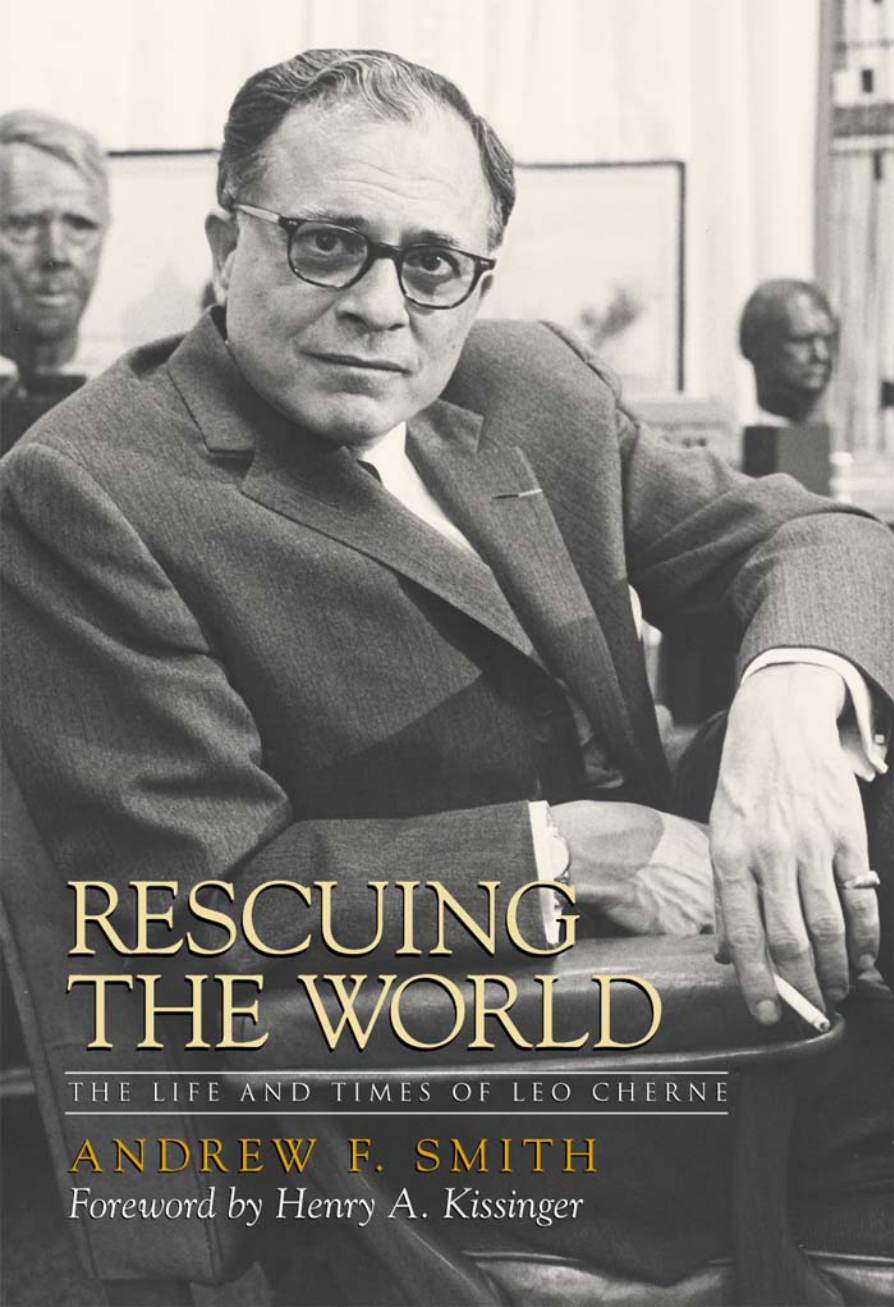

RESCUING THE WORLD

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF LEO CHERNE

ANDREW F. SMITH

Foreword by Henry A. Kissinger

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This is dedicated to the hard-working and devoted staffs of refugee organizations, particularly that of the International Rescue Committee; and to Leo Cherne's friends who helped with this book, especially Lionel Olmer, John Richardson, Liv Ullmann and Marie Gomez.

And this is dedicated to the Kling Family, Alexander and Vera, Russians torn from their native land by World War II, and their two daughters, Alla, born in Austria, and Tatianna, born in Germany, who learned English in the New York Public Schools and became teachers of children of refugees in the same system. My favorite displaced person, Tatiana Kling, my wife, has enriched my life with love, affection, joy, support and inspiration. Without her constant encouragement, this book would not have been written.

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Foreword

In the Jewish religion, it is said that at any one point in time, God preserves the world because there exist ten just men who, without claiming themselves that they are just, give Him a motive for leaving the world intact. Leo Cherne was surely one of those ten just men.

I met Leo in the 1950s before I was Henry Kissinger, when I was still writing short books. He had read one of them and invited me to visit him at the Research Institute of America in New York. He thought that what I had written about foreign policy was important and I should devote myself to it. He gave me a copy of the bust of Abraham Lincoln, which he had sculpted, and he asked, of course, nothing for himself except my best performance.

To me he was a mythic figure, because he had been at the Hungarian border the year before I met him. And having been a refugee myself before there was an IRC, I knew how much it meant to have individuals who looked after refugees, not as an act of charity, but as an act of inner necessity. And Leo, in those days, was dedicated, above all, to the care of the downtrodden. He opposed Communism, not on the grounds of a foreign policy strategy, but as a contribution to the liberation of the human spirit—as a necessity for the liberation of the human spirit.

