

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Inside the Centre

Ray Monk

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Ray Monk

List of Illustrations

Title Page

Preface and Acknowledgements

Part I: 1904–1926

1. ‘Amerika, du hast es besser’: Oppenheimer’s German Jewish Background

2. Childhood

3. First Love: New Mexico

4. Harvard

5. Cambridge

Part II: 1926–1941

6. Göttingen

7. Postdoctoral Fellow

8. *An American* School of Theoretical Physics

9. Unstable Cores

10. Fission

Part III: 1941–1945

11. In on the Secret

12. Los Alamos 1: Security

13. Los Alamos 2: Implosion

14. Los Alamos 3: Heavy with Misgiving

Part IV: 1945–1967

15. The Insider Scientist
16. The Booming Years
17. Massive Retaliation
18. *Falsus in uno*
19. An Open Book?

Picture Section

Notes and References

Index

Bibliography

Copyright

About the Book

J. Robert Oppenheimer is among the most contentious and important figures of the twentieth century. As head of the Los Alamos Laboratory, he oversaw the successful effort to beat the Nazis to develop the first atomic bomb – a breakthrough which was to have eternal ramifications for mankind, and made Oppenheimer the ‘father of the Bomb’.

Oppenheimer was a man of diverse interests and phenomenal intellectual attributes. His talent and drive allowed him, as a young scientist, to enter a community peopled by the great names of twentieth-century physics – men such as Bohr, Born, Dirac and Einstein – and to play a role in the laboratories and classrooms where the world was being changed forever.

But Oppenheimer’s was not a simple story of assimilation, scientific success and world fame. A complicated and fragile personality, the implications of the discoveries at Los Alamos were to weigh heavily upon him. Having formed suspicious connections in the 1930s, in the wake of the Allied victory in World War Two, Oppenheimer’s attempts to resist the escalation of the Cold War arms race would lead many to question his loyalties – and set him on a collision course with Senator Joseph McCarthy and his witch hunters.

As with Ray Monk’s peerless biographies of Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, *Inside the Centre* is a work of towering scholarship. A story of discovery, secrecy, impossible choices and unimaginable destruction, it goes deeper than any previous work in revealing the motivations and complexities of this most brilliant and divisive of men.

About the Author

Ray Monk is the author of *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* for which he won the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the Duff Cooper Award, and *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude*. He is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southampton.

Also by Ray Monk

Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius

Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude

Bertrand Russell: The Ghost of Madness

List of Illustrations

FIRST SECTION

- [1](#) Oppenheimer with his mother (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [2](#) Oppenheimer in the arms of his father (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [3](#) Oppenheimer building with blocks (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [4](#) 155 Riverside Drive (© Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations);
- [5](#) Oppenheimer at Harvard (© Harvard University Archives);
- [6](#) William Boyd (© The National Library of Medicine);
- [7](#) Frederick Bernheim (image provided by the Duke Medical Center Archives);
- [8](#) Paul Horgan (© J. R. Eyerman/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images);
- [9](#) The Upper Pecos Valley (courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives, New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe/053755);
- [10](#) Inside the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge (© Omikron/Science Photo Library);
- [11](#) Paul Dirac (© Bettmann/CORBIS);
- [12](#) Patrick Blackett (© Science Photo Library);
- [13](#) Niels Bohr (© Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory/Science Photo Library);
- [14](#) Max Born (© Bettmann/CORBIS);
- [15](#) Charlotte Riefenstahl (© Göttingen Museum of Chemistry);
- [16](#) Werner Heisenberg (© Bettmann/CORBIS);
- [17](#) Paul Ehrenfest;
- [18](#) Oppenheimer on Lake Zurich with I. I. Rabi, H. M. Mott-Smith and Wolfgang Pauli (© AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives);

- [19](#) Oppenheimer at Berkeley (courtesy of the Department of Physics, Physics and Astronomy Library);
- [20](#) Oppenheimer with Robert Serber (© New York Times/Redux/eyevine);
- [21](#) Ernest Lawrence (© AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives);
- [22](#) Kitty (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [23](#) Perro Caliente (© Peter Goodchild);
- [24](#) Haakon Chevalier (courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley);
- [25](#) Frank Oppenheimer;
- [26](#) Jean Tatlock (© Dr Hugh Tatlock);
- [27](#) Steve Nelson (© United Press International Photos);
- [28](#) Joe Weinberg, Rossi Lomanitz, David Bohm and Max Friedman;
- [29](#) The staff of the Radiation Laboratory sitting on the 60-inch (© Science Source/Science Photo Library)

