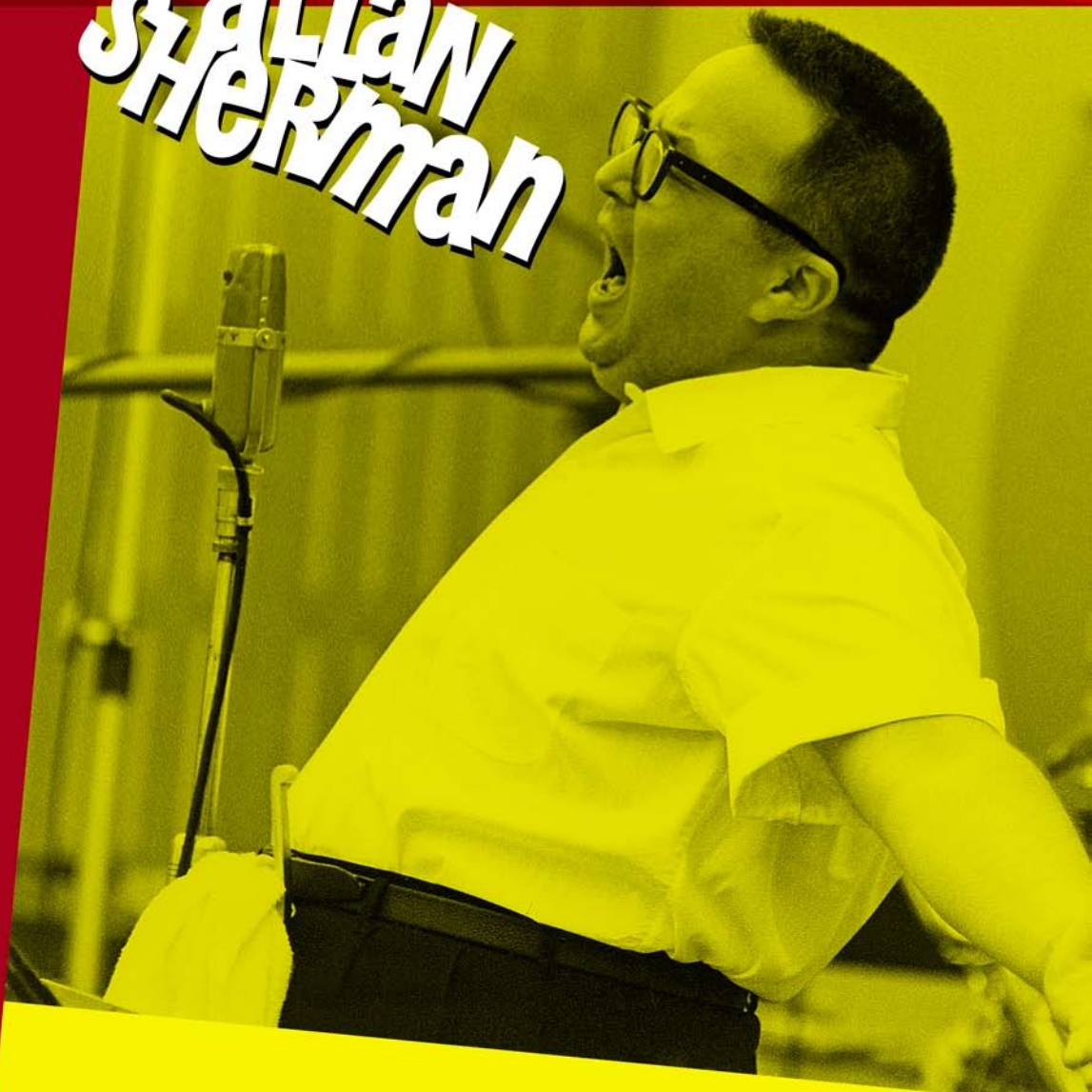


Mark Cohen

Overweight Sensation

THE LIFE AND COMEDY OF

Shallan SHERMAN



**overweight
sensation**

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SHALIAN SHERMAN

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FOR DANIELLE

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Prologue

OVERWEIGHT SENSATION

On October 26, 1962, it still wasn't clear everything would be okay and the Cuban Missile Crisis would not lead to nuclear war. There were two days to go in the thirteen-day showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union. Missile construction in Cuba charged ahead, and Fidel Castro urged the Soviets to bomb America if the U.S. invaded Cuba. It was a good day to count your blessings, especially if you were a top government official in Washington. So Newton N. Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, wrote a note of thanks to Allan Sherman.

“Dear Allan Sherman: MY SON, THE FOLK SINGER has brought brightness into our lives in some difficult hours here. It's very, very funny.”

Minow was not the only Washington official to put Sherman's new million-selling album on the turntable when things got crazy. In the Camelot years, President John F. Kennedy and his wife Jackie swung open the doors of the White House to welcome America's greatest artists, musicians, actors, and writers. But in addition to the energy of Leonard Bernstein, the sober gravity of Pablo Casals, the sturdiness of Carl Sandburg and the elegance of George

Balanchine there was a record album by a fat man with a coarse voice singing about seltzer, the garment industry, and why being a knight wasn't really so great (aluminum pants). President Kennedy had trouble sitting through a cello concert. He grew fidgety during chamber music pieces. But he loved the Jewish song parodies of Allan Sherman.

"I can't say how much we have enjoyed the record," wrote the president's special assistant, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in a November 6, 1962, note to Sherman about his first album, *My Son, the Folk Singer*.

That record lifted Sherman from obscurity to the heights of American celebrity and kicked off one of the most sensational winning streaks in American comedy. Between October 1962 and August 1963, Sherman released *My Son, The Folk Singer*, *My Son, The Celebrity*, and *My Son, The Nut*. All three albums went gold, sold a total of 3 million copies, sparked a fifteen-city concert tour and landed Sherman dozens of national television appearances that brought his comedy to tens of millions. Audiences across the country laughed and applauded as he thumbed his nose at classic American songs. "The Streets of Laredo" became "The Streets of Miami," where Jewish businessmen gunned it out and the loser "crumbled / Just like a piece halvah." "The Ballad of Harry Lewis" replaced "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and in Sherman's version the warehouse stored "the drapes of Roth," not grapes of wrath (difficult to mark down).

