered an insight and an opportunity to write about the choices each of us must make as we journey, for only a brief moment, within the human habitat. We can—and we are cynically and routinely encouraged to do so—see and understand ourselves in ever-narrowing corridors that provide us a sense of comfort.

Inevitably, thickening clouds of dread come to surround such narrow visions of belonging. The bloody history of nationalism offers an instructive instance of where this can, and does, lead. Far too often—right now in the world I am writing from—national, ethnic and even sexual pride march in lockstep with acts of carnage and mayhem.

In my life, experience after experience has suggested an alternative choice. I continue to be a Jew on a daily basis but struggle to ignore my distinctions and embrace cohesion as a principle of my existence. I seek to find myself in others and to encourage others to find themselves in me, save those who—in their deeds—have lost all connection with their own humanity.

For me, it has become a reflex and a mantra. As I swim, my being and the oceanic tides become one. *I am everything and I am nothing.*

Stuart Ewen
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