SECOND SECTION

- [1](#) Julian Schwinger (© Estate of Francis Bello/Science Photo Library);
- [2](#) Richard Feynman (© Tom Harvey);
- [3](#) The Los Alamos Ranch School (© Digital Photo Archive, Department of Energy (DOE), courtesy AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives);
- [4](#) General Groves (© Los Alamos National Laboratory/Science Photo Library);
- [5](#) Enrico Fermi (© Argonne National Laboratory/Science Photo Library);
- [6](#) The graphite pile at Stagg Field (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [7](#) Hans Bethe (© Science Source/Science Photo Library);
- [8](#) Klaus Fuchs (© Keystone/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images);
- [9](#) Edward Teller (© University of California Radiation Laboratory/Science Photo Library);
- [10](#) Seth Neddermeyer's early attempts at implosion (courtesy of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Archives);

- [11](#) The Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombs (Claus Lunau/Science Photo Library);
- [12](#) The ‘Little Boy’ design, as reverse engineered by John Coster-Mullen;
- [13](#) Workers at Oak Ridge (© Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Digital Photo Archive, Department of Energy (DOE), courtesy AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives);
- [14](#) Preparing the Trinity Test (courtesy of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Archives);
- [15](#) Preparing the Trinity Test, landscape (courtesy of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Archives);
- [16](#) The Trinity explosion (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [17](#) Oppenheimer and Groves at the Trinity Test site (Emilio Segrè Visual Archives/American Institute of Physics/Science Photo Library);
- [18](#) The effects of the atomic bombs in Japan (courtesy of the Los Alamos National Laboratory Archives);
- [19](#) Oppenheimer and Kitty in Japan, 1960 (© Historical/CORBIS);
- [20](#) The cover of the first issue of *Physics Today* (courtesy of Berkeley Laboratory);
- [21](#) Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard (© Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)
- [22](#) The Ulam-Teller design (© Carey Sublette and the NuclearWeaponArchive.org);
- [23](#) The Mike Test;
- [24](#) Oppenheimer lectures Ed Murrow (© Bettmann/CORBIS);
- [25](#) Oppenheimer with Paul Dirac and Abraham Pais at the Institute for Advanced Study (© Alfred Eisenstaedt/Getty Images);
- [26](#) Oppenheimer, Toni and Peter at Olden Manor, Princeton (© Alfred Eisenstaedt/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images);
- [27](#) Lewis Strauss (© Bettmann/CORBIS);
- [28](#) Edward Teller congratulates Oppenheimer on his Fermi Prize (© Ralph Morse/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images);
- [29](#) Oppenheimer speaking at last visit to Los Alamos (© Oppenheimer Archives/CORBIS);

30 Oppenheimer photographed for *Life* magazine (© Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Inside the Centre:

The Life of J. Robert Oppenheimer

Ray Monk



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Preface and Acknowledgements

THE ORIGINS OF this book lie in a review I wrote about fifteen years ago of a reissued edition of *Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections*, edited by Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner. Until then, I knew about Oppenheimer only what everybody knows: that he was an important physicist, that he led the project to design and build the world's first atomic bomb, and that he had his security clearance taken away from him during the McCarthy era because of suspicions that he was a communist, or even possibly a Soviet agent.

What I did not know until I read this collection of his letters was what a fascinatingly diverse man he was. I did not know that he wrote poetry and short stories, that he had a deep love and wide knowledge of French literature, that he found the Hindu scriptures so inspiring that he learned Sanskrit in order to read them in their original language. Nor did I know how complicated and fragile his personality was, nor how intense his personal relations were with his father, his mother, his girlfriends, his friends and his students.

Learning all this, I was surprised to discover that no full and complete biography of him had, at that point, been written. There was, I said in my review, a really great biography waiting to be written about Oppenheimer, a biography that would attempt to do justice both to his important role in the history and politics of the twentieth century and to the singularity of his mind, to the depth and diversity of his intellectual interests. Such a book would need to describe and explain his contributions to physics and to place them in their historical context. It would need to do the same with regard to his other intellectual interests and to his participation in public life. It would not be an easy book to write. In fact, it seemed perfectly possible that it would never be written.

Since I wrote that review, several books about Oppenheimer have been written and published, which attempt to rise to at least some of the challenges I described. Chief among these is *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, a book that was a long time in the making and the result of a staggering amount of research. *American Prometheus* is a very fine book indeed, a monumental piece of scholarship that I have had at my side ever since it was published. However (partly to my relief, since I was, by the time this book appeared, engaged on my own book), it is not the book I envisaged when I reviewed Smith and Weiner. Though Bird and Sherwin describe in exhaustive detail Oppenheimer's personal life and his political activities, they either ignore altogether or summarise very briefly his contributions to physics.

