

"With this tour de force, McBride remains the godfather of Spielberg studies."
—NIGEL MORRIS, author of *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light*

A close-up portrait of Steven Spielberg, an older man with grey hair, a beard, and glasses, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is wearing a dark sweater over a striped shirt.

STEVEN SPIELBERG

A B I O G R A P H Y

Second Edition

ff JOSEPH MCBRIDE

**S T E V E N
S P I E L B E R G**

A Biography

SECOND EDITION

Joseph McBride

ff

faber and faber

To Jean Oppenheimer

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He is arguably the most influential popular artist of the twentieth century. And arguably the least understood.

– MICHAEL CRICHTON, 1995

“CECIL B. DESPIELBERG”

FIRELIGHTS CAPTURE EARTHLINGS IN FILM PREMIERING TUESDAY

— HEADLINE IN *THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC*

A SEARCHLIGHT swept the night sky of downtown Phoenix as a limousine pulled up under the theatre marquee. The director and his stars stepped out, bedazzled by the glare of strobes and exploding flashbulbs. Inside, a packed house awaited the world premiere of a science-fiction epic from American Artist Productions. For the next two hours and fifteen minutes, the audience watched enrapt at the spectacle of mysterious colored lights emerging from the heavens to abduct humans for an extraterrestrial zoo. At the night’s end, the box-office take from that screening at the Phoenix Little Theatre, at seventy-five cents a head, was enough to put the movie into profit.

The date was March 24, 1964. The movie was *Firelight*. Its production cost was under \$600, and it was the first feature-length film written and directed by a high school junior named Steven Spielberg.

The precocious seventeen-year-old billed himself as “Steve” in the credits, not Steven, but some of his classmates mockingly called him “Spielbug.” He may have looked like a “nerd” and a “wimp” those years, as he himself recalled, but he was already making a name for himself in Phoenix with his moviemaking. His mother proudly called him “Cecil B. DeSpielberg.” A Jewish kid who “felt like an alien” while growing up in a succession of increasingly WASPish suburbs and turned to making movies as a way of finding the social acceptance he craved, Steve Spielberg had been shooting films obsessively for more than seven years, with a monomaniacal dedication that made him virtually oblivious to schoolwork, dating, sports, and other normal adolescent pursuits.

“I was more or less a boy with a passion for a hobby that grew out of control and somewhat consumed me,” he said years later. “... I discovered something I could do, and people would be interested in it and me. I knew after my third or fourth little 8mm epic that this was going to be my career, not just a hobby.”

One of Steve’s grade-school classmates, Steve Suggs, has never forgotten the day in seventh grade when he received a phone call from a mutual friend who told him, “Spielberg’s making a movie. Do you want to be in it?” It was a World War II movie called *Fighter Squad*.

Steve Suggs was one of the school jocks, and he was not close to Spielberg: “I had no insights into his level of talent. He wasn’t athletic at all, nor was he necessarily a brainchild. On the surface, in the six or eight hours a day we spent in school together, he didn’t have any redeeming qualities. I didn’t know if he was going to have his Brownie out there pointing at us and have us dressing up as girls.

“I went to Spielberg’s house and got into a car; Steve’s father was driving. We went out to the airport. Somehow Steve had arranged access to a fighter and a bomber! He took a shot of me in the fighter with ketchup coming out of my mouth when I was shot. He had a script; he knew what he was doing. It wasn’t just the boys going out and screwing around—he knew how to deal with people.

“I remember telling my mom about it afterward. Here was this kid who was sort of a nerd and wasn’t one of the cool guys; he got out there and suddenly he was *in charge*. He became a total

different person, so much so that I as a seventh grader was impressed. He had all the football players out there, all the neat guys, and he was telling *them* what to do. An hour ago at home or on the camp he was the guy you kicked dirt in his eyes.

“It was miraculous. It just blew me away. It’s as if you hear this nerd play piano and suddenly he’s Van Cliburn.”

PEOPLE all over Phoenix soon began to pay attention to the youthful filmmaking prodigy. A local TV news crew covered the filming of Spielberg’s forty-minute World War II movie, *Escape to Nowhere* (completed in 1962), which won first prize in a statewide contest for amateur filmmakers. The filming of *Firelight* was the subject of two articles and photo spreads in *The Arizona Republic*, which hailed him in December 1963 as a “Teenage Cecil B.” with “an amateur but honored standing and a professional outlook.”

