

and was appointed to teach Romance Languages. He taught at Penn concurrently with his graduate studies for four years before he received an appointment at Rutgers University. Given his background, he was naturally drawn to the investigation of the Jewish contribution to Iberian civilization, and after receiving his master's degree and completing his doctoral

*Dr. Martin Cohen's Madrid National Library card.*

courses, he began, with the encouragement of his professor, the distinguished Miguel Romera-Navarro, a thesis on religion in the work of Cervantes, who is known to have been favorably disposed to the descendants of New Christians. In the meantime, with the help of a friend, Rabbi Theodore Gordon z"l, C '33, his family persuaded him to turn to the rabbinate.



Cohen enlisted in the Air Force during the Korean War, and spent much of his spare time preparing for advanced standing at HUC-JIR. "I even took my psychological exams and my psychiatric exam for HUC-JIR while I was in the military."

Cohen met his wife, Dr. Shelby Ruth Cohen (née Brenner), at the University of Pennsylvania's International House in 1948. They were married five years later, just before Cohen's discharge from the Air Force. Dr. Shelby Cohen is Professor of Applied Psychology at Kean University, where she is now in her thirty-eighth year of teaching.

Immediately following the Korean War, Cohen entered the College as a second-year student, and by March of his first year in residence in Cincinnati, Cohen recalls, "I was told that the College wanted me for its faculty." Though he wanted to complete his dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, the administration urged him to obtain his doctorate at HUC-JIR instead, with a concentration in Sephardic Hebrew texts.

Cohen came of age in this niche at HUC-JIR and has been for more than half a century a part of the College

Institute's history. He has known five of its presidents: Julian Morgenstern (President, 1921-1947) was President Emeritus when Cohen arrived at HUC-JIR, and taught a course that Cohen took; Nelson Glueck (1947-1971) was his teacher in the rabbinical program and brought him onto the faculty; Alfred Gottschalk (1971-1995) was his classmate; Sheldon Zimmerman (1996-2002) and David Ellenson (2002-present) were his students.

Cohen is recognized as one of the foremost scholars in his field. He has published five books on Sephardic themes, covering the cultural history and accomplishments of *conversos*, Jews in Spain and Portugal, and the history of the Sephardic experience. His well-known book, *The Martyr: The Story of a Secret Jew and the Mexican Inquisition in the Sixteenth Century* has been printed in two editions and adapted as an opera, *El Conquistador*. He has penned hundreds of articles and reviews, and presented papers throughout the United States and Latin America. He is the only Reform and Ashkenazic Jew ever to serve as President of the American Society of Sephardic Studies, and in



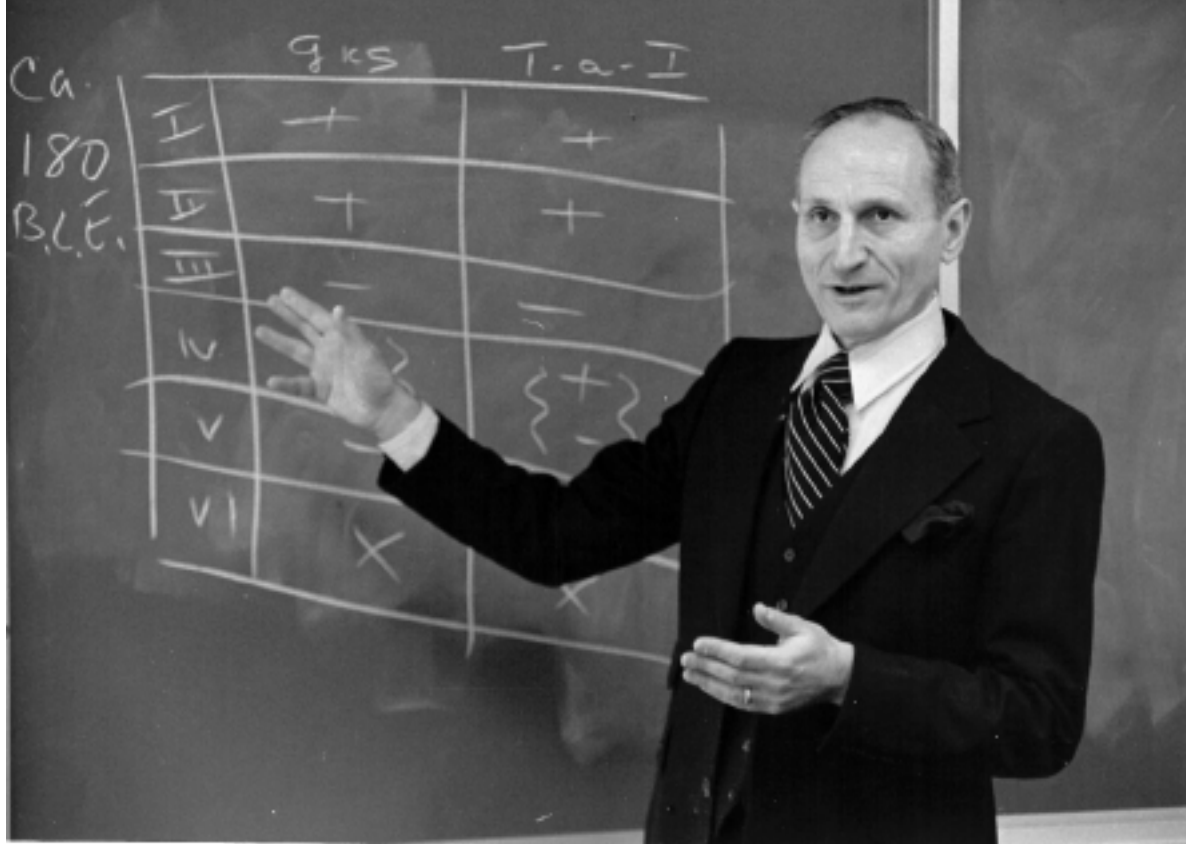
*Dr. Martin Cohen (at right, third from top) among his classmates at Ordination at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati in 1957.*