Every once in a while he would give me a call and give me some assignment which he thought needed to be done in the field of the humane impact of foreign policy, or express some concern he deeply felt. And he became an important fixture of my life.

It was one of these curious phenomena that I, as time went on, became involved in so many struggles and in so many concerns on the more sheer political side that I felt I could always come and take Leo for granted, because he would know when I needed to hear from him. And indeed he did.

I served in government in a very tragic period of the American spirit, when American perfectionism turned on itself and conceived the idea that

we had to be humiliated before we could be worthy of conducting foreign affairs. Leo never made this assumption. Leo always believed, as I believe, that America has a duty to stand for freedom and to make sure that the weak can be secure and the just can be free.

In the tragic period when the helicopters lifted off the roofs in Vietnam in 1975, we thought, above all, of the hundreds of thousands that were being left behind. It was a slight solace to know that there was Leo, who would worry about them and make sure that whoever could be saved would be saved.

When I was secretary of state, my friend Liv Ullmann honored me at one point by saying that she had been asked to do something for the International Rescue Committee and she wanted to know whether it was a CIA agency. Of course if there was any person who could not have told her the truth, it was I. But I knew she was going to be in the care of Leo, and he removed any doubts about what the IRC was about. And what the issues of our period were about.

I admired Leo's intensity, his passion, his faith, his unselfishness, his nobility, and the purity of his soul. To be active in the political arena; to be head of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, where I had the privilege of working with him; to know the tactics but never to be submerged by them; never to raise any question about his motives; never to be engulfed in the discussions of the short term, so characteristic of our political life. And to do this for over half a century is a record that has ennobled all of us who had the privilege of knowing him.

At one point, Liv told me I had to call Leo, that he wasn't very well. And so I did. But he didn't want to speak about his problems. He didn't want to hear my commiseration. He talked about what moved him. The causes in which he believed. And he honored me by thinking I might play a small role in supporting them.

Surely there is one less just man in the world today, and none of us can claim his mantle. But perhaps if all of us try a little harder, maybe we'll help fulfill his mission which will continue as long as there are free people and suffering humanity.

Henry A. Kissinger

Introduction

> I have thought of writing an odd kind of biography. Even now I don't have much patience for a biography which involves a sequence of events; I'm much more interested in a combination of the active and the introspective.
>
> —Leo Cherne, 1961.[1]

I first met Leo Cherne in May 1998. I had heard about him for years, but our paths had not crossed. This meeting had been arranged by John Richardson, a mutual friend, who had confided that Cherne had wanted for years to write his autobiography and needed advice. I was dubious about what advice, if any, I could offer, but I jumped at the chance of meeting Leo Cherne, whose reputation was filled with paradox. He was considered variously as a Renaissance man, a dynamic orator, a lightweight gadfly, a behind-the-scenes power broker, a thoughtful advisor to nine presidents, a flamboyant economic futurist, a playboy closely connected with the nation's rich and famous, a high-level fundraiser for humanitarian causes, a master spy in the employ of an American intelligence service, a highly successful businessman, and a powerful conservative Cold Warrior.

When I first met him, the eighty-six year old Cherne was physically immobile, had difficulty seeing and hearing, and was suffering from a host of medical complications; I'm sure he was in pain. Yet, his eyes danced and his smile flashed when he remembered a particular event or a person. He was clearly upset with his deteriorating physical condition and occasional memory lapses, but courage and confidence exuded from him.

One meeting led to another. On the surface, his life presented a mystifying facade filled with improbability. He had been born into a secular Jewish family of newly arrived immigrants from Russia, yet he rose quickly to the pinnacle of economic and political power in WASP America. He was educated as a lawyer, but left the practice of law to launch a business venture in

the midst of the Depression. With his business thriving, Cherne devoted considerable time and talent to humanitarian causes, particularly the rescuing of political refugees. Although not a trained economist, he enthralled America's business elite by prognosticating economic trends annually for fifty years. In his spare time, Cherne became a self-trained sculptor, and his works graced the Cabinet Room at the White House, the Smithsonian Institution, and numerous museums around the world.

Cherne received no pay for his humanitarian work and little compensation for his public service, although he was rewarded with hundreds of honorary degrees and awards from around the world, including the Federal Republic of Germany's Commander's Cross, France's Legion of Honor, and the Director's Medal from the Central Intelligence Agency. Cherne was proudest of the Presidential Medal of Freedom bestowed upon him by President Ronald Reagan, who proclaimed that although Cherne was never elected to public office, he had more influence on American foreign policy than did most elected officials.

Cherne was clearly an intelligent, creative, talented man who exuded public confidence and charisma. He was a consummate networker with the uncanny ability to identify and cultivate talented people before they became prominent; such were William Casey, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Claiborne Pell, and Henry A. Kissinger. Cherne also befriended a diverse set of prominent political and cultural leaders from William Buckley, Nelson Rockefeller, and Bayard Rustin to Eleanor Roosevelt, Joan Baez, and Marilyn Monroe. And Cherne served as an advisor to every president, with one exception, from Franklin Roosevelt to George Bush. But Cherne did not cultivate the present and future high-and-mighty just to hobnob or bask in their public glory: he was committed to rescuing political refugees. To this end, he preferred working behind the scenes using the old-boy network; but if quiet diplomacy did not succeed, Cherne was not averse to proclaiming loudly his concerns in front of the camera. He was good at both approaches; this twin threat made Cherne a powerful man.