He played Carnegie Hall; befriended Harpo Marx; discovered Bill Cosby; met President Kennedy; sang for the National Press Club, the U.S. Department of Labor, and Lyndon Johnson's presidential campaign; and very incongruously participated in a New York orgy frequented by luminaries including George Plimpton. The country's greatest songwriters and composers and comedians recognized his talent. Richard Rodgers had worked with Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein II, two of Broadway's best lyricists, and he explored partnering with Sherman to create an original musical. Johnny Mercer and the great Irving Berlin sent congratulations through mutual friends, and Harpo Marx showed him off to Jack Benny and George Burns. They loved him, and so did much of the country. His fame hit its peak in the summer of 1963 with the extraordinary international success of "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh! (A Letter from Camp)," which won Sherman a Grammy Award and

was turned into a children's book and even a board game. As an account of the record industry noted, in the early 1960s Sherman personified The Moment.

Sherman's completely unexpected and extraordinary success changed American comedy and popular culture. For the first time since the end of vaudeville more than a half-century earlier, Jewish dialect humor spread to mainstream culture and led to fame and fortune. Ethnicity was back.

The ethnic identity business has long been a very Jewish occupation. From the time of Israel Zangwill's 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*, American Jews have struggled to balance "the competing impulses of assimilation and ethnic self-affirmation." In the first decades of the twentieth century, with the encouragement of a country in an inhospitable mood, many Jews sacrificed ethnicity. To ensure it would die out, Congress in 1924 dramatically reduced immigration. Sherman was born in Chicago that year to parents who, as Saul Bellow described the phenomenon, "brought so much enthusiasm, verve, love to this American life" they surrendered almost their entire selves to it to become totally American.

His parents' lives did not work out so well, and Sherman rejected their approach. Instead, he took inspiration from his maternal grandparents, the Yiddish-speaking immigrants Esther and Leon Sherman. He owed them a great debt of love, and in return he was determined to find a way to make America accept, celebrate, and enjoy their accented and ungrammatical Jewish voices and stories. He found the way in a comedy that hijacked the country's songs and dubbed them with his grandparents' quirky brand of English. Strange new words came out of old tunes. The characters were not saying what they were supposed to be saying. Tradition was both preserved and made new.

Sherman crafted the perfect comic model for a country that continues to transform immigrants into Americans. Nobody has ever done it better.

**overweight
sensation**

Introduction

HUMPTY DUMPTY

By September 1936, Allan Segal was an eighth grader who had been around. Just shy of turning twelve, he was already on his second last name, third father, and fourth school, and he still had one more name and four high schools ahead of him. But for now the years spent rambling between Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York were over and he was settled in Los Angeles, a city he first saw in 1930, when the twenties boom had burst but had done its work. Los Angeles had become a great city, a great port, a major industrial center and the capital of show business, which was his business. He'd put on some weight, but that could be funny, and he was a funnyman.

Within a year of his return to Los Angeles he had made his mark. In November 1937, his name appeared in his junior high school's gossipy "Guess Who" newspaper column, which noted that Segal was "roly-poly" and also "very witty." In February 1938, he contributed a letter to the *Los Angeles Herald's* "Listen, World," column that won him a cash prize, and in June he spoke on "The Passing Parade of Invention" at his ninth-grade graduation. Segal's funny and sometimes coyly risqué school newspaper articles, exuberant wit,

and performance as a comic character named Roundy Robins in a school theatrical called *Laundry Mark* made him a celebrity among his fellow students. They were an elite group from tony Hancock Park, where stringent zoning ensured the houses were large enough and the lawns deep enough to attract Howard Hughes and Mae West. Segal blossomed there, and in the spring of 1938 he cracked the code of his comic gift and discovered his life's work while knocking out some copy at 300 McCadden Place, probably in room 100-M, where Mrs. Munscher held homeroom at John Burroughs Junior High School. That is where Allan Segal first got in touch with his future as Allan Sherman.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a train
Happily singing "Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen";
All the conductors and all the porters,
Couldn't get Humpty out of his quarters!

In four lines the parody nails the themes of Sherman's childhood world as well as his future life and career. At thirteen he knew who he was and what he liked. Not all the news was good. Humpty Dumpty was and would remain the perfect metaphor for the rotund, damaged Sherman. The ill-fated egg man suggests the fatal cracks in Sherman's personality that in this little ditty, and in his later life, he papered over with charm, brains, and wit. (Eventually he ran out of material.) Crucially, the parody links Jewishness and singing to happiness. It combines a Jewish work — the originally Yiddish song "Bei Mir Bistu Shein" that in 1937 was an English-language hit for the Andrews Sisters — with the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme, making it just a step and twenty-five years removed from "Sarah Jackman," Sherman's fame-making 1962 parody of "Frère Jacques."

Just as important as Humpty Dumpty is the fact that he is on the move.

The Union Pacific rail link between Los Angeles and Chicago was one of the most important elements of Sherman's unsettled childhood. The rhyme doesn't say where Humpty is traveling, but Allan often headed to Chicago to live with his Yiddish-speaking maternal grandparents, Esther and Leon Sherman, whom he came to love deeply. Other relatives felt differently. "My grandmother would not look at Leon and Esther Sherman," said Evelyn Raden, one of Allan's cousins. "She said Leon was a *shikker* and Esther a whore.

She would not be on the same side of the room as them.” Whatever drinking and fooling around took place paled next to what young Allan learned about another Chicago relative. His paternal uncle, Abraham Coplon, was a dentist, nudist, raw foodist, and author of *Man Alive! An Analysis of the Human Struggle*, which condemned as evil medicine, bread, cooking, and clothing. “He screwed every woman in Chicago who was standing,” said Lee Cooper, a relation. “If they were standing he made them lie down.” Allan was friendly with his cousin Morris, Coplon’s son, who as a boy in the 1930s decided that Allan’s mother, Rose, was crazy. “It didn’t take me long to see that she was a congenital liar. Rose couldn’t tell the truth if her life depended on it. Clinically she could be labeled schizophrenic. She lived in a fantasy world, literally.”

Allan faced a family life at the same level of headlong eccentricity when he traveled in the opposite direction, from Chicago to Los Angeles. That is where his mother met and married, in a church, her last husband and Allan’s third father. Dave Segal was a Jewish con man and gangster whose name became a byword in the family for illegal or merely crazy shenanigans. “Anything that was remotely shady was a Dave Segal thing,” recalled celebrity defense attorney Mickey Sherman, one of Allan’s first cousins. “One day the doorbell rang and he was trying to hide in our basement in Connecticut. He just sold the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami to Cuban gangsters, but he didn’t own it. My father wouldn’t let him in.”