“We’re all for Steve’s hobby,” his mother, Leah, told the newspaper. “This way we know and the parents of his teenage friends know where they are; they’re not cruising up and down Central Avenue.”

The Army surplus jeep Leah drove around town was prominently featured in *Firelight*, and she sometimes slapped a helmet over her short blond hair to play a German soldier in her son’s war movies. “Our house was run like a studio,” she recalled. “We really worked hard for him. Your life was not worth a dime if you didn’t, because he nagged you like crazy. Steven had this way of directing everything. Not just his movies, his life. He directed our household.... He was a terrible student in school. But I never thought, What’s going to become of him? Maybe if it had crossed my mind, I would have gotten worried.”

Leah was so tolerant of her son’s lack of interest in school that she often let him stay home when feigning illness, so he could edit his movies. All he had to do to convince her was “hold the thermometer to a light bulb and put the heating pad over my face”—a trick he had Henry Thomas teach Elliott play on his mother in *E.T.* Steve’s father, Arnold Spielberg, a pioneer in the field of computer engineering, was frustrated by his attitude toward schoolwork. “The only thing I ever did wrong,” Arnold says, “was try to coax him into being an engineer. I said, ‘Steve, you’ve gotta study math.’ He said, ‘I don’t like it.’ He’d ask me to do his chemistry for him. And he would never even *do* the damn chemistry lab, he would just come home and say, ‘Dad, I’ve gotta prepare this experiment.’ I’d say, ‘You don’t have any data there. How am I supposed to tell you what you’ve done?’ So I’d try to reconstruct the experiment for him, I’d come down with some answers. He’d come back and say, ‘Jesus, Dad, you flunked!’”

“Leah recognized that he really wasn’t cut out for [science]. She would say, ‘Steve, I flunked chemistry two times. Don’t even try.’ After about a year, I gave up. He said, ‘I want to be a director.’ And I said, ‘Well, if you want to be a director, you’ve gotta start at the bottom, you gotta be a gofer and work your way up.’ He said, ‘No, Dad. The first picture I do, I’m going to be a director.’ And he *was*. That blew my mind. That takes guts.”

Arnold humored his rebellious son by bankrolling the production of *Firelight*. He also helped Steve design miniature sets, rigged the lights for scenes filmed in Steve’s studio (the carport of their house) and built a dolly for the elaborate tracking shots that were already a hallmark of the Spielberg visual style. Steve enlisted his three younger sisters, Anne, Sue, and Nancy, in the production as well. Anne served as a script supervisor, Nancy played the key role of a little girl abducted by aliens, and all three of them bounced up and down on the hood of the jeep inside the carport to make the jeep look like it was speeding through the desert night around Camelback Mountain.

Steve Spielberg's ambitions were grandiose, if as yet intellectually circumscribed: he told his young collaborators during the making of *Firelight*, "I want to be the Cecil B. DeMille of science fiction."

Many of his schoolmates, teachers, and neighbors thought him an "oddball" and a "nut" for being so consumed by moviemaking, but "one thing I never heard anybody associate with Spielberg was that he was blowing smoke," recalled a high school friend, Rick Cook. "A lot of people were skeptical about his chances, but I don't think you can find anybody who didn't think he would give it his all."

BY the time of the *Firelight* premiere, the teenaged Spielberg had already started the process of turning his dreams into reality. He had met a man at Universal Studios who recognized his extraordinary potential as a filmmaker, gave him advice about the making of *Firelight*, and eagerly awaited a chance to see the finished movie. Spielberg saw *Firelight* as his *entrée* to a career as a Hollywood director. He hoped to persuade Universal to back him in making a big-screen version of his sci-fi tale. But though Universal would sign him to a directing contract five years later, it was only after Spielberg had served an apprenticeship in television and directed what was then the biggest hit in film history, *Jaws*, that he was able to raise the \$19 million he needed from another studio for his transmutation of *Firelight*—*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

After becoming a professional filmmaker, Spielberg publicly disparaged *Firelight* as "one of the five worst films ever made anywhere." But his extraordinary promise was obvious to everyone who attended the Phoenix premiere in 1964. "*Firelight* is just as good, although this may be construed as criticism, as some of the science-fiction movies seen by the late-late television viewers," wrote *Arizona Journal* reviewer Larry Jarrett. "The plot, the action, the basic material of the movie, is sound and not as far out as some of Hollywood's fantasies-de-science."