1998 he gave the keynote address at Santangel '98, an international conference on Sephardic studies sponsored by the Dominican University.

Cohen's passion for this oeuvre is transmitted to his students. Rabbi Larry Sernovitz, N '07 observes, "Dr. Cohen has invested incredible time and effort into uncovering the history and beauty of Sephardic Judaism. He cares deeply about producing a comprehensive history of Sephardic Judaism and all its nuances for people to study and honor for decades to come."

Since joining the faculty, Cohen has taught courses, now two per year, on the development of early rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, and also writes and lectures on Bible and modern Jewish history when he is not teaching or writing on Sephardica. While working on the Sephardic Curriculum Project, Cohen has completed another book on Sephardica, scheduled for publication by the University of Nebraska Press, and has been approached to write a college text on the Sephardic experience. He hopes some day to finish a 450-page book based on his

***Dr. Martin Cohen has been a beloved teacher and mentor to students for over fifty years.***



***Dr. Martin Cohen teaching at HUC-JIR/New York.***

tract, *Two Sister Faiths: Introduction to a Typological Approach to Early Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*.

Alongside this active academic career, Cohen has always loved the human side of his chosen profession. "Even when I started teaching," he remembers, "the administration knew that my interest in going into the rabbinate was primarily to be a congregational rabbi. I love the rabbinate. I just love it." Cohen speaks fondly of his years as rabbi of various congregations, including his assistantship at Adath Israel in Louisville, Ken-

tucky and his senior interim position at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan.

Nowadays, however, his scholarly pursuits prevent him from serving in a rabbinical role. "My audiences don't like me to preach. They all want me to lecture. I love to preach. I miss that part. But I get vicarious enjoyment from my students, watching them develop and seeing where they go."

In many cases, his relationships with students have lasted for decades. He is the kind of teacher thought of by many who cross his path as a mentor, not merely an instructor. Sernovitz shares: "He is not only a true *chacham*, a true scholar, but he is an extremely gifted teacher and inspirational rabbi. He has had deep and profound impact on me both professionally and personally. As I was studying Sephardic Judaism with him as well as writing my thesis, he was patient, caring, insightful, and challenged me to produce high quality work in a risk-free

environment, one where he supported me entirely along the way." Rabbi Allison Berry, N '07 adds, "His gentle manner inspired me to work harder and to truly love what I learned from him."

Rabbi David Ellenson understands why generations of students feel this closeness. "As a teacher and mentor, no one has been more caring. His classes have always been filled with exceptional depth and real intellectual excitement."

Cohen has advised more than 100 theses, most of them in Sephardica, in his half century of teaching at HUC-JIR, and he shows no sign of slowing down. A man of tremendous energy, he recalls that "when I was an assistant rabbi in Kentucky, I used to commute back and forth from Cincinnati to Louisville. In those days my energy level was so high I could get by with two hours sleep. As Confucius said, 'Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.'" ■