
Lithuanian Jewish family spotlight:
David Isaac Cohen

David Isaac Cohen (1825-1941) was born in Lithuania and trained to be a shochet, Yiddish for ritual slaughterer and butcher. After marriage, he settled in the village of his wife, Hasia Schreyer, near the Lithuanian-German border, where he practiced his trade.

Anti-Jewish violence wracked the countryside of the Czarist Empire in the 1880s, and the family, now with seven children, emigrated alongside many thousands of other Jews in about 1885 to escape the oppression. Cohen had a position awaiting him among landsmen in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, but the family stayed there only a few years before moving to Chicago, where Cohen found work in the stockyards at the Libby, McNeil, and Libby packinghouse. He was employed there until he was 100, after which he received a small pension from his former employer. His age was confirmed at his funeral by the son of another Lithuanian Jewish immigrant who had known Cohen in Lithuania.

With his long beard and skullcap, Cohen was a well-known presence for many decades on the streetcar between the family's apartment in the Maxwell Street area and the stockyards. He was a craftsman and made objects out of bone he gathered at his place of employment, and these have been handed down through the generations within the families of his descendants.



The People of the Stock Yards: Lithuanian Jewish Family Stories



Cohen carved objects out of bone from the packing plant, including an intricate box and cane, with detail shown at far right.

Photos and text courtesy of David A. Gerber.