Allen Daviau, the cinematographer who has shot such Spielberg films as *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, *The Color Purple*, and *Empire of the Sun*, was shown *Firelight* by Spielberg in the late 1960s. "It's what you expect with a kid's film, the acting and so on, but oh, God! Some of it was so audacious," Daviau says. "The effects were what was really amazing—that's what his heart was in. What he did with crumpled aluminum foil and bits of Jell-O on a kitchen table was pretty amazing."

SPIELBERG'S canny flair for self-promotion, which has served him so well in his professional career, was already much in evidence in his teenage years, although then, as now, it was carefully concealed within a personality that seemed outwardly shy and modest, even deferential. People in Phoenix still speak in awestruck tones of how Spielberg talked his way into shooting scenes for *Firelight* at a hospital and at an airport, using an actual jet plane.

"When he was making *Firelight*, and he had to get into a hospital," his father says, "he went down to the Baptist Hospital in Phoenix and talked them into letting him have a room. They lent him some oxygen tanks and stuff like that, and he put one of his actresses in a bed and put an oxygen mask on her. He did it all on his own. I didn't help him at all. He said, 'What do I do?' I said, 'Call the office and ask 'em.' 'Well,' he said, 'how do I get on an airplane?' I said, 'Just get down to the [Sky Harbor] airport and ask American Airlines if you can have the use of a plane for about ten minutes when it lands and before it takes off again.' And they let him!

"I would just give him the lead and then he'd go do it. Because I figured, if I ask for him, then he's not really doing it. He had more guts than I did, asking for things that I would say, 'Oh, they'll turn you down, Steve.' Besides, he was a novelty in Phoenix, a bright young kid there, and made the newspapers. So people cottoned onto that and they were very cooperative. He had something special

Mostly he had drive. He had a will to do it.”

Betty Weber, whose daughters Beth and Jean worked on *Firelight*, let Steve shoot part of the film at her house. A volunteer stage manager at the nonprofit Phoenix Little Theatre, Betty cajoled the theater’s board members into donating their facilities for the premiere. She barraged the local newspapers and radio stations with announcements about the young filmmaker, arranged for photo spreads in *The Arizona Republic*, and made sure the title of *Firelight* was displayed on billboards at businesses all over town. Beth Weber, the film’s leading lady, typed and mimeographed the program distributed to the opening-night audience. The limousine that brought Steve and his actors to the theater was supplied and driven by a cast member’s father who owned a local brewery. The searchlight was borrowed from a nearby shopping center.

Arnold Spielberg helped Steve play the complicated soundtrack for the movie, and Leah Spielberg climbed a ladder to put the title of her son’s first feature on the marquee. As she did so, she was thinking, “This is a nice hobby.”

That triumphant evening in March 1964 marked a coming of age for Steve Spielberg. His debut as a feature filmmaker was also his farewell to his boyhood years in Arizona. The day after the premiere he and his family moved to California. He told the local press that he hoped to be working for Universal that summer before finishing high school and going to film school at UCLA.

Making movies “grows on you,” Steve declared. “You can’t shake it.... I want to write movie scripts, but I like directing above all. All I know for sure is I’ve gone too far to back out now.”

“HOW WONDROUS ARE THY WORKS”

MY FATHER WAS SO EXCITING. I HAVE MEMORIES — COLOR MEMORIES — OF WALKING THROUGH A SNOWSTORM IN CINCINNATI. IT WAS GLISTENING, AND HE LOOKED UP AND SAID, “HOW WONDROUS ARE THY WORKS.” HOW WONDROUS ARE THY WORKS. THIS IS WHO I AM. THIS IS WHO STEVEN IS.

— LEAH ADLER, STEVEN SPIELBERG'S MOTHER

THE child's eyes were wide with awe as he was borne from the surrounding darkness toward the red light burning before the Ark of the Torah. Framed in a colonnaded marble arch inlaid with gold and blue, the Ark's wooden doors were hidden by a curtain that glistened in the candlelight with an alluring, unfathomable aura of mystery. Under the domed skylight with a bronze chandelier hanging from a Star of David, the child in his stroller was pushed down the blue-carpeted aisle. From all around he could hear the chanting of elders in beards and black hats, swaying rhythmically to the Hebrew prayers. “The old men were handing me little crackers,” Steven Spielberg recalled. “My parents said later I must have been about six months old at the time.”

This was the earliest memory of the child who would grow up to make *Schindler's List*. The year was 1947, and the place was the Adath Israel synagogue in Cincinnati, Ohio, across the street from the first home where Steven Spielberg lived during his peripatetic boyhood.