So it is irrelevant which way Allan Segal’s Humpty was heading. Either destination had its travails. What is vital is that Humpty was on the train and *did not want to get off*. “All the conductors and all the porters / Couldn’t get Humpty out of his quarters!” He was happy in the physical space between departures and arrivals, and happy also in the identity he created between those places, an identity that was mid-point between his old world Yiddish grandparents and fiercely Americanizing mother. Sherman’s contribution to American popular culture was this hybrid midpoint comedy that preserved ethnic identity without pretending he was not also steeped in American culture.

He invented this hybrid comedy to preserve his sanity. The riot of family energy, sexuality, *Yiddishkeit*, Americanism, recrimination, enmity, and criminality that greeted Allan on all sides had by 1938 become his own. Those forces fueled and necessitated his wit. He was helpless against the power of

his erratic mother, who shipped him back and forth across the country like a forwarded letter, but with his words he could move others and become a power himself. He was angry, eager to be sexually adventurous, hungry for fame, and pleased to be Jewish. The adolescent Sherman was also excited by his own talents, confidence, and daring, the scope of his comic invention, his facility with language, the riches of English and the pungency of Yiddish, and how valuable all these comic gifts could be, how much he could get away with and how much money he might one day make from humor. His Yiddish-inflected Mother Goose rhyme appeared in the 1938 John Burroughs Junior High *Burr*, the yearbook for and by graduating ninth graders, and in it is another Sherman article called "Humor for Sale." The piece zeroes in on the size of the humor market and imagines a comedy department store that "would be the busiest store in the world. That is because people love to laugh." At the lunch counter customers order the "fried Jack Benny Special," and on "the Humorous Poetry Floor one can spy customers asking for 'A parody on "Hiawatha" to wear with baby blue.'" Best of all is the joke department. "Floors upon floors containing drawers upon drawers of jokes." Sherman did not need a career counselor. He knew what he wanted to do.

That optimistic vision of comic commerce presents Sherman as a wide-eyed, spirited ingénue, but he also mocked claims to innocence. In "Catastrophe," Sherman displays a shrewd sexual flirtatiousness that seems unlikely for a boy not yet thirteen. But maybe it was adult insistence on childhood innocence that permitted the poem to appear in the October 7, 1937, *Far and Near*, his junior high school's student newspaper. Surely Sherman did not know what he was saying. But the poem indicates the opposite is true.

What teacher, walking down the street
With a fast and very steady beat,
Came upon a safety lad,
Said, "Hello," and was very glad
To see what a fine committee we had.
The safety boy was not too slow,
In turning round to say hello,
And then with his terrible black and white stick,

He gave Miss _____ a terrible nick.
To think that one who's cracked up to be our savior
Could be guilty of SUCH behavior.
He turned, bowed, said, "I'm sorry.
I'll be a better boy tomorry."

The sexual imagery is inescapable. The stick/nick rhyme evokes a host of unmentioned but unavoidable four-letter words. But even more attention grabbing is the comic pretense of shock. The cynicism here, complete with an insincere apology that winks at the reader with the cutesy "tomorry" is breathtaking. Before he was thirteen the student journalist possessed the world-weariness of a hardened hack reporter from Ben Hecht's *Front Page*. And the slangy expression, "cracked up," that explodes in the middle of the key line signals emerging writing talent as well as the wisenheimer attitude that's coming our way. "To think that one who's cracked up to be our savior / Could be guilty of SUCH behavior." Captain Renault in *Casablanca* was similarly shocked to discover that Rick's Café allowed gambling.

Sherman clearly knew plenty about what the world was cracked up to be and what it really was, about so-called saviors who neglected to guard those under their care because they were off satisfying powerful urges. His jaundiced view of human nature was reflected in his report cards, which monitored his level of Social Concern. Sherman's teachers were concerned about his lack of it. On his January 29, 1937, report card, four of his six teachers agreed he "needs to improve." Six months later on June 25 it was a landslide. Six out of seven teachers gave him a thumbs-down in the category. His bad attitude was a side effect of the lessons he learned from his mother's and grandmother's and uncle's loose ways, lessons "Catastrophe" proves were not lost on him. An ungovernable desire for that most problem-causing human need ran in the family, and Sherman early discovered his own way to satisfy it. Humor was how to get, and get away with, the act suggested in the poem, and also the poem itself. About that social concern he was expert and canny and needed no improvement. The sexual rewards of wit were as valuable as humor for sale. When Sherman's comedy later won him fame it paid off big in sexual currency. Money wasn't everything.

Comedy greased the wheels of sexual expression and it did the same for anger. Beneath the photograph of Segal's homeroom class in the 1938 *Burr* the forty-four ninth-graders were given a chance to express their individuality. The results were underwhelming. Each student stated his Undertaking, Saying, and Ambition, which accounts for the patriotic "USA" that appears in a vertical row under every name. Nearly all of Segal's classmates offered predictable drivel. Bob Rothman's undertaking, saying, and ambition were "Fool around," "Howdy partner," and "bartender." George Schweitzer's undertaking was also "Fool around," but his saying was "Oh, yeah." Dolores Rubin's saying was, "My oh my." Philip Simon's was, "Nuts to you and I do mean foo." The preponderance of Jewish names was not unique to homeroom 100-M. On September 24, 1936, the *Far and Near* reported, "30% of J.B. Pupils Observe Jewish Holidays." The previous week, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, 650 students were absent from school. But this population largely defied laudatory ethnic stereotypes. There is little evidence that John Burroughs was a hotbed of witty invention. Many dared to be dull.

Allan Segal stood out. His undertaking was "Miraculous gustatorial feats." The dictionary disagrees with Segal about the existence of "gustatorial," but it seems necessary as a step beyond mere gustatory, suggesting an act requiring the death-defying instincts of someone gladiatorial. Sherman had such instincts, and for the rest of his life miraculous gustatorial feats remained part of his repertoire of self-destruction. His aim was "Editor in chief, New York Times." This was also grand, but it certainly pointed in the right direction. During his senior year at John Burroughs he took a journalism class and served as city editor of the *Far and Near*. But the truest measure of his ambition revealed itself in his saying, which at eleven words was five times the length of most, and three times greater than all but a few. When measured by the syllable, however, and also comic sensibility and exultant literacy, Sherman's saying dwarfed the others like a Gulliver. He wrote, "I shall reward your impertinence by striking you upon the cranium." The saying presents a cynical view of the "reward" that awaits the one who speaks inappropriately. Being impertinent is one way of speaking your mind and rebuking authority, but being funny is smarter.