To take an example that might seem unimportant, but in fact is not, one would never know from reading Bird and Sherwin's book how much of Oppenheimer's time and intellectual energy was taken up with thinking about mesons. Mesons are subatomic particles, the existence of which was predicted in 1934 and discovered in 1936. For much of Oppenheimer's scientific career they were a puzzle, resisting all attempts to make sense of the apparently contradictory evidence about their nature and their behaviour that was gathered from laboratory experiments and observations of cosmic rays. Oppenheimer's student, Edward Gerjuoy, in illustration of his point that 'Oppie did his physics, talked about his physics, lived his physics, with an unusual passion', gave as his prime example Oppenheimer's frustrated determination to make sense of mesons: 'it bothered him, it tore at him'. If one wants to understand Oppenheimer, one might think this passionate, decades-long search for an understanding of mesons is something one should look at. And yet almost nothing is said about it in Bird and Sherwin's book. The word 'meson' is not even in the index.

The relationship between a biographical subject and his or her work has often been discussed. Many people, rightly in my opinion, insist that *of course* it is possible to understand a person's work without knowing anything about their lives, Shakespeare being the

obvious and most telling example. This does not make biography useless or superfluous, since the understanding of individual people is a worthwhile and interesting pursuit *in itself*. We want to understand Oppenheimer, not *in order* to understand his work, but just because he was an interesting man. However, though it is possible to understand Oppenheimer's work in isolation from his life, the reverse, it seems to me, is not possible: we cannot claim to understand Oppenheimer unless we have at least some understanding of his work, especially when, as Gerjuoy's comments make clear, that work was pursued with such passion and intensity and was such an important part of what made him the person he was.

So, much as I admire Bird and Sherwin's achievement, and much as I have learned from their work, theirs is not the book I imagined after I had read Oppenheimer's letters. Nor, for basically similar reasons, is Charles Thorpe's *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect*, which came out the year after Bird and Sherwin's and which has much of interest to say about Oppenheimer's life as it was affected by, and as it affected, the society and politics of the time, but almost nothing to say about Oppenheimer's life as it was shaped and driven by his desire to understand physics.

Many people, including me, thought that a biography of Oppenheimer that put his contributions to physics at the centre of the narrative would be written by the late Abraham Pais, who, it was widely known, had been working on a biography of Oppenheimer for many years before his death in 2000. A renowned particle physicist himself, Pais had known Oppenheimer well at Princeton, and had previously written excellent lives of Bohr and Einstein. Alas, when he died, Pais was a long way from finishing the book. What he *had* written, together with 'supplementary material' added by Robert P. Crease, was published in 2006 as *J. Robert Oppenheimer: A Life*. It turned out that what Pais had been concentrating on was not Oppenheimer's contributions to physics (to which he devotes only a short and highly derivative chapter), but rather his directorship of Princeton's Institute for Advanced

Study. Those looking for a scientific biography of Oppenheimer were thus forced to look elsewhere.

David C. Cassidy, who had previously written an outstandingly good, scientifically literate biography of Heisenberg, published a biography of Oppenheimer in 2005 that many thought would fill the gap left open by Pais. Cassidy's book, *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century*, certainly gives more prominence to Oppenheimer's scientific work than any previous biography. However, as indicated by his title, Cassidy has, like Thorpe, chosen to approach Oppenheimer's life from a broadly historical and sociological perspective. Though there is much new biographical information in the book, its focus, for much of the time, is on Cassidy's theme of 'the American century' – that is, the growth of American political power and the pre-eminence of American science during the twentieth century.

There is nothing wrong with such an approach, and much to be gained by pursuing it, but it cannot possibly produce the kind of biography that I envisaged and that I have tried to write. Oppenheimer's place in history, his impact on American society and that society's impact on him are all interesting topics, and ones that a biography of him cannot ignore. However, what *most* interests me is Oppenheimer *himself*, his extraordinary intellectual powers, his emotional and psychological complexity and his curious mixture of strengths and weaknesses in dealing with other people. Of the books that have come out in the last few years on Oppenheimer, the one that most closely approximates to the one I wanted to write, in terms of balance and focus, is Jeremy Bernstein's wonderful memoir, *Oppenheimer: Portrait of an Enigma*. If Bernstein had chosen to write a full biography rather than a brief memoir, he might well have made my book entirely superfluous.

I have entitled my book 'Inside the Centre' for many reasons, the first of which is to indicate my intention of writing an internal rather than an external biography – one that aims, first and foremost, to understand Oppenheimer himself. Of course this does not mean that I am not interested in the social and political background to Oppenheimer's life. On the contrary, I am deeply

interested in that background and, indeed, devote my first chapter to the German Jewish community in New York in which he was born and brought up. The legacy of that community, in fact, forms another reason for my title, as it seems to me that Oppenheimer cannot be understood without taking into account the importance of his deeply felt desire to overcome the sense of being an outsider that he inherited from his German Jewish background and his desire to get inside the centre of American political and social life. This desire lies at the root of the ambivalence towards his Jewish ancestry that was noted by many of his closest friends, and at the root of what Einstein perceptively described as his unrequited love for the US government. It also, I think, figures largely in his willingness to undertake the enormous task of leading the effort to build the world's first atomic bomb, and his determination after the war to play a leading part in shaping US atomic policy. It must be taken into account too in understanding why he felt compelled to defend himself against charges of disloyalty when it would have been so much easier simply to walk away from the battle.