No other filmmaker has mined his childhood more obsessively or profitably than Spielberg, who has said that he “can always trace a movie idea back to my childhood.” Indeed, the roots of his distinctive visual style can be seen, embryonically, in those images of the synagogue: the hypnotic tracking shots mingling a sense of wonderment with fear of the unknown, the dazzling light flooding his characters' field of vision (“God light,” he calls it), the intensely emotional employment of subjective viewpoints, and the omnipresent delight in surprising apparitions and visual magic. He has always been fascinated by “what I think is there but cannot see.” From *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* to *The Color Purple*, *Empire of the Sun*, and *Schindler's List*, Spielberg has shown a rare gift for making audiences throughout the world share his own primal fears and fantasies.

He describes his favored protagonist as “Mr. Everyday Regular Fella.” That common touch is one of the keys to Spielberg's unprecedented level of success with the mass audience. It also helps explain the disdain of elitists who fail to recognize that the ordinariness of his protagonists encompasses a wide range of archetypal human conflicts. Spielberg's protagonist typically is either a child whose troubled life has caused him to evolve into a precocious maturity, or a childlike adult whose attempts to escape a grown-up's responsibilities are viewed by the director with deep ambivalence. Despite the relatively limited thematic range and intellectual scope of much of his body of work so far, Spielberg, like any major popular artist, has an instinctive awareness of shared contemporary psychological concerns and an uncanny ability to express those concerns with directness and simplicity. Perhaps his greatest artistic strength is his seemingly innate ability to conjure up visual images that evoke archetypal emotions and are nonetheless complex for being nonverbal.

When asked in 1991 to select a single “master image” that sums up his work, Spielberg chose one

with powerful echoes of his first childhood memory: the shot of the little boy in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* opening his living-room door to see the blazing orange light from the UFO, “the beautiful but awful light, just like fire coming through the doorway. And he’s very small, and it’s very large door, and there’s a lot of promise or danger outside that door.”

*

PROMISE or danger. Spielberg gives the words equal weight, but for many years most American critics condescendingly regarded Spielberg as a child-man fixated on the toys of moviemaking and incapable of dealing maturely with the darker side of life. Pauline Kael, who praised *Close Encounters* in *The New Yorker* as “a kids’ movie in the best sense,” later complained, “It’s not so much what Spielberg has done, but what he has encouraged. Everyone else has imitated his fantasies, and the result is an infantilization of the culture.” Spielberg’s public statements did little to discourage such belittling assessments of his life and work. He said in 1982 that he was “still a kid.... Why? I guess because I’m probably socially irresponsible and way down deep I don’t want to look the world in the eye. Actually, I don’t mind looking the world in the eye, as long as there’s a movie camera between us.”

There was truth in that *mea culpa*, enough to make even his admirers uneasy about Spielberg’s potential for growth and development. Would he continue to resist the responsibilities of full maturity as a man and as a filmmaker, indulging his boyish fondness for pulp adventure (the Indiana Jones movies), infantile humor and overblown production values (*1941*, *Hook*), and special-effects fantasies and extravaganzas (*Poltergeist*, *Jurassic Park*) while becoming self-consciously skittish when he ventured into mature sexual territory (*The Color Purple*, *Always*)? Would he overcome his anxieties about confronting his audience—and himself—with the kind of socially conscious, controversial subject matter he has touched upon only intermittently throughout his career?

In his *annus mirabilis* (1993) that saw *Jurassic Park* break *E.T.*’s world-wide box-office record by grossing nearly a billion dollars, Spielberg finally silenced many of his detractors with *Schindler’s List*, his masterful film version of Thomas Keneally’s book about a gentile businessman who saved eleven hundred Jews from the Holocaust. The film was hailed as “a giant bar mitzvah, a rite of passage ... his cinematic initiation into emotional manhood.” Such praise was double-edged, for it implied that in his first twenty-five years as a professional filmmaker, Spielberg had never before made a serious, mature, adult film, an assumption that unfairly denigrated the best of his earlier work from his landmark TV movie *Duel* to the timeless fantasies *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* and the flawed but deeply moving dramas *The Color Purple* and *Empire of the Sun*. After Spielberg started winning awards for *Schindler’s List*, his grade-school teacher Patricia Scott Rodney, one of the first people to encourage his filmmaking talents, commented, “I’ve heard him say, ‘Finally I’ve made a serious film.’ I recognize that as Spielberg humor.”