A cliché in the telling of a humorist's life is a trauma, sadness, or despair that comedy never assuages, and there is no escaping that cliché here. Of the

five articles that Sherman wrote or cowrote for the *Burr*, four are about homelessness and migration. His childhood was practically nomadic, and he was powerfully drawn to people on the move, people in train stations, trailer camps, and tourists. In a brief article called, “There’s No Place Like Home — On Wheels!” he visited Pepper Grove, where “children, pets, relatives, and large families live in trailers.” Walking around, “license plates of every color, size, and shape, greet the eye.” Then he noticed something else. “Those people are happy! They eat from crude dishes, cook on crude stoves. Nevertheless, they have the feeling of roughing it and everybody is happy.”

Everybody wasn’t happy in the Segal household. Daddy number one disappeared after the divorce from Mommy. Daddy number two died blaming Mommy for the fact that his wife was trapped in wartime Europe. Daddy number three was cheating his ex-wife out of her alimony and child support. Mommy pretended to be younger, more American, and less frequently married than she was. Allan had no Social Concern. Superficially, his family was like the ones at Pepper Grove. He moved around the country a lot and then settled in Los Angeles. But there was something different about his migration, his family, his people, and that difference would fascinate Sherman and form the basis of his comedy.

One WITZ-KRIEG!

Among the two million Jews who left Europe for America at the turn of the twentieth century was a passel of Lustigs. Between 1906 and 1920, siblings Anna, Abraham, Fanny, and Saul Lustig arrived in Chicago as single adults in their late teens and early twenties. Their sister Esther joined the family exodus in 1909, but she left Stashev, in Russian-ruled Poland, as the twenty-six-year-old wife of Leon Sherman and the mother of two daughters, Rose, four, and Kate, three. More than any of her siblings, Esther carried the greatest weight of the old world with her when she arrived in America, and that weight burdened her daughter, Rose, who struggled mightily to shrug it off. It was a gift to Rose's son, Allan Sherman, who saw in it something to anchor his rootless life.

"To Grandma and Grandpa, Jewishness was a basic condition of life," Sherman wrote. "Everybody was meant to be Jewish; the fact that some people weren't was some kind of clerical error on God's part."

The patriarch of the Lustig clan followed his five children to Chicago in 1921, and he imparted another key legacy. Most Stashev Jews worked as craftsmen, as merchants dealing in cloth, wheat, lumber, and leather, or as home-based

laborers doing piecework for garment makers or shoemakers. But Esther's father did none of the above. Instead, he practiced a risky trade that will forever instill fear in prospective in-laws. Leib Lustig was a musician.

The Lustig family's search for a better life began in 1883, when Leib, twenty-two, left his birthplace in the tiny Polish shtetl of Ozarow for the neighboring but larger Stashev. Sometimes even a musician must be practical. Leib's daughter Esther was a baby, there were more on the way, and in Ozarow the Jews were so poor four children sometimes shared one bed on a mattress made of straw. Three slept side by side and the fourth lay across the bottom at the feet of the others. An even more practical move would have been for Leib not to be a musician, but that decision was out of his hands. He had to play the violin. By the time he was born it was an established family calling. Jews in the Ozarow region adopted European-style family names beginning in 1805, and many took the name of their occupation. One name for the musicians who played at weddings and festive holidays was merry makers, or *lustik-makers*.

So the best Leib could do was find a larger and richer town than Ozarow, which might also have been too strict and monolithic in its religious observance for the Lustigs. Leib was a rule-breaker and he encouraged family members to follow in his footsteps. "He called my mother old-fashioned because she did not smoke cigarettes," said Cyril Gilbert, one of Leib's great-grandchildren. That outlook made Ozarow a poor fit. In the mid-nineteenth century, it held fewer than eighteen hundred people, with two-thirds or about twelve hundred being Jews. That number was small enough for a powerful Hasidic dynasty to exert a large influence, and Ozarow became home to such a dynasty in 1812, when Rabbi Yehuda Arie Leib ha-Levi Epstein, a disciple of the Seer of Lublin, became a rabbi there. The Seer taught that certain holy men had "divine authority to lead a community," and in Ozarow Epstein's descendants led the town's Hasidim for over a century, until the last Epstein immigrated to America in 1927. Religious practice was pervasive. Among the orthodox, even letters to family began "by citing the Torah portion of the week." In Ozarow, "taking the right road meant going straight from *cheder* [Jewish primary school] to yeshiva."

For Leib Lustig the right road led to Stashev. It was not a great town, but with eight thousand people, including more than five thousand Jews, it was

quadruple the size of Ozarow, and that meant four times as many weddings. Stashev also was home to a military garrison of eight hundred soldiers, which was great news for Jewish tavern owners and brewers, who also had children to marry off. In short, it was a town amenable to musicians, and when Leib arrived there the Jewish community was grooming several that in the early twentieth century were recognized more widely, such as the pianist and conductor Israel Schwoger, violinist Moses Rotenberg, and violinist and violin craftsman Jakub Cymerman.

Leib's move paid off for his son Abraham, who was born in Stashev in 1883 and became a violinist like his father, and it appears that Esther also liked the world of her father's *lustik-makbers*. Her marriage to Leibush Sherman was almost certainly arranged by a matchmaker. Marriages in Ozarow, for example, were still being arranged as late as 1938, and Esther married no later than 1903, when she was about twenty-one. But any good matchmaker must look for promising signs that a deal will close, and the match between Esther and Leibush had many.

First, Esther's father and the proposed groom were both from Ozarow, and they shared almost the same name. Leibush meant Little Leib. Plus, the Leibush name was a good sign. Ozarow's revered early nineteenth-century Hasidic rabbi, Yehuda Arie Leib ha-Levi Epstein, was known as The Great Leibush. But the clincher must have been that Leibush Sherman was also a *lustik-makher*. Allan Sherman wrote that in the old country his grandpa Leibush was a *grom*. The word is Yiddish for rhyme, and is close to a term that describes a *lustik-makher* skill. In addition to musicians, there were poets at weddings who recited rhyming songs, known as *gramen zogn*. As Sherman wrote, it was a case of "My Grandfather, The Folk Singer."