Moreover, as I have said above, it seems to me that, if one wants to understand Oppenheimer, one must attempt to understand his contributions to science, and the phrase 'inside the centre' captures some of the themes that dominate that work. Oppenheimer's striving to understand mesons, for example, was driven, at least in part, by a desire to know what forces are acting inside the centre of an atom, the pi-meson being the carrier of the strong nuclear force that binds nucleons (neutrons and protons) together. And, of course, the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb are possible only because of an understanding – which Oppenheimer helped to create – of the fission and fusion processes undergone by atomic nuclei. What many people consider to be Oppenheimer's greatest contribution to physics – his work in the late 1930s on neutron stars and black holes – sheds light on what happens at the centre of a massive star when it has burned up all its hydrogen and gravitational collapse takes over.

Finally, there is Oppenheimer's determination to be at the centre of scientific discovery, an ambition that took him first to Cambridge

to work at Rutherford's Cavendish Laboratory, and then to Göttingen to work with Max Born at precisely the time when Born was playing a leading part in the creation of quantum mechanics. Eventually, combined with his fervent patriotism, this drove Oppenheimer to make America the world centre of advances in physics. At every stage in this development the problems that he and his students chose to tackle were strongly influenced by his insistence on being at the centre of theoretical physics, always wanting to be dealing with the fundamental questions, not the peripheral ones.

I am not myself a physicist, but during the ten years that it has taken me to write this book I have made a concerted effort to understand those parts of physics to which Oppenheimer contributed. I have been helped in this by some wonderful historical and expository work that has been published in the last decade or so, most notably those books listed in the Bibliography by Jeremy Bernstein, Helge Kragh, Manjit Kumar, Jagdish Mehra and Helmut Rechenberg, and Silvan Schweber. I have also benefited considerably from the expertise of my friend James Dodd, whose work *The Ideas of Particle Physics: An Introduction for Scientists*, jointly authored with C. D. Coughlan and B. M. Gripaios, is one of the clearest textbooks I have ever read, and whose comments on an early draft of this book were invaluable. At an early stage in the research for this book I also received help from Brian Ridley, who kindly explained some notions in theoretical physics that were confusing me, and, at a much later stage, I received help via email from the physicists Jeremy Bernstein, Silvan Schweber and Kip Thorne.

I would like to extend special thanks to my friend David Pugmire, who has provided me with unstinting encouragement and support throughout the writing of this book and who, when it was finished, read it through with meticulous care, making many astute and helpful comments. In this connection I would also like to thank Mike Cleeter, Sophia Efstathiou, Peter Middleton, Frederic Raphael, Danika Stow-Monk and Alan Thomas, who also read and made helpful comments upon an early draft.

Research on this book necessitated several trips to Washington DC to use the Library of Congress, the staff at which could not possibly have been more helpful and obliging. The same is true of the staff at the Nils Bohr Library in Copenhagen. I also need to thank the staff at my own institution, the University of Southampton, for providing such an excellent service. The university gave me research leave in order to concentrate on the book, for which I am immensely grateful.

In Kristine Puopolo and Dan Franklin I have had the best publishers an author could wish for, giving me great support when I needed it most, showing encouraging faith in me and my project and exercising patience to the point of saintliness. I would also like to thank my editor, Alex Bowler, for his interest in the project, for his indispensable editorial skills and for the many ways in which he helped me to avoid errors and improve my text. The text has been improved in many ways too by the superb copy-editing it received from Mandy Greenfield. I could not have written this book without the help of my agent, Gill Coleridge, who has become a good friend as well as an inexhaustible supply of good sense and cheering encouragement. My greatest debt, as always, is to my wonderful partner, Jenny, and our lovely children, Zala, Danika, Zeno and Myron, who are not children any more, but whose loveliness has kept me going during the sometimes difficult years in which this book was written.