When I finally broached the subject of his autobiography, Cherne was uncharacteristically vague. He admitted trying to write it on several occasions, but he failed to complete even a chapter. I wondered why. He mumbled something about being a shy person, not wanting to take credit for his successes. I shared this explanation with Cherne's friends and they promptly dismissed it. Throughout his life, Cherne had no problem taking credit for things he had accomplished, his friends claimed, and no one believed that Cherne suddenly turned bashful in his old age.

There had to be a better explanation why Cherne had not completed his autobiography. I could not attribute his reticence to a lack of writing

skills: he was an accomplished wordsmith, with a clear and forceful writing style, who had published best-selling books and had written numerous articles for popular magazines and technical journals. As he had kept extensive records about the important events of his life and had easy access to them, it was not lack of documentation. Neither was it a lack of time: Cherne's early and middle life were filled with activity, but during his last decade, he could easily have written his autobiography. In the end I concluded that the apparently gregarious, outgoing Leo Cherne simply could not write a book about himself because it was unseemly for him to do so.

Cherne did not shy away from the prospect of someone else writing about him, however, and he just assumed I would do it. He was right: after the first few meetings, I was hooked. His life was a good story—a story I wanted to tell. What piqued my interest was not only that he had influenced so many important people and been involved in so many significant events that had shaped the twentieth century, from Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s to the fall of the Soviet Empire in the 1990s. Neither was it merely Cherne's amazing chutzpah in responding to those events and people. Whether one agrees or disagrees with his political positions on various issues, his public life demonstrates that one committed person with courage can make a worldwide political and humanitarian difference. His is a message that we need to hear as neo-isolationism resurfaces in new guises and as even deeply committed Americans give up hope of resolving difficult and apparently intractable global problems.

With the exception of the first chapter, which explores Cherne's early life and establishes behaviors that emerged. Later, chapters examine ways in which Cherne combined the insider's network with the outsider's ability to go public. This book is not intended as a "how to" recipe book that others may use to affect the world. It simply chronicles the creative ways in which one person influenced the significant events of his times. His life demonstrates that citizens can alter worldwide events.

A Note on Sources

Throughout our meetings, Cherne patiently responded to my questions, as if he had all the time in the world. He was not opposed to exploring the more controversial parts of his life and was willing to discuss almost anything. There were two exceptions. The first related to his private life. He would neither confirm nor deny stories others told relating to his private life. As I had decided to focus the biography on his public life, this was not a major handicap. The second exception related to his involvement with the President's Foreign

Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) and the Intelligence Oversight Board (IOB). With regard to his specific activities in PFIAB and IOB, Cherne had taken an oath "not to reveal classified information acquired through their service on the Board." He revealed no such information in my discussions with him; neither would he comment on material collected by Freedom of Information Act that he believed related to classified PFIAB documents.[2]

However, I investigated in depth his relationships with American intelligence agencies. After extensive discussions, interviews, and a careful examination of his papers, I uncovered no evidence that he ever worked for any intelligence organization except for those relationships noted in his public record regarding his membership on the PFIAB and IOB. I located no evidence suggesting that he, or any of the humanitarian organizations with which he was connected, knowingly sought or accepted funds from the Central Intelligence Agency or any other intelligence organization.

A rich, voluminous quantity of material on Leo Cherne has survived. By my count Cherne wrote three major books, dozens of professional reports, introductions, or chapters in books, more than four hundred published articles, and thousands of letters. His testimony in Congressional hearings is extensive, as is the coverage of his press conferences. During just the twenty-six–year period from 1944 to 1970, Cherne appeared on 283 radio and television programs and gave 836 known speeches; many scripts have survived, as have many audio and visual tapes. In addition, articles about Cherne or references to him appeared in thousands of magazines, newspapers, and books. Within his papers, the most helpful sources were these: Cherne's 143-page autobiography written in 1943, and almost solely concerned with his early work with the Research Institute; his 578-page Oral History, compiled from July 14, 1960 to December 23, 1961 by Jerrold Auerbach, then of Columbia University; and his various autobiographical notes written in the 1980s and early 1990s. Also helpful were copies of taped interviews with Dale van Atta in 1984 and 1985, used as the basis for his *Reader's Digest* article; and my own interviews in 1998.[3]

Much of the material resides in his archive at the Special Collections and Archives of Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library. *Rescuing the World* focuses on Leo Cherne's public life and is not intended as a comprehensive biography. I encourage others to delve into his life and archive.

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without the support of Leo Cherne. It was not just his fascinating story or his willingness to open his

archives. It was his infectious enthusiasm that kept this work on task during the crucial early months. When Leo died in January 1999, this support and assistance was continued by Lionel Olmer, former undersecretary of commerce and currently partner at Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton & Garrison, Washington, DC, and one of Cherne's closest friends for the last twenty-five years of Cherne's life. Without his encouragement and help, this book could not have been completed. Likewise, John Richardson, former assistant secretary for educational and cultural affairs at the State Department and friend of both the author and Leo Cherne, made the initial contact and provided constant help and assistance with this work. Both Olmer and Richardson read and reread the various versions of the manuscript and responded to thousands of questions.