After the assassination of Russia's czar in 1881, the terrible pogrom against the Russian Jews of Kishinev in 1903, and the suppressed Russian Revolution of 1905 and subsequent pogroms, great masses of Jews left Eastern Europe for America. That is where everything changed.

Leibush Sherman landed alone at Ellis Island on October 30, 1907, and headed for Chicago, where his sister-in-law Anna Lustig had arrived the year before. The not unusual plan was for Leibush to work and save money and then send for his wife and children, which is what he did. Leibush worked as a

presser in Chicago's garment industry and after eighteen months of separation his wife Esther landed in New York on March 18, 1909, with her daughters, then called Rivke and Kreindel. Nine months later on December 19 Esther gave birth to a son, Morris.

But the match that looked promising in Stashev did not work in America. The new country exposed the differences between husband and wife. Leibush, now Leon, developed a longing for the old country and his orthodox little hometown of Ozarow. He was one of seven men to ask members of Chicago's Stashev *landsmanshaft*, an immigrant mutual-aid society, to change its name and accept members from nearby towns. Despite his residence in Stashev, Leon remained an Ozarower, never mind a Chicagoan. In response to this plea, on June 7, 1909, the Stashev organization became the American Progressive Society, a name precisely wrong but part of the comedy of immigrant life, an unintentional parody. Leon was anything but an American progressive. As one of the founders of this newly chartered *landsmanshaft*, he was, like other such founders, "steeped in Eastern-European Yiddishkeit, the age-old traditions and ideals of the Yiddish-speaking diaspora."

It was not the best résumé for success in America.

"Leon was a smart and frustrated person," remembered granddaughter Gilbert. "He became an alcoholic."

Esther remained true to her roots, as a Lustig.

"Esther screwed around," said Carol Selsberg, another granddaughter. "They took in boarders and Esther was in bed with the boarders."

Allan Sherman's ex-wife, Dee Golden, corroborated the account. "Esther necked with all the men that came to the door. More than that, is what I hear."

She also liked to play poker, and Sherman wrote she was what pros call "a mechanic," a dealer who could cheat undetected. She certainly did like to cheat. "She was ruthless," Golden said. "She never paid for anything." Esther sneaked into theaters, made phone calls and then demanded that operators return the money, saying the call never went through. She was a classic example of the *kurtn shpiler*, the card playing and gambling Jewish women that smoked cigarettes, used rough language and humor, and "understood that [life] included *good times*." There were many in Chicago like her, and Saul Bellow celebrated the type in Grandma Lausch. Like that character in *The Adventures*

of *Augie March*, Grandma Esther was a cutthroat, loving, and thoroughly un-sentimental immigrant woman who always had her eye out for an advantage and a useful lie. Esther's husband, Leon, detested this behavior, and it is likely Esther considered him a fool. "They fought a lot and gave each other dirty looks," said Gilbert. Selsberg said, "They hated each other." Selsberg's brother, Mickey Sherman, summed it up with comic understatement. "It was several miles from the Cleaver family." As their marriage deteriorated, Leon took to drink. "He walked around with a flask in his pocket," remembered Helen Stricker, a relation. Leon managed to keep his job by staying sober during the day. "He started drinking when he came home," said relation Vivian Mailand, and then kept drinking until he passed out for the night.

Meanwhile, daughters Rivka and Kreindel, now Rose and Kate, and son Morris grew up in a freedom bordering on chaos. "Morris had burns from trying to cook for himself as a child," said his daughter Carol Selsberg. "There was no parenting." When Esther did cook, dinner was a free-for-all. "Everybody reached in to grab," recalled Golden. "I didn't have any. I wasn't used to grabbing." The rush might have stemmed from her reputation in the kitchen. "Esther was a wonderful Jewish cook," Gilbert said. "Best matzo balls I ever tasted." Rose and Kate soon entered dancing contests and won prizes, and all of this whirling activity and sexuality and aggression and misery were common in 1920 among Chicago's two hundred twenty-five thousand Jews, and especially so in the immigrant quarters such as the Humboldt Park area, where the Sherman family lived at 1226 North Wood Street, and also around the corner at 1800 West Division Street, amid more than sixty thousand newcomers to the area. Moralists cautioned young Jewish women to "stay clear of the dance hall's charms," but the appeal of these sexually charged environments was irresistible. Young people were unfettered by the constraints and stability their parents knew in the *shtetl*, where tradition, religion, and parental and rabbinical authority ruled. In America, they experienced a "wild sense of freedom" that was as "disorienting as it was intoxicating." The early twentieth century Jewish sociologist Louis Wirth was not amused by what he saw happening in Chicago. Immigration "constitutes a crisis in the immigrant's life," he wrote. And when the bond between the individual and the Jewish community weakens, these newly liberated people suffer "personal disorganization."

A disrupted and disorganized life applied to immigrants generally, but conditions were exacerbated among Jews. America filled them with an extraordinary sense of gratitude and hope as an escape from poverty and persecution, and they fervently embraced their new country. Newspapers serving other immigrant groups admonished female readers to preserve ethnic or religious traditions. The *Jewish Daily Forward's* women's page urged Americanization. Jewish immigrants were also on average younger than those of other groups because Jews more commonly arrived as families, with far fewer single men seeking to make their fortune and return home. Neighborhoods bursting with recently arrived teenagers and young adults filled the dance halls frequented by Rose and Kate, and dancing created a readership for Yiddish sex guides. Margaret Sanger's guide to birth control, *What Every Girl Should Know*, appeared in Yiddish in 1916 and 1921. Ben Zion Liber's *Dos geshlekhts lebn*, or *Sex Life*, saw four editions from 1914 to 1927.

Chicago itself turned up the heat that brought young Jews to a boil. It was not New York, where Jews were a multitude that changed the character of the city. In 1920, Chicago's Jews were just 8 percent of the population, and Jews Americanized more quickly there and were less comfortable asserting visible signs of ethnicity. They took the lead in a national campaign to stamp out the vaudeville performances and "low comedy songs" that poked fun at Yiddish accents and Jewish life, behavior, and appearance. In 1913, the city's Anti-Stage Ridicule Committee and the new Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith protested such entertainments. Young Jewish immigrants everywhere were driven to master proper English. In the immigrant novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the hero undertakes a "long excruciating struggle to shake off his accent," and in the immigrant memoir *The Promised Land*, "Americanization is measured by [the author's] conquest of the 'dreadful English th.'" But Chicago's Jews were especially keen to achieve these goals. In the Midwest, Jews "were bound to be aware of 'America' as a more compelling geographic and cultural reality," and this encouraged assimilation. Saul Bellow hammered this point home. His Augie March announces, "I am an American, Chicago-born." As one writer slyly noted, "I am an American, New York-born" would have "lacked the same power of conviction."