Ray Monk

Southampton
May, 2012

PART I

1904–1926

*‘Amerika, du hast es besser’: Oppenheimer’s
German Jewish Background*

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER, his friend Isidor Rabi once remarked, was ‘a man who was put together of many bright shining splinters’, who ‘never got to be an integrated personality’. What prevented Oppenheimer from being fully integrated, Rabi thought, was his denial of a centrally important part of himself: his Jewishness. As the physicist Felix Bloch, echoing Rabi, once put it, Oppenheimer ‘tried to act as if he were not a Jew and succeeded well because he was a good actor’. And, because he was always acting (‘you carried on a charade with him. He lived a charade,’ Rabi once remarked), he lost sight of who he really was. Oppenheimer had an impressive and wide-ranging collection of talents, abilities and personal characteristics, but where the central, united core of his personality ought to have been, Rabi thought, there was a gap and so there was nothing to hold those ‘bright shining splinters’ together. ‘I understood his problem,’ Rabi said, and, when asked what that problem was, replied simply: ‘Identity.’

Rabi spoke as someone who, by virtue of his background, intelligence and education, was well placed to understand Oppenheimer’s ‘problem’. He and Oppenheimer had a great deal in common: they were roughly the same age (Rabi was six years older), they were both theoretical physicists, were both brought up in New York City and were both descended from European Jewish families. Behind this last similarity, however, lay a fundamental difference. Rabi was proud of his Jewish inheritance and happy to

define himself in terms of it. Though he had no religious beliefs, and never prayed, he once said that when he saw Orthodox Jews at prayer, the thought that came into his mind was: 'These are my people.'

No such thought could have entered Oppenheimer's mind, no matter who he was looking at. There was *no* group to whom he could point and say, 'These are my people', and not just because of his ambivalence about his Jewish background. It was also because that background itself, regardless of Oppenheimer's feelings about it, could not have provided him with the sense of belonging and, therefore, the sense of identity that Rabi thought was missing in him. Rabi, despite his lack of religious beliefs, was Jewish in a fairly straightforward and unambiguous way; the Jews simply *were* 'his people'. Theirs was the community to which he belonged. One cannot say the same about Oppenheimer. The sense in which *he* was Jewish, the sense in which he did – and did not – come from, and belong to, a Jewish community, is far more complicated and, as Rabi has perceptively noted, crucial in understanding the fragility of his sense of identity.

For an understanding of the elusive nature of Oppenheimer's Jewishness, the contrast between his family background and Rabi's is instructive. Despite their many and important similarities, and despite the fact that they grew up within a few miles of each other, Rabi and Oppenheimer were born into and brought up in families that were culturally worlds apart. Rabi was a 'Polish Jew'. Born in Galicia to a poor, Yiddish-speaking family of Orthodox Jews, he came to New York as an infant and was raised, first in the crowded slums of the Lower East Side and then in a tiny apartment in Brooklyn. Oppenheimer was born not in Europe, but in New York City, to a wealthy family that had abandoned its Jewish faith and traditions a generation earlier. The bustling and crowded 'Jewish Ghetto' of the Lower East Side would have seemed utterly alien to the young Oppenheimer, who was brought up in an enormous luxury apartment in the genteel Upper West Side. The family had never spoken Yiddish, and, though German was his father's first language, it was never spoken at home.

And yet, despite regarding himself as neither German nor Jewish, Oppenheimer was seen, by Jews and non-Jews alike, as a 'German Jew'. In New York in the early twentieth century the central division among the Jewish community was between, on the one hand, the German Jews and, on the other, the Polish and Russian Jews – the differences between the two groups accurately mirrored by the differences between Oppenheimer and Rabi. The German Jews, sometimes called 'Uptown Jews', were on the whole wealthier, more assimilated and less religious than their Polish and Russian counterparts, to whom they were notoriously condescending. At the time of Oppenheimer's birth in 1904 there were more Polish and Russian Jews in New York than German Jews, but the Germans assumed leadership of the Jewish community and took it upon themselves to help 'Americanise' the Russians and Poles, who reacted with resentment at what they saw as a dismissal of their religion and their customs.

What Rabi called Oppenheimer's problem – the problem of identity – was, in fact, a problem for the entire American Jewish community, perhaps its central problem. Certainly it was the issue at the heart of the tension between the two groups of Jews in New York City. For the Russian and Polish Jews, their sense of identity was bound up with their Jewishness: their Orthodox religious beliefs, their Yiddish language and their Jewish culture and traditions. *That* sense of identity, that culture, however, had been abandoned by the German Jews before they even came to America.

The mass migration of German Jews to America that occurred in the mid-nineteenth century was intimately bound up with their earlier abandonment of the traditional trappings of Jewish identity. *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, was an essentially German movement, its prophet being the great Prussian Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn. *Haskalah*, which led in turn to that other essentially German movement, Reform Judaism, encouraged Jews to, literally and metaphorically, leave the ghettos in which they had been confined and embrace the modernising ideas of the wider Western European Enlightenment. This meant using German rather than Hebrew as the language of worship,

abandoning traditions and customs that served to isolate Jews from the rest of society, and reforming Jewish education so that it prepared people for the world at large rather than schooling them in a separate culture. The hope that inspired these changes was that, in return for abandoning those aspects of their culture that identified them as radically different from others, the Jews would receive from the gentile world a lifting of the discriminatory laws that affected almost every aspect of their lives, and a full acceptance as members of society with the same legal, financial and political rights as other citizens. Thus fully assimilated, Jews would no longer think of themselves as a separate race or nation, but rather as adherents of a religion. Their nationality would be *German*, and they would be not a bit less German for worshipping in a synagogue rather than a church.