“The critics in awe of how much I’ve stretched just don’t know me,” Spielberg said. “This is no stretch at all. *Schindler’s List* is the most natural experience for me. I *had* to tell the story. I’ve lived on its outer edges.”

But few people, least of all Spielberg himself, questioned that *Schindler’s List* marked both a profound enrichment of his art and a triumphant midlife point of personal maturation. “I feel a very strong pull to go back to traditions,” he said at the time. The film was the culmination of a long personal struggle with his Jewish identity, a struggle that had helped determine his choice of a career and his orientation as a popular, mass-market filmmaker. He spoke of that struggle in interviews at the

time of *Schindler's List*:

"I never felt comfortable with myself," he admitted, "because I was never part of the majority... I felt like an alien.... I wanted to be like everybody else.... I wanted to be a gentile with the same intensity that I wanted to be a filmmaker."

"I was so ashamed of being a Jew, and now I'm filled with pride.... This film has kind of come along with me on this journey from shame to honor. My mother said to me one day, 'I really want people to see a movie that you make someday that's about us and about who we are, not as a people but as people.' So this is it. This is for her."

Spielberg's early rejection of his Jewish roots, and his gradual return to them, was an experience shared with many Jews in his post-World War II, post-Holocaust generation of baby boomers. He was a child of second-generation American Jews who broke away from their roots and for whom assimilation was part of the price of social acceptance and professional advancement. As a result, Spielberg, like many others in his generation, grew up questioning the relevance of his old-world heritage and the faith of his parents and grandparents.* In the white-bread culture of the Eisenhower era, Jewish baby boomers such as Spielberg became increasingly Americanized as they drifted from their cultural identity and became, in large part, a generation of outwardly assimilated but inwardly alienated suburb-dwellers. Spielberg and his movies came to typify the suburban experience, as he himself became, in Vincent Canby's phrase, "the poet of suburbia," a designation hardly suited to work in honor with cultural elitists who scorned the middle-American ethos that suburbia had come to represent in the 1950s.

Spielberg once defined his approach to filmmaking by declaring, "I am the audience"; it was as if his own personality, through a self-abnegating act of will, had become indistinguishable from that of the majority. His prodigious popularity was a sign of how thoroughly assimilated he had become. Though his films sometimes engaged in social criticism, his refusal before *Schindler's List* to assume all the responsibilities of a socially conscious filmmaker—he once called himself an "atheist" on serious subjects—was bound up with his refusal to define himself as a Jew. He was in danger of losing touch with an essential part of himself, the part that stemmed from being part of a minority.

While associating himself with Jewish charities and liberal political causes, Spielberg tended to aim for the broadest mass appeal as a filmmaker, largely avoiding Jewish subject matter and not asserting his ethnic identity as overtly as such directors as Woody Allen and Paul Mazursky. Still, Spielberg chose Richard Dreyfuss ("my alter ego") as his protagonist in *Jaws*, *Close Encounters*, and *Always*, when other directors might have cast a WASP leading man in those roles, although Spielberg did not direct attention to the characters' ethnic backgrounds. The unleashing of the magical powers of the Ark of the Covenant to destroy its Nazi captors in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* reflected Spielberg's affinities with Jewish mysticism, but in the context of a frivolously escapist storyline; after making *Schindler's List*, Spielberg said he could no longer stomach the use of Nazis as figures of mere entertainment.

A more revealing exception to the rule of Spielberg's general avoidance of specifically Jewish themes was the 1986 animated film *An American Tail*, on which he was an executive producer. It tells the story of a Jewish immigrant mouse named Fievel Mousekewitz, who comes to America to flee persecution (by Cossack-like-cats) at home in Russia. Fievel, whose adventures continued in *An American Tail: Fievel Goes West* (1991), was named by Spielberg after his beloved maternal grandfather, Philip Posner, an impoverished Russian immigrant whose Yiddish name was Fievel.

THE Spielberg family history reflects the archetypal Jewish-American journey of the last hundred years, from persecution in Russian cities and *shtetlach* (small towns) to religious freedom in the New World, and in succeeding generations from the comforts and limitations of a traditional midwestern Jewish-American community to the hazardous opportunities offered by the largely WASPish suburbs.

Spielberg's not atypical rejection of the values of his devoutly Orthodox maternal grandparents was in large part a defense mechanism against his feeling of growing up an "alien" in a predominantly Christian society. That feeling grew increasingly stronger in him as his college-educated parents moved the family up the socioeconomic ladder from Cincinnati to Camden and Haddon Township in New Jersey, and then westward to Phoenix, Arizona, and Saratoga, California.