Esther escaped the worst repercussions of this unbridled freedom, pressure

to become an American, and embarrassment about how she spoke and who she was. She and her husband were girded by their upbringing in a traditional Jewish world. They “kissed a Mazuzah [*sic*] as they walked through their front door, and were shamelessly unselfconscious about being Jewish,” Sherman wrote. This comfort and pleasure in being Jewish impressed him greatly and was crucial to his later fame. In the 1950s, when he began singing Jewish parodies of Broadway musicals for his friends, that ease was something American Jews realized they had lost and wanted to regain. “This is the great thing about the Jews described by Sholom Aleichem,” Alfred Kazin wrote with amazement in 1956. “They enjoy being Jews, they enjoy the idea of belonging to the people who are called Jews.” Sherman became a star with comedy that communicated that same pleasure.

It was not a pleasure for Sherman’s mother, Rose. Though born in a *shtetl* she arrived in America at the age of four and completely lacked her mother Esther’s unselfconscious Jewishness. She grew up without tradition in a world of anarchic freedom that was “a sort of moral void,” and she was surrounded by an atmosphere that objected to depictions of people who spoke and behaved like her parents. Rose got the message and did what she could to leave Jewish life. Louis Wirth predicted her case in an ominous warning. “The immigrant is braced by certain Old World loyalties, but his child may grow up loyal to nothing whatsoever, a rank egoist and an incorrigible who will give us vast trouble before we are done with him.”

Or her.

Hello Muddah

Sherman wrote that his mother was a “beautiful-looking little thing with brunette hair and mischief in the eyes, and she believed life to be a bowl of cherries.” It is a description more suited to a child than a parent, but some think that is what makes it accurate. “She had the mentality of an eight-year-old kid,” said Morris Coplon. “How she dressed, how she put on her makeup, a different hairstyle every month, forever buying new clothes. Rose was a very sick woman.” Other relations paint a similar picture, but with less condemnation. “Rose liked to live dramatically and big. She loved nice clothes,” said Gilbert.

“She had a dynamic personality.” Rose also was the one family members went to for advice. “She was halfkidding, half serious when she said about husbands, ‘Don’t be a dummy. He’s gonna walk off with the money and you’re going to be left with the kids.’ Shrewd about real life,” Gilbert said. Mincing words was not her style. “Rose was like Roseanne Barr, very much like her,” Mailand remembered. “Rose had a faculty of saying — she said what she felt like.”

A 1925 photograph of Rose and her sister, Kate, is a study in contrasts and suggests that Morris Coplon’s less charitable assessment is closer to the truth. Kate is dressed conventionally and looks intelligent and amused. Rose is dressed exotically in a flowing robe over an embroidered dress, with one ring on her right hand and two on her left. But it is her expression that sets off alarms. Her fixed gaze expresses an angry misunderstanding with the world.

Rose Sherman was born in Ozarow on May 16, 1904, according to the citizenship papers completed by her father, who had a greater allegiance to the truth than his wife. But when on January 17, 1920, the U.S. government census-taker stopped by the Sherman household, Esther told him Rose was fourteen and born in 1906. Esther manipulated her daughters’ ages for convenience. Making Rose younger narrowed the gap between Rose and her sister, Kate, who was born on August 20, 1906. “Esther entered Kate and Rose as twins in school,” Gilbert said. Both Rose and Kate attended Chicago’s Tuley high school in the early 1920s, but neither graduated.

An early photograph agrees with family assurances that when Rose was young she was slim, attractive, and stylish, with painted lips and a hairstyle familiar today from silent film images. But she was also tiny, and in the photograph her left arm that faces the camera looks so soft, weak, and childish that it is startling to see it end in a hand sporting an engagement ring.

On July 17, 1922, Rose, eighteen, married Jacob Carp, a twenty-three-year-old shipping clerk in a clothing factory. Rose needed to escape her parents’ unhappy marriage, and Carp was a good catch because he had something going for him Rose would always find attractive. He was not obviously Jewish. Though of Russian Jewish heritage like herself, he was born in Manchester, England, lived there until he was sixteen, and undoubtedly spoke with an English accent. This made him a rare bird. Some Russian Jews immigrated to America via England to save money (it was cheaper than embarking directly

from the continent), but they were relatively few. Even fewer grew up there, so English-accented Russian Jews were in short supply. That Rose found one is the first sign of many that she was on the lookout for ways to distance herself from her origins.

There is no record of Rose's divorce from Carp, but on October 18, 1923, she married her second husband and Allan Sherman's father, Percy Coplon, aka Perry Coplon, aka Percy Copelon, aka Perry Copelon. Rose never quit changing his name and finally gave up trying to perfect him and just divorced him. But Coplon's outsized personality, adventurous exploits true and imagined, long absence, reemergence, pledges made and apparently broken, and bizarre and widely publicized death hammered many cracks into the shell of his Humpty Dumpty son.

Hello, Fadduh

In 1901 the city of Birmingham, Alabama, was only thirty years old and did not have much tradition or history to interfere with its energetic pursuit of the new. But as if to ensure that Peretz Kaplan would never be encumbered by any idea that had some dust on it, on March 25, 1901, fate sent Birmingham a "wild wind and conscienceless storm" to destroy anything old, dilapidated, or past its prime. Three months later, on June 21, 1901, Peretz, five, and his mother, Keile; brother, Benjamin; and sister, Chane, landed at Ellis Island. Their destination was the so-called Magic City that seemed to spring fully-formed as a center of iron and steel manufacturing from the ground beneath it, rich in iron ore, coal, and limestone. In 1880 Birmingham's population was 3,086. In 1893 it was 50,000. Miners dynamited into the hillsides, steel mill furnaces pumped black smoke, nine railroad lines connected the city to the rest of the nation, and with the arrival of Peretz and his mother and siblings Moses Kaplan had reunited his family for the first time since he immigrated to Birmingham in 1898. Two additional children, Abraham and daughter Sime, had arrived from Europe on June 8, 1900. It was time to begin anew.