It was the dashing of this hope that persuaded hundreds of thousands of German Jews in the middle decades of the nineteenth century to turn their backs on their home country and look to America – a country founded upon the proposition that the equality of all men and the inalienability of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were self-evident truths – to find the freedom and equality they had failed to achieve in Germany. Thus, in the eyes of German Jews, America became not only a refuge from discrimination and prejudice, but also the national embodiment of Enlightenment ideals, the ideals of *Haskalah*. Many of them therefore ceased trying to become accepted as *Germans* and sought instead to become accepted as *Americans*.

‘Amerika, du hast es besser.’ These famous words of Goethe are contained in the poem ‘Den Vereinigten Staaten’ (‘To the United States’), written in 1827, when, as an old man, he reflected upon the advantages that youthful America had over the ‘Old Continent’ in having no tradition, no ‘decaying castles’, and being therefore free from the continuous strife that comes from long memories. The image of America that Goethe’s poem conjures up is one of a *tabula rasa*, waiting, so to speak, to have its history written upon it. This was an image perfectly suited to arouse the interest and

expectations of the German Jews, a group who longed to start afresh, free from the tensions and prejudices of the past.

And so, beginning in the 1820s, the rallying cry ‘On to America’ echoed throughout the Jewish community in Germany. A whole movement grew up dedicated to the encouragement of migration to the United States, publicising the financial, social and political advantages of the New World, and providing hope and support to those prepared to make what must have been an alarming as well as an exciting fresh start. In books by Europeans who had been to America, in letters to relatives from those who had migrated, and in village meetings where people gathered to hear first-hand accounts of American life from migrants who had returned to visit families, the image of America as ‘the common man’s utopia’ was spread, inspiring more and more Jews to set sail for the United States.

A typical example of such inspirational first-hand accounts is a letter written in November 1846 by the journalist and academic Max Lilienthal, which was published in the German Jewish weekly newspaper, *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*. Extolling ‘the beautiful ground of civil equality’ that he had discovered in America, Lilienthal announced: ‘The old Europe with its restrictions lies behind me like a bad dream . . . At last I breathe in liberty . . . Jew or Christian, Christian or Jew – this old strife is forgotten, and only the man as such is respected and loved.’ Encouraging others to follow his example, he urged: ‘Shake off the centuries-old dust of Jew-pressure . . . become a human being like everybody else.’ And, he promised, in America: ‘Jewish hearts are open in welcome. Jewish organisations ready to help anyone. Why should you go on carrying the burden of legal exclusion?’

The number of German Jews willing and eager to ‘shake off the centuries-old dust of Jew-pressure’ was so large that it completely transformed the American Jewish community. In 1840, there were just 15,000 Jews in the United States; by 1880, there were 280,000, most of whom were of German origin. This influx of German Jews is known to Jewish historians as the ‘Second Migration’ – the ‘First Migration’ being the arrival in the seventeenth century of a small community of Sephardic Jews. These were descendants of the Jews

expelled from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, who, by the nineteenth century, were a well-established part of American life.

These self-styled 'old American Sephardic families' took pride in the fact that they had been in America for as many generations as the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, and tended to treat the new German arrivals with the kind of lofty disdain with which the German Jews would later treat the Russians and Poles. The first German Jews to arrive in America accepted the leadership of the old Sephardic community and even adopted the Sephardic form of worship. When the number of German Jewish migrants began to increase dramatically, however, the balance of power shifted and the German, Ashkenazi Jews replaced the Sephardim as the leaders of the American Jewish community.

The mass influx into America of Russian and Polish Jews, which took place from 1880 to 1920, formed the 'Third Migration', and was on an entirely different scale from the previous two, being measured not in tens of thousands, or in hundreds of thousands, but in millions. Roughly two and a half million Jews from Eastern Europe arrived in the United States during the Third Migration, bringing with them a very different kind of Jewish culture from that of either the Sephardim or the Germans.