Like many other successful Jewish creative artists in the twentieth century, Spielberg built his career not by declaring his "otherness" but by seeking acceptance and common cultural ground with the American majority, by trying to become one of them. "I've always worked to be accepted by the majority," he said in 1987. "I care about how I'm perceived—by my family, first; by my friends second; by the public, third."

In choosing to concentrate his youthful energies on making movies rather than paying attention to his schooling, Spielberg rebelled against the traditional Jewish reverence for education and literacy. By declaring his independence from that part of his cultural tradition—and from the middle-class values typified by his father, who despaired because of Steven's refusal to finish college and follow in his footsteps—Spielberg was casting his lot with another kind of Jewish cultural tradition, the more disreputable but equally vital mass culture established in Hollywood by immigrant Jews of his grandparents' generation, popular fabulists who drew much of their inspiration, and their audience directly from the humbler elements of the *shtetl*. Those early Hollywood moguls created the homogenized popular image of the American Dream. As Neal Gabler wrote in *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, "The movie Jews were acting out what Isaiah Berlin, in a similar context, had described as 'an over-intense admiration or indeed worship' for the majority, a reverence that, Berlin also noted, sometimes oscillated with a latent resentment too, creating what he sympathetically called a 'neurotic distortion of the facts.' Hollywood became both the vehicle for and the product of their distortions."

It was not until he became middle-aged that Steven Spielberg took the profound and irrevocable risk of redefining himself before the world by fully embracing his ethnic and religious heritage. Making *Schindler's List* was an act of psychic health and integration that took him back full circle to those first memory images of the synagogue in his Cincinnati childhood. "This is truly my roots," he declared. What finally enabled him to make *Schindler's List* was his long-deferred decision eight years earlier, at the age of thirty-eight, to leave his childhood behind by accepting the responsibilities of fatherhood:

"I had to have a family first. I had to figure out what my place was in the world.... When my [first] son [Max] was born, it greatly affected me.... A spirit began to ignite in me, and I became a Jewish dad at the moment of birth and circumcision. That's when I began to look at myself and think about my mom, my dad, what it was like growing up, what my childhood was like. I began crying at every movie. I began crying at bad television. At one point I thought I was having a bit of a breakdown. I tried to go back, seeing what I had missed, and I realized I had missed everything....

"Suddenly I'm flashing back to my childhood and remembering vividly the stories my parents and grandparents told me.... My father was a great storyteller, and my grandfather [Fievel] was amazing. I remember hearing stories from him when I was four or five and I'd be breathless, sitting on the edge of his knee. My grandfather was from Russia, and most of the stories were very indigenous of the o

ONE of the stories Fievel told was of how he learned his lessons. As a Jew growing up in Odessa, Russia, in the late nineteenth century, Fievel was prohibited from attending secondary school by the czarist government's *numerus clausus* (closed number), a quota system severely limiting the number of Jews allowed to receive a higher education. But he found a way around the edict. Steven remembered what Fievel told him: “They did allow Jews to listen through open windows to the classes, so he pretty much went to school—fall, winter, and spring—by sitting outside in driving snow, outside of open windows.”

A version of this memory made its way into *An American Tail*. Separated from his family after coming to New York, Fievel Mousekewitz forlornly presses his nose against a pane of glass to watch a group of little American mice attending school. Always the outsider, even in America, the strange new land of freedom, where there were supposed to be “no cats.” Though Steven Spielberg failed to acquire his grandfather's yearning for education, he too became a storyteller, and he never forgot the image of the boy sitting outside the schoolhouse, or what it showed him about being a Jew in a hostile land.

Always convenient scapegoats during economic and political upheavals in a land of deep-seated anti-Semitism, Russian Jews in the late 1800s were subjected to increasingly frequent and brutal pogroms (the Russian word for “devastation”). In his childhood, Steven listened with fascination to his grandparents' tales of pogroms. The social and economic liberties of Russian Jews were restricted further by laws compelling them to live only in *shtetlach* and barring them from most occupations except for certain forms of trade. Nearly 2 million Jews fled Russia and Eastern Europe for the United States between 1881 and 1914, “a migration comparable in modern Jewish history only to the flight from the Spanish Inquisition,” Irving Howe wrote in *World of Our Fathers*. America was seen “not merely as a land of milk and honey,” observed