Many thanks go to Marie Gomez, Cherne's executive assistant at the Research Institute of America and the International Rescue Committee, who conducted research, kept up the encouragement, and constantly assisted the author with locating sources and scheduling interviews; Henry Denker, writer, New York, who was Cherne's dearest friend; Dale van Atta, writer, who kindly forwarded transcripts of his 1984 and 1985 interviews with and about Leo Cherne; and Adri de Groot, who forwarded his 1992 taped interviews with Leo Cherne. I particularly want to thank Leo Cherne's brother, Jack Cherne, who answered many questions about his brother's early life and forwarded photographs for inclusion in this book. In addition, I gratefully acknowledge all those who agreed to be interviewed: Henry A. Kissinger, former secretary of state, currently president of Kissinger Associates; Vera Blinken, member of IRC's board; James Butler, former executive, Research Institute of America; Andreas Castellano, former official at the United Nations; David Cohen, former director for operations, Central Intelligence Agency; Ira Cooperman, Cherne family relative; Fred Demech, formerly of the President's Foreign Intelligence Board and currently director, Intelligence and Systems Information, Systems Operation, TRW; Peter Drucker, president, Peter Drucker Foundation; Henry Goldstein, president, Oram Associates; Gilbert Jonas, former staff member of the Research Institute of America, and currently president, Gilbert Jonas Associates; Valerie Lanyi, professor of rehabilitation medicine, New York University Medical Center; Shepard Lowman, former deputy assistant secretary of state and current vice president for policy, Refugees International; Lionel Rosenblatt, president, Refugees International; Karen Salzmann, wife of Richard Salzmann, late president of the IRC; Jay Schulberg, vice chairman, Bozel, WW Inc.; Liv Ullmann, actress and vice chairman international, International Rescue Committee; Winston Lord, former U.S. ambassador to China and assistant secretary of state, currently co-chairman, International Rescue Committee;

Leonard Sussman, former executive director of Freedom House and longtime friend of Cherne; John C. Whitehead, former deputy secretary of state and Cherne's successor for eight years as Chairman of IRC, currently president of AEA Investors; William J. vanden Heuvel, former U.S. Representative, United Nations European Office, Geneva, and currently vice president, Allen & Co.; Claiborne Pell, former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Marge Levenstein, wife of Aaron Levenstein, one of Cherne's closest friends; Mort Feinberg, former employee of the Research Institute of America; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, U.S. Senator and lifelong Cherne friend; Mary Ellen Burgess, Cherne's former secretary at the Research Institute of America; Warren Meeker, former president, Research Institute of America; Marcel Faust, former director of the IRC office in Vienna, Austria; Jerry Steibel, former associate at the Research Institute of America; Nancy Starr, volunteer, International Rescue Committee; Rose Kraut, Cherne's assistant at the Research Institute of America during the late 1930s and early 1940s; James Strickler, former dean of the Dartmouth Medical School and currently co-chairman, International Rescue Committee; and many others.

I particularly thank the current and former staff of the International Rescue Committee who kindly answered my frequent questions, searched for documents, and reviewed early drafts of this book. These include Alton Kastner, Robert DeVecchi, and Carel Sternberg. I also want to thank the many librarians who located material for this book, including Howard Gotlieb, Special Collections and Archives, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University; Library of Congress; New York Public Library; St. Louis University; Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University; Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor; Special Collections and Archives, Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis; and University Archives at New York University. I also want to thank several people who reviewed all or portions of the manuscripts and offered editorial comments. In addition to those already mentioned, I thank Tanya Kling, Michael Beiser, Bonnie Slotnick and Karla Paul for their comments and suggestions.

While all suggestions and critical comments were appreciated, this work reflects only my opinions and judgments, and I am solely accountable for all interpretations and errors that may appear.

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

> [In 1928,] a devastating hurricane ripped through the Caribbean, leaving Puerto Rico and its people in desperate need of food, water, and health supplies. The survival of thousands was in grave doubt. We students at Morris High School were suddenly summoned to the auditorium for an unscheduled assembly. Principal Bogart opened the proceedings, but not with the usual prayer or a reading from the Bible. Instead, he introduced a student who had been the instigator of this unusual assembly. Onto that stage burst a skinny, dark complexioned student, with a shock of unruly black hair, not unlike many other students at Morris High School in those days. But one thing about him was different. His eyes. Even from the ninth row I was struck by his eyes. The intensity in his voice matched the look in his eyes. And after he described the devastation left in the wake of that hurricane, he asked—no, he demanded—help of any kind, in any amount, whatever we students could spare. And more, he insisted, tomorrow bring food, in cans and containers. Food! That afternoon, the money began to pour in. Quarters, dimes, nickels, even pennies, our lunch money. The next morning bags and boxes appeared in the corridors. By day's end they were filled with cans of food. I made my contribution and then consigned the matter to history. I did not know on that day that I was witnessing the beginning of a lifetime of dedication to victims of all forms of suffering, whether inflicted by nature or by man, which ofttimes is the most devastating.
>
> —Henry Denker, February 3, 1999

Prologue

America is a land populated by successive waves of diverse peoples. Some migrated in prehistoric times; some arrived in chains and slavery; others came as indentured servants and prisoners; but most emigrated because they chose to enjoy religious freedom, escape from somewhere or someone, or seek their fortunes in a new world.

Early European immigrants mainly came from the United Kingdom and Ireland, with a smattering from other Western and Northern European countries. In the 1880s this immigration pattern changed as peoples from Southern and Eastern Europe flooded into the United States. The pace of immigration exploded in 1900: nine million people arrived in American cities.