For Moses, that meant continuing with the old. He joined Birmingham's only Orthodox synagogue, K'hilah K'nesseth Israel, which was founded in 1889 to serve the city's small but growing population of traditional East European

Jews. K'nesseth Israel catered to "gentlemen whose devotion to Judaism has never permitted them to diverge from its most orthodox aspects," and for the rest of their lives Moses and his wife Keile, now Kate, ate kosher food, observed the Sabbath, spoke Yiddish within the family, and in general lived as they had in Lizensk, a shtetl in Austro-Hungarian Galicia. Some few concessions were made. Kaplan became Coplon, a spelling pioneered by Moses's brother Dave, who was the first in the family to settle in Birmingham. Peretz became Percy and sisters Chane and Sima turned into Annie and Celia. But the truly great changes took place without Moses' permission.

"Percy was strictly a southerner," recalled Joe Resnick, a family friend. "He wasn't so much ingrained with Judaism. He was an American boy."

In the South, the school day commenced with prayer and readings from the New Testament, including "the most offensive tirades against the Jews in the Book of John." Though prejudice against Catholics and blacks took precedence over discrimination against Jews, "assimilation was highly desirable."

This was not a problem for the young. In June 1911, Birmingham High School published a literary journal called the *Mirror*, and in it a contemporary of Percy's, high school senior Sara S. Sewelovitz, published "The Call to the Open." It recounts an early morning spent watching laborers march to work. "One I remember had a remarkably pleasing countenance that held a suggestion of great power behind it. I've seen him often since, coming from work, his face grimed with toil, yet still having that expression of latent power."

Power was catnip to Percy, and so was its deployment to experience risk, speed, and danger. He was a man of high spirits. "Percy was one of the most convivial men you ever met," said nephew Morris Coplon. "He had that earthy humor of the South. Southern blue collar."

Percy inherited his exuberance from his father. "You want to write about a character? Mose Coplon was a character. He could sell shoes to a billy goat and get him to wear 'em and like 'em," said Resnick. Percy channeled that spirit into diagnosing, fixing, and racing automobiles, a symbol of progress in the mostly poor and rural South, and America's greatest surrogate for male power. Birmingham's machine- and engine-dominated world seeped into Percy's bones and nerves. Morris Coplon remembered that Percy "could take a metal bar, listen to one end, put the other end to the engine" and figure out

what was wrong. Another nephew, Daniel Isenberg, said, “In my mind he could do anything. He was my god.”

Percy’s affinity for machinery displayed itself early. By the time he was seventeen he appeared in the 1913 Birmingham City Directory as a machinist, and on October 29, 1913, Percy served as the “mechanician” for a racecar driver competing in a hundred-mile contest at Birmingham’s State Fair grounds. The *Age-Herald* reported that Percy rode in car 14 with driver W. R. Lawson and was with him when it “left the track at the southwest turn and crashed through the inner fence, injuring both occupants seriously.” As it turned out, Percy was not badly hurt. But the incident gave him the chance to issue the jaunty boast to a reporter from the *Birmingham News* that, “he didn’t reckon you could kill a tough nut like him.” After that, publicity joined machines as something Percy loved.

He remained in Birmingham until June 1918, when the First World War took him to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where he worked as an instructor, probably in automobile repair. Percy wasn’t satisfied with this story and invented a more daring and romantic one that had him flying bi-planes in Europe, a story Sherman loved and apparently believed even as it distorted his sense of reality. “Percy said he wanted to go to Europe as a flyer but never did,” Morris Coplon said. His 1918 draft registration card hints that his breezy attitude toward the truth was causing family trouble. He named his mother as his nearest relative, not his father. The traditional Moses and Percy the southerner lived in different worlds, and even their bodies seemed to reflect their opposition. Percy’s registration card noted that at age twenty-one he was already “stout.” His father remained “a well-built old man,” Isenberg said.

After the war Percy returned to Birmingham and in January 1919 founded the Coplon Auto Company. A year later he started the Minute Change Lever Co., a manufacturing concern, and on September 6, 1920, he drove a Chevrolet 490 and won a ten-mile automobile race that was part of Birmingham’s Labor Day weekend celebrations. The race was for amateurs, and Percy’s win was partly due to luck. According to a newspaper account, another driver “led the race until his engine developed ignition trouble in the fourth mile.” This tarnished victory was followed by failures. The local paper reported Percy would race again in the State Fair in October, but he did not, and his two businesses

apparently closed, because in 1922 he was no longer his own boss but worked for the Alabama Auto Service Company. His ventures likely were victims of the now forgotten 1920–21 financial depression. Percy was twenty-six, estranged from his father, and a failed businessman. It was time to move on.

The place to go was Chicago, where Percy's older brother, Abraham, moved in 1918 to practice dentistry and become a well-known eccentric. Notoriety was inevitable. There were not many dentists who were also raw foodists, nudists, free-love advocates, and public philanderers. Abe dedicated his 1928 book, *Man Alive! An Analysis of the Human Struggle*, to his mistress. "My dad was marvelous, unique, strange and complex and probably manic depressive," said Dorothy Macarus. Lee Cooper said that when George Gershwin died, Abe announced, "I could have saved him.' He was convinced he was a healer." That belief could be dangerous. Cooper's father went on one of Abe's "crazy diets of just water for thirty days, wasting away into virtually nothing to cure ulcers. My dad never recovered from this absolutely stupid regimen."

Percy later followed a more extreme version of the diet. It cost him his life. But in June 1923, things were looking up. Percy had a new business in Chicago, the Roco Motor & Garage Company at 2342 West Division Street. "Roco" was a composite, named for Rose Coplon. In June 1923, however, there was no Rose Coplon. She did not acquire that name until her marriage to Percy on October 18. But if the Roco Motor name had no basis in fact, it was a true sign of the young lovers' unwary exuberance.

Percy's love of fast cars found a counterpart in Rose's love of a fast life, of dance halls and showy clothes, and they were both child immigrants who grew up divorced from their Jewish heritage and in love with their very American hometowns and their very American selves. Rose's first husband may have spoken like an Englishman, but Percy topped that with his Southern drawl. It was just as un-Jewish, and American to boot. Acting like a southerner was then a shortcut to Americanization, and Jewish songwriters capitalized on this trend with tunes such as Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band," and George Gershwin's "Swanee." The composers and fans of such tunes became "facsimile southerners," real Americans, and by marrying Percy, Rose did the same.