The arrival of these Russian and Polish Jews was such an embarrassment to the established German Jewish community that their first reaction to it was to argue, through editorials in their newspaper, *American Hebrew*, and direct lobbying from their organisation, the United Hebrew Charities of New York, for the introduction of tougher immigration laws. When this came to nothing and the number of Eastern European Jewish immigrants kept rising, the German Jews set up the Education Alliance, which organised Americanisation programmes in which the new immigrants were instructed in 'the privileges and duties of American citizenship'. What drove these measures was not only the German Jews' love of America, but also a dread of the anti-Semitism which they feared the Eastern European Jews would arouse. The Jewish historian Gerald Sorin points out: 'These uptowners were very taken

with Israel Zangwill's play "The Melting Pot". They saw in it a reinforcement of their own proposed solution for the problems of downtown: the sooner immigrants from eastern Europe gave up their cultural distinctiveness and melted into the homo-genised mass, the sooner anti-Semitism would also melt.'

It was a strategy that German Jews had tried unsuccessfully in Germany, but which seemed to be working in the United States. It required, however, constant vigilance with respect to 'cultural distinctiveness', a vigilance that could easily slip into the kind of self-denial of which Rabi accused Oppenheimer. One form this vigilance took was an acute sensitivity among German Jews about their names. Sometimes this led to the abandonment of German-sounding surnames, a notable example being August Schönberg, the son of an impoverished Jewish family from the Rhineland, who would become famous as the millionaire New York banker August Belmont. More often, though, it took the form of changing one's first name and giving to one's children names that sounded reassuringly 'American'. Joseph Seligman, another millionaire New York banker, brought his brothers, Wolfgang, Jacob and Isaias, over from Germany, but on arrival they became William, James and Jesse. The names of Joseph Seligman's children look like a roll call of American heroes: George Washington Seligman, Edwin Robert Anderson Seligman and Alfred Lincoln Seligman (evidently 'Abraham' was considered too Judaic).

Of the American heroes commemorated in these names, the least well known today is undoubtedly Robert Anderson. He was a major in the US army at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861 and was involved in the opening hostilities, when Fort Sumter in South Carolina, which was then under his command, came under fire from the Confederates. For holding his ground and defending the fort for thirty-four hours Major Anderson was promoted by Abraham Lincoln to Brigadier General and became a national hero, not just for the duration of the war, but also for many decades afterwards. Because of him, the name 'Robert' became immensely popular. For anyone wanting to affirm the American identity of their offspring, it was the natural choice. Indeed J. Robert

Oppenheimer was to like it so much that he ignored the 'J' in his name and was known, by family and friends, simply as 'Robert' or 'Bob'. When he was asked what the 'J' stood for, he would reply that it stood for nothing. In fact, as his birth certificate shows, it stands for 'Julius', his father's name. For anyone striving to avoid 'cultural distinctiveness', the name 'Robert Oppenheimer', or even 'J. Robert Oppenheimer', had obvious advantages over 'Julius Oppenheimer'.

Even so, the surname remained, and it was as 'culturally distinctive' as a name can be, identifying its bearers' ancestors both geographically and ethnically. 'As appears from his name,' one of Oppenheimer's professors once wrote in an academic reference, 'Oppenheimer is a Jew.' If, ignoring *Haskalah*, one clung to the notion of Judaism as defining a race, a nation or a tribe, rather than simply a religion, then the professor was correct. After the Napoleonic decree of 1808, which required Jews to take a surname, 'Oppenheimer' was the name adopted by those Jews who lived in the area around the small and fairly obscure town of Oppenheim, which lies in the Hesse area of Germany, between Mainz and Worms, not far from Frankfurt. With regard to J. Robert Oppenheimer, what 'appears from his name' is that his ancestors were among those Hessian Jews. Could he look upon *them* and say, 'These are my people'? Well, after his political awakening in the 1930s, when his relatives – like all Jews in Germany – were facing the horrors of the Nazis, his determination to play a part in defeating Hitler's regime *did* suggest some feeling of kinship with the victims of the Third Reich. But, until then, his reaction to his German Jewish relatives was to look upon them as if they came from a very distant time and place. When, as a child, he went to Germany on a family visit and met his grandfather, Benjamin Oppenheimer, who still lived just a few miles away from Oppenheim, his impression (or so he later recalled) was of 'an unsuccessful small businessman, born himself in a hovel, really, in an almost medieval German village'. This, one feels, is the impression of a child used to the wealth of the Upper West Side and the modernity of twentieth-century Manhattan; whether Benjamin would be regarded as 'unsuccessful', his birthplace a 'hovel' and his

home town 'medieval' by people with less exalted standards is, I think, doubtful.

The 'almost medieval village' was presumably Hanau, a town north-east of Oppenheim, where Benjamin Oppenheimer lived and where his son, Julius, was born in 1871. Julius spent just seventeen years in Hanau before, in 1888, leaving for America. Whatever the truth about Benjamin Oppenheimer's circumstances, the family clearly had aspirations for a better life than was possible in Hanau and, like many other German Jews, thought they could fulfil those aspirations in America. Julius's younger brother and sister, Emil and Hedwig, joined him a few years after he had set sail, and Julius himself was following the example of his two uncles, Solomon and Sigmund Rothfeld ('Sol & Sig' as they were known in the family), who had migrated to the United States a generation earlier.