When H. G. Wells visited America in 1905, he described the mix of these newcomers as a "long procession of simple-looking, hopeful, sunburnt country folk from Russia, from the Carpathians, from Southern Italy and Turkey and Syria." He saw confusion and little coherence in an America filling with these immigrants speaking different languages, practicing different religions and possessing different cultural heritages. Wells lamented the likelihood that these immigrants would ever become real Americans. Most did not speak English, and Wells predicted they were not likely to learn it in America. It was most probable, claimed Wells, that these immigrants and their children would end up working in factories, dividing the United States into two nations: one, a rich aristocracy descended from Western European immigrants; and the other, a dark-haired, darker-eyed, uneducated working class from Central and Eastern Europe.[1]

Five years after Wells's visit, it looked as if his prediction were sure to come true. New York had more Italians than Rome, more Jews than Warsaw, more Irish than Dublin. Immigrants from all over Eastern and Central Europe poured into America. A large number of these were Jews from Eastern Europe. This latter group was not welcomed by mainstream America or by the 450,000 Jews who had previously migrated from Germany. The *American Hebrew* asked: "What can we do with these wild Asiatics!" The United Jewish Charities in New York encouraged some Jewish immigrants from Russia to return home and tried to talk others out of emigrating in the first place. Pushed out by pogroms, however, Jews streamed out of Russia and Eastern Europe; whole villages and families emigrated en masse to America.[2]

The Jews who arrived during the first years of the twentieth century were commonly portrayed as wild, unkempt anarchists. A bill introduced into Congress sought to exclude Jews by imposing a language test that excluded Yiddish and Hebrew. The Jewish community united to defeat the bill. This victory energized a resurgent Jewish community to form or expand relief agencies for the refugees. Many such organizations served all immigrants, not just those who were Jewish. And Jews moved into active leadership roles in America. Some led America's most effective and radical labor unions, while others published Yiddish and other periodicals, which endlessly debated socialism, anarchism, and Zionism.

Despite Wells's prognostication, Jewish immigrants quickly learned English, demonstrated a passion for education unmatched by other immigrant groups, and became firmly grounded in American patriotism. Wells might have extrapolated this outcome from his visit to a Jewish school on New York's Lower East Side, where he observed immigrant children waving American flags and singing in English, "God bless our native land."[3]

Early Life

Among the mass of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe was one Max Chernetsky, who had lived the first two decades of his life near Kishinev, a city in Bessarabia, then a part of Russia, but now in the nation of Moldova.[4] He was a compositor by trade and was a member of the social democratic underground. He frequently printed underground anti-Czarist tracts, which circulated freely in Kishinev. In retaliation for anti-Czarist activities, Russian officials instigated a pogrom, resulting in the massacre of many Jews in the city during April 1903. Almost all the remaining Jews in Kishinev left Russia. Max Chernetsky's family migrated to New York's Lower East Side, while he himself went to England, where he acquired a working knowledge of the English language. His first employment was in a canning factory. When he discovered an amputated finger in a food-filled can, he decided to pursue printing as an occupation. Around 1905, he traveled to Canada, and a few months later entered the United States through Ellis Island.[5]

In New York, Max Chernetsky took up printing, the only trade for which he was skilled. To better his prospects, he attended night school, where he met Dora Bailin. She had been born in the ghetto of Disna, a small town then in Russia—today, Belarus. Her parents had arranged a marriage for her in Russia. Rather than go through with the unwanted wedding, she left Russia in about 1906, joining her brother in New York. She landed a job as a garment worker, but she too was interested in bettering herself, so she attended night school.[6] Max and Dora fell madly in love but chose not to marry. For them it was not a question of strong mutual commitment or deeply held affection: those were undeniably present. But as socialists and agnostics, they did not believe that any religion or government agency should officiate over their personal commitments to each other.[7]

Around 1910, Max Chernetsky and Dora Bailin merged their lives and their economic fortunes when they purchased a small business on East 138th Street in the Bronx and lived in a railroad flat above the store. Here, they

framed pictures and sold lithographs, prints, engravings, and plaster of paris busts of Bach, Brahms, and Berlioz.[8] At the time, the area was predominantly Irish, and the Chernetsky's store was in the shadow of Saint Jerome's Catholic Church. As there was not much of a market either for picture framing or art reproductions, Dora and Max struggled to make ends meet. Both worked from dawn to late into the night, trying to keep the business afloat while they explored more financially rewarding directions.

Into this world, Leopold Chernetsky was born on September 8, 1912. Leo's Aunt Lena moved in with the family and filled in for his working parents. Because Max Chernetsky was an agnostic, he was separated from the Orthodox Jewish members of his family who lived on Delancey Street on New York's Lower East Side. Max's father, Leo's grandfather, taught Hebrew, and what Leo learned about Judaism in his early years, he learned from his grandfather. When Leo was nine, his brother Jack was born.[9] Neither received their Bar Mitzvah nor did they frequent the synagogue in their early years.