The two were married in Chicago by Judge H. Sterling Pomeroy. There was no Jewish ceremony for these natives of the East European shtetl, and their

marriage certificate records the first improvement Rose made to her new husband. He married as Perry Coplon. Percy did not take this change very seriously. On legal papers for Roco Motor he continued to use Percy. But the change was a warning of the confusion that would become their life and the life of their son.

Shake Hands with Your Uncle Max

Allan Sherman was born in Chicago on November 30, 1924, as Allan Coplon. Better make that Copelon. A close look at the handwritten birth certificate reveals that Allan's last name was first spelled Coplon, and that a small awkward upper case E was later wedged between the p and l. This was not the end of the awkwardness. Percy himself was unsure of the new family name. Unused to writing Copelon in a cursive hand he wrote "Coprlon." "Rose started spelling Coplon with an *e* because people were mispronouncing it," said Coplon relation Jackie Sheinberg. That is, people pronounced it as it was written, almost identically to the more common Kaplan. But Rose wanted it pronounced with a long o, something the addition of the *e* would indicate. The only explanation for Rose's irritation is that without the *e*, Coplon was too Jewish.

If Rose had not made the retroactive change to her son's family name, the Jewish sounding Coplon might have undermined her choice of hospital. She gave birth at Norwegian Deaconess at a time when Chicago Jews flocked either to Mount Sinai or the larger Michael Reese, a Jewish-founded and funded institution that was a leader in pediatrics. In 1922, it inaugurated the first nursery in the world dedicated to the care of premature babies. But taken together Norwegian Deaconess and the new Copelon name was meant to rescue Allan from a Jewish identity Rose found intolerable. Many facts about her life were intolerable. Where Allan's birth certificate asks for Rose's place of birth, she wrote Chicago, not Poland or Russia. The form also requests Rose's age. In 1923 she stated, accurately, that she married Percy at age nineteen. Now, a year later, Rose said she was eighteen.

She may have been crazy, but she was not lonely, and neither was her son. Allan was surrounded by a throng of family members that left its mark on many of his parodies, from "Sarah Jackman" with its motley collection of

relatives to “Shake Hands with Your Uncle Max,” about a traveling salesman who returns home and is greeted, in fact mobbed, by family. The young Allan experienced this overflow of Jewish family connections with their curious accents and curious names sometimes curiously spelled. They were his first audience and his first fans. “As a child he was a celebrity,” said Golden. “He stood in the middle of the room and entertained.”

He probably played to a full house. On the Lustig side there was Great-grandpa Leib; Grandma Esther and Grandpa Leon; their children Rose, Kate, and Morris; and at least fifteen of Rose’s aunts, uncles, and cousins. Uncle Abraham Lustig, the violinist, was married to Blanche. They gave their two daughters the rhyming and unusual names of Vera and Irma. Aunt Anna Lustig married a jeweler named Samuel Strowiss, an odd spelling of the common Strauss. Their children were Rose, Jeanette, and Aaron. Uncle Sol Lustig was a barber married to Dora, and they had two boys, Nathan and Theodore. Finally there was Aunt Fanny (Lustig) Friedman, and her son, Charlie. The Coplon side was short on uncles and aunts, contributing only Percy’s brother, Abraham, and his wife, Emma, but they made up for it with their six children Helen, Julian, Herman, Milton, Morris, and Dorothy.

It was a paradise for a born performer, and Allan inherited the performing gene from all sides: Great-grandpa Leib, the musician; Grandpa Leon, the wedding singer; Grandpa Moses Coplon, who could sell shoes to a billy goat; his father, Percy, an exhibitionist that loved press coverage; and his mother, Rose, a natural actress that played a life role from her own script. With relatives like that, Allan had to compete for the limelight. He managed it. “Allan mentioned that his folks were proud of him. He made them laugh as a kid,” said friend Leonid Hambro. “Even as a kid, he already exhibited a gift with words.”

It was a kooky Jewish paradise rich in family attention and love that Sherman never forgot and always longed for. It did not last long.

Paradise Lost

On April 23, 1925, with the economy booming, Percy and a partner each contributed \$4,000 to expand and incorporate Roco Motor, but as in Alabama, his business soon foundered. May 15, 1928, brought the first sign of trouble,

when Roco Motor was late in filing its annual report and paying the required \$10 fee. On November 10, Illinois asked the Cook County sheriff to collect the still unpaid amount. By then the Copelon family had left its home at 1158 Christiana Street and was living with Leon and Esther Sherman at 2909 West Division. Roco Motor officially died on June 14, 1929, and the Copelon family went into reverse. Percy, Rose, and Allan alternated between living with Rose's parents and Percy's brother Abraham, his wife, then five children, father-in-law, and a boarder. With perfect timing, the August 23, 1929, Chicago Jewish *Sentinel* reported that, "Mrs. M. Coplon of Birmingham, Alabama, has left for Chicago, where she will make her home with her sons, Dr. A. G. Coplon and Percy Coplon and their families at 1550 North Hoyne avenue." Her visit, without her husband, was another sign of Moses's estrangement from his sons, but it was a blessing in disguise. There was no room for an additional visitor. With their mother's arrival, the crowded Coplon apartment rivaled the ship's cabin in *A Night at the Opera*, and if Groucho Marx had been there he might have told Mrs. Coplon, "You know I had a premonition you were going to show up." The stock market soon crashed, the Depression began, and by the time Allan turned five on November 30, 1929, he was well into his chaotic childhood.

After Chicago did not work out, the place to go was Los Angeles, where Rose's uncle, Abe Lustig, had moved in 1928. He provided Rose a bit of family security without the overwhelming family, and Los Angeles offered Percy business opportunities. In 1930, the Los Angeles metropolitan area of 2.3 million people was the national symbol of the "triumph of motor transport." Best of all, Los Angeles was America's "gigantic improvisation." The city lacked traditions, and that went double for the Jewish community. Jewish life in Los Angeles was "post-Judaic, post-secular, and remote even from an earlier subculture of Jewishness." It was a city made for people like Rose Coplon/Copelon and her husband Percy/Perry. In Los Angeles, they would be free to be anything they wanted. The city attracted many midwesterners with a utopian vision of a suburban life that was "spacious, affluent, clean, decent, permanent, predictable and homogenous." In other words, everything that Rose and Percy were not, and everything their son Allan would mock and parody.