The ambition may have come from Benjamin's wife, Babette Rothfeld, since the two uncles in question were her brothers. 'Sol & Sig' left for America in 1869, nearly twenty years before Julius Oppenheimer came to join them, but more than thirty years after the 'Second Migration' had begun. In those thirty years or so, a great deal had happened to the German Jewish community in America. Or, rather, one should say that in those years the American German Jewish community had been created, its development demonstrating both that the United States could indeed realise many of the hopes expressed in Max Lilienthal's letter, and that it could not entirely live up to the promise of being a land in which the 'old strife' between Jew and Christian had been forgotten.

By 1869, the German Jewish migrants who had landed in America thirty or so years earlier had formed a successful social group, among whom were a surprisingly large number of families that had become extremely wealthy. Within a single generation, the Seligmans, the Lehmans, the Guggenheims, the Schiffs, the Goldmans and the Sachsens had all amassed vast fortunes and become founders of some of the best-known, most successful and most powerful financial and commercial institutions in America. They had also created a fairly tight-knit community, known to its members as 'Our Crowd', a Jewish version of the more

conspicuously wealthy group of families – the Astors, Vanderbilts, Morgans, Roosevelts, and so on – that constituted New York’s gentile high society during this period. ‘Our Crowd’ was a self-consciously cohesive community, whose members worshipped together at the Temple Emanu-El (the Reform Jewish synagogue, whose imposing building on Fifth Avenue, opened in 1868, was a symbol of the success and aspirations of the German Jewish community), socialised together, took holidays together and chose their wives and husbands from each other’s families. The conformity of this community was satirised by one of its members, Emanie Sachs, in her novel *Red Damask*:

Our crowd here. They cover their walls with the same silks. Why there isn’t a house we go to, including Sherry’s, that hasn’t a damask wall. They go to the same dentist and the same grocer and the same concerts. They think alike and act alike and they’re scared to death not to talk alike. The men go to jobs their fathers or grandfathers created, and all they do is sit at their desk & let the organisations work.

Behind the conventionality satirised by Sachs was an earnest desire among the wealthy German Jewish community in New York to ‘fit in’, both with each other and with the wider society. As the names given to the Seligman offspring illustrate, what these prosperous German Jews wanted, perhaps above all, was to be accepted as Americans.

The loyalty this generation of German Jewish migrants felt towards the United States had its origin in the contrast between the restrictions they had experienced in Germany and the freedom and opportunities they had found in America. Until the Civil War, America had been for these migrants almost everything that they had been promised it would be. Of course, every Jew in America would, at some time or other, have come across anti-Semitic prejudice, but the state itself was not anti-Semitic; there was no institutionalised anti-Semitism enshrined in law, decree or officially sanctioned customs. In the years during and after the Civil War, however, this began to change, partly because of the conspicuous

success of the German Jews, and partly because life in the United States for everyone during these years became darker and more troubled.

Most notoriously, in December 1862, eighteen months into the war, General Ulysses Grant issued an order calling for the expulsion of Jews from the military district under his command, which included the states of Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee. The justification for this extraordinary order was the suspicion that Jews were engaged in illegal cotton trading. A month before he ordered the expulsion, Grant had issued an order banning Jews from travelling south into the cotton states. When this did not stop the black-market trading, he resorted to expulsion.

Grant's expulsion order came as a great shock to Jews throughout the United States. Writing in 1912, the Zionist Max Nordau remarked that Grant's order showed 'how thin the floor between Jews and Hell was (and most probably still is) even in enlightened free America . . . What an object lesson to Jewish optimists.' It was the first time that Jews in America had faced anti-Semitism in an institutionalised, officially sanctioned form, and they reacted to it not with resignation and disappointment, but with an angry refusal to accept it. A campaign against the order was organised, including petitions and delegations to the President (at least one of which was led by the aforementioned Max Lilienthal), and, although the episode was a blow to those who believed in America as a land free from Jew-hatred, perhaps the most remarkable thing about it was how quickly the President gave in to the protests. On 3 January 1863, just a few weeks after the order had been issued, President Lincoln instructed Grant to revoke the order. It was therefore, after all, still possible to believe in the United States as a nation without anti-Semitic prejudice, although its image in that respect had been badly tarnished.

In 1869, the year Solomon and Sigmund Rothfeld arrived in New York, Ulysses Grant, having recently been elected President, began what would become, after re-election in 1872, an eight-year period in office. Despite his ill-judged expulsion order in 1862, he was not regarded as an enemy of the Jews. Rather, the opposite. Perhaps the