Leo entered PS 9 in 1917. Elementary school was a traumatic experience for him. Specifically, he had problems with grammar and with the English language in general. He was left-handed, and teachers forced him to use his right hand. Forty years later he still remembered the pain of the teacher's ruler hitting his knuckles. In addition, he was not athletically inclined or particularly friendly with the other students.[10] His parents, however, drummed into him the importance of education, an education that they had been denied. While Leo was never a scholar and indeed rebelled against formal schooling, he did become socialized by the educational experience and became an avid reader.[11]

During this time, the Chernetskys converted their shop to a stationery store that also sold candy and school supplies. They were the first franchised dealers for Hallmark Greeting Cards in the area. The Chernetskys then became the first franchised dealer in the Bronx for the Eastman Kodak Company and sold film, cameras, and supplies to photographic studios. By the end of World War I, the demand for photographic equipment and supplies had skyrocketed. They acquired a car, permitting Max to pick up and deliver supplies to customers throughout the Bronx. The business moved to larger quarters, and a printing press was installed in the back of the new store. This press printed private and commercial stationery for a variety of small businesses in the South Bronx, advertising brochures, personalized Christmas cards, and other odd jobs.[12] As a result of selling photographic equipment and supplies, Max became interested in photography as an art form and subsequently won awards for his photos, including first place in the amateur division of an international contest in Paris.[13]

Despite their improved financial circumstances in capitalist America, the Chernetskys retained their radical political interests. Dora proved to be an intellectual who loved the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Sigmund Freud. Max and Dora quickly became a part of New York's intellectual milieu, fusing unequal parts of socialism, agnosticism, nihilism, and idealism. They were ardent supporters of Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist. Max was also a member of the Workmen's Circle, a Jewish fraternal and insurance society, which brought together others with similar social democratic political perspectives.

Friends frequently dropped by their home for serious discussion. Small talk was not possible for these intense young people. As Leo later summarized: "They worked hard, they hoped hard, they dreamed hard, they argued hard." Relaxation for them only postponed their intellectual exploration.[14] Cherne began reading books and taking part in these discussions, which offered him the opportunity to converse about important topics of the day. What was more significant, his parents permitted him to disagree with them, thus encouraging independent thinking.[15]

Within a few blocks of the Chernetsky's store, many ethnic, religious, racial, and immigrant groups mingled. When Leo was old enough, he explored the neighborhood on foot, and often hitched rides on the trolley or trains to visit other boroughs and neighborhoods of New York. In this way he met all kinds of people, including immigrants from all over the world. Leo frequently joined his father in making deliveries; and the family made occasional longer trips to the Catskills, Kingston, Poughkeepsie, and Rhinebeck. Those journeys were possible only when a national or Jewish holiday attached to a Sunday made it possible to close the store for two days. Even though his parents were not religious, they nevertheless closed their store on Jewish holy days to avoid upsetting religious neighbors and partially to demonstrate their respect for their own Jewish heritage. These holy-day trips upset Leo's grandparents, who were very religious. His grandmother was not only horrified at the thought of her son driving a car on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, but equally certain that God would literally inflict physical retribution for these lapses. On one occasion, the family did have an auto accident on Yom Kippur, confirming the grandparents' direst imprecations. On another Jewish holy day, the car would not start due to a dead battery. Leo was embarrassed as the family carted their luggage home, encountering on their way their more devout neighbors heading for the synagogue.[16]

Two developments during this period of Leo's life were defining ones. The first was his membership in a gang. He had never been particularly sociable with kids his own age. A local gang was the first group that accepted

him, which was all the more surprising as he was the only member of the gang who was of Jewish heritage. Gang members played games in the street, gathered on rooftops, evaded the police, sneaked into movies, loitered around stoops or in front of the candy store, rallied to defend their territory against marauding attacks from other gangs, or sallied forth into another gang's turf. For the most part, the activities of this gang were nonviolent, but at times fists, elbows, and an occasional knife were employed. Leo often came home with bruises; occasionally his parents retrieved him from the police station.[17]

The second development opened up a very different world, when his parents acquired an annual subscription in the Family Circle of the Metropolitan Opera House. The Chernetsky parents loved music. Since they could not afford to close their store, one parent would go at a time. Sometimes they would take a friend; often they took Leo.[18] In junior high school, Leo's music teacher suggested that he audition for the Metropolitan Opera Children's Chorus. In each session, the chorus rehearsed two or three hours, three times a week. For the three years that Cherne sang in the chorus, he enjoyed extraordinary experiences backstage at the Metropolitan, where he met the opera stars of the day.[19] During three succeeding years, he sang in *Carmen, La Gioconda, Jewel of the Madonna, Mephistopheles,* and he wangled occasional opportunities for parts in operas ranging from *Der Freischütz* to *La Boheme.*[20] The children were taught to sing phonetically and Cherne never understood a word he sang, but he maintained a love for music and especially opera throughout his life.

Leo entered Morris High School in 1926. As the school was overcrowded, he ended up at the Hunt's Point Annex, four miles away from the main campus. He participated in the drama club, performed in plays, and joined a debate club. At the Annex, he rehearsed for and acted in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew.*[21] He was next scheduled to play Willie Baxter in Booth Tarkington's play, *Seventeen*. Unfortunately, he acquired a mastoid infection that required surgery. Before the play opened, he was discharged from school. However, when the student playing Willie Baxter took ill, Leo came back just to perform the role, although he was in excruciating pain. The school records report that he saved the play. Despite his own illness, it was his "enthusiasm that made the play the astonishing success it was," according to a contemporary observer.[22]

Until his fourteenth birthday, Leo spent summers in Jewish camps in the Catskills, such as the Workmen's Circle Camp.[23] Through the Workmen's Circle, his family became friends with Henry Aron, a respected member of the Republican Party in the Bronx. Aron was a customs inspector, a patron-

age job. Just before Leo's fifteenth birthday, Aron landed him a job as an ordinary seaman on the Ward Line, which sailed for the Caribbean. To prepare for the trip, Leo grew a little moustache and spent time in the sun to get a darker complexion; he wanted to look like a hoodlum in hopes the crew would not pick on him as a newcomer. But his new tough appearance did not help him. Although he was seasick the first day, he was nevertheless thrown onto the floor and was forced to work from five in the morning until eight at night. The crew stole his camera, knife, and money. When the ship docked, Leo was assigned backbreaking manual labor carrying loads of sugar and bananas on and off the ship. Had he been able to easily jump ship during the first few days, he would have done so. His stubbornness and courage were simply not enough. He later reported that he was glad that the first trip lasted two weeks. Had it been any shorter, he would never have sailed again. However, he survived the appalling conditions and mastered his fears. By the time the ship docked in New York, he was ready to sign on for another voyage. In all Leo completed four trips to the Caribbean in 1927 and additional trips the following summer.[24] By his final trip, he was a veteran sailor treated with respect by the crews he sailed with, despite his youth.[25]

When Leo entered the fall semester of his junior year at Morris High School, the big topic of discussion was a hurricane that had devastated Puerto Rico. At a meeting of the school's Service League, of which he was a member, Leo announced the formation of a "Hurricane Committee." At the time, few Puerto Ricans lived in the Bronx and Cherne knew none. His parents had not been particularly interested in events in Puerto Rico. Newspapers' reportage was intense, but newspapers had covered many previous natural disasters, to which neither Leo nor other students paid much attention. However, this disaster was different. Leo had been in the Caribbean a few weeks before, and the ship had sailed through the edge of a hurricane. As the self-appointed head of the "Hurricane Committee," he requested an assembly of the entire student body to solicit aid for Puerto Rico. The principal consented, and Leo volunteered to make an impassioned plea. Henry Denker, a student attending the assembly, reported that there had never been anything like it at Morris High School: money poured in that afternoon, and the following morning, food cans filled bags and boxes in the halls.[26]

As Leo later commented about his speech, he had a need to "seek the public platform," and the hurricane provided the opportunity to gain public recognition. His involvement in the Puerto Rican hurricane relief provided a model that served him well in future years: quick intervention in seizing the public platform, altruistic motives, positive responses of others, and record-breaking results. Another immediate outcome of his hurricane

speech was that Leo was elected president of the student body, the first time in the history of Morris High School that a junior won that post. The following year he was reelected, another unprecedented event. He asserted that the prime qualification for success was "nerve," which he defined as "overpowering self-confidence."[27] This too provided a model for his future approach to life.

In August 1929, Leo's father legally changed their family name from Chernetsky to Cherne.[28] In his senior year, the newly named Leo Cherne was selected editor of the high school newspaper, the *Morris Piper*. Henry Denker, a student who had witnessed Cherne's Puerto Rican speech, became the paper's columnist and humorist. The two worked together under the strict supervision of an English teacher named Julius Drachman. Outwitting Drachman's edicts united Cherne and Denker as co-conspirators. The two bonded, and that friendship lasted a lifetime.[29]

Cherne was involved in other extracurricular activities during his high school years. He was actively interested in the events and issues of the day. One hotly debated issue during the 1920s concerned two Italian-born anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In April 1920, they had been arrested for the murder of a paymaster and guard in Massachusetts. At the time of their arrest, both men were armed. During the previous year, Congress had passed a law permitting the expulsion of immigrants who were anarchists. When they were apprehended, Sacco and Vanzetti, fearing deportation to Italy, gave false statements to the police. Despite contradictory evidence, both were found guilty of murder in July 1921 and sentenced to death. The Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld their convictions. After their execution in August 1927, mass demonstrations erupted, raging against this presumed injustice. One mass rally was held in Madison Square Garden in New York.

Denker and Cherne believed the Sacco-Vanzetti verdict was a miscarriage of justice, and they longed to demonstrate their support by attending the rally. Neither Cherne nor Denker could afford the entrance fee. Cherne went to his father's printing press and printed a very official-looking letterhead for a fictitious newspaper, *The Westchester Daily Sentinel*. On the letterhead, Denker typed a message: "To Whom It May Concern, This is to inform you that staff reporters Leo Cherne and Henry Denker have been assigned by the *Sentinel* to cover the Sacco-Vanzetti rally in Madison Square Garden. We insist they be treated accordingly." Boldly, they approached the press gate of Madison Square Garden and presented their bogus credentials. After thorough scrutiny by uniformed guards, they were escorted to the press section in the very first row.[30]

From the age of sixteen to twenty-one, Cherne was a member of Aleph Zadik Aleph (AZA), a youth organization of B'nai B'rith. After he joined, he pulled Denker and other friends into the AZA chapter. With their support, he was elected chapter president. Through the AZA, he participated in oratorical and debate contests. This gave him his first real experience of travel in the United States. He took part in oratorical contests in Jersey City, Hartford, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Springfield, Massachusetts. His early themes promoted peace and railed against munitions makers, who, according to the wisdom of the time, had caused World War I. Cherne was required to leave AZA at the age of twenty-one, so he graduated into the Junior Order of B'nai B'rith. There he continued to participate in oratorical contests, becoming the "international oratorical champion."[31]

Cherne's favorite speech was "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" about William Randolph Hearst, Father Charles Coughlin, Huey Long, and Hugh Johnson. With Hitler's increasing power in Germany, Cherne added the Führer's name to his enemies list. On April 3, 1932, Cherne tried to organize a citywide mass meeting sponsored by the AZA to deal with "this new international problem which has recently arisen, and which is best denoted by the name of its chief exemplar—Hitlerism." Cherne's purpose was "to combat this venomous spread of fascism."[32] At this time in isolationist America, these stands were courageous, and not everyone appreciated Cherne's fiery speeches. Particularly offensive to some was his inclusion of Hugh Johnson, then the head of the National Recovery Act (NRA), as one of Cherne's apocalyptic horsemen. Cherne saw disturbing similarities between Roosevelt's NRA and public-works programs in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.

Cherne was advised by Judge Albert Cohen, a family friend, to tone down his remarks. Some Jewish leaders believed that Jews should maintain a low profile and avoid provoking anti-Semitism. Aggressive assaults on anti-Semites might well serve as an excuse for attacking Jews. When Cherne continued to speak out forcefully, he was censured by his B'nai B'rith lodge. Through this experience, he learned to handle censure from others, particularly when he was convinced that he was right and his critics wrong.[33]

New York University

While at Morris High School, Cherne gave little consideration as to what to do after graduation. Cherne's grades were not distinguished, but he had

excelled in extracurricular activities. He had won the Harvard Prize, an award given by Harvard University to outstanding high school students. The newspaper article about the award reported that he had overcome a speech impediment in elementary school to star in dramas and public speaking. This award opened up the possibility that Cherne could attend Harvard, but he cavalierly dismissed it. For a while, he considered attending Duke University in North Carolina. In the end, he remained in New York. Ineligible to enter New York's City College because his grades were not good enough (or so he later claimed), Cherne and Henry Denker enrolled in New York University (NYU), which at the time accepted almost anyone with the financial wherewithal to pay the tuition.[34]

At NYU Cherne decided to major in journalism. He had been the editor of the Morris High School student newspaper and he enjoyed writing. During the fall of Leo's freshman year at NYU, Elias Jacobs launched the *South Bronx News* to compete with the *Bronx Home News* with its circulation of 100,000 in the Bronx and Harlem. Jacobs was interested in selling advertising to local merchants and banks. Cherne saw the first few issues and approached Jacobs with the proposition that he convert the *South Bronx News* into a newspaper catering to the South Bronx, Harlem, and Northwest Queens. Jacobs agreed and named Cherne editor. Cherne wrote the content and Jacobs acquired advertisements from merchants to cover costs. Cherne expanded the newspaper and renamed it the *Tri-Boro News,* advocating the construction of a single bridge to connect three boroughs of New York: the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan. Cherne called this then-hypothetical bridge the "Lewis Morris Bridge." Morris (whom Cherne's high school had been named after) was the only signer of the Declaration of Independence from the Bronx.

As two out of three of the newspaper's circulation areas were slums, it is surprising that the *Tri-Boro News* achieved a circulation of 30,000. When the Depression hit the Bronx full force in 1933, advertisers dried up and the newspaper folded. But the idea of connecting the three boroughs was a good one. The bridge was constructed in 1936; however, it was named the more descriptive "Tri-Borough Bridge."[35]

Cherne's first year at New York University was actually spent in an annex at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building. He had no serious academic orientation, and he found the courses unstimulating with two exceptions. One was an English class, in which he was required to write a paper. At the time, Prohibition was still the law of the land, and Cherne noted that newspapers were filled with stories about deaths on the Bowery as a result of the illegal sale of "smoke," a mixture of wood alcohol and

water, which had a smoky appearance. It sold for fifteen cents a bottle—sometimes just a dime. Every morning ambulances would arrive on the Bowery and cart away the bodies. Some victims needed medical treatment, but many died from alcohol poisoning. Cherne convinced Lillian Herlends, his English teacher, to give him credit to live for a month on the Bowery and write up the experience, provided that a newspaper agreed to publish his stories. The editors he approached at *The Daily Mirror* bought the idea.[36]

Cherne lived on the Bowery disguised as a bum frequenting speakeasies. He reported daily the addresses of the places that sold smoke, which *The Daily Mirror* dutifully published. The police read the stories and raided the speakeasies identified in Cherne's articles. This had two results: the speakeasies threw comatose bodies into the alleys behind their establishments rather than out the front door, where they would have been visible; and every proprietor on the Bowery began looking for the informer. At first Cherne had been able to order smoke and spill it out without drinking it, but as things heated up, he had to drink what he ordered. He remained on the Bowery for ten days, living in flophouses. One morning, he awoke to find himself piled with the others in the back of a speakeasy. He'd had enough. *The Daily Mirror* was happy with the results and his teacher gave him an A+.[37]

The other class that Cherne enjoyed was a sociology course on organized recreation. In this course, students were required to examine and report on recreational entertainments. As a result of this class, he found himself watching movies for eight to twelve hours per day. (Due to his writeup of this experience, the Department of Sociology nominated him to the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, on which he served for two years.) Cherne also frequented pool halls as part of his study. His parents had purchased a pool table for him when he was sixteen, and now Cherne honed his skills and became a pool shark. He devoted special efforts to his study of dance halls, often staying out until they closed at 2:00 A.M. Persuaded that his assignment required him to learn more about the women who charged a dime a dance, he dated several of them. In his paper for the sociology course, he offered a frank explanation of what two dollars worth of tickets could buy, much to the dismay of the instructor.[38]

Cherne continued his interest in journalism: he became the editor of the NYU student newspaper and he again tried his hand at publishing, this time with *The Putnam Times*, catering to the citizens of Danbury, Connecticut, and Brewster and Pawling, New York. His parents had property in Putnam County which Cherne visited regularly during this time. *The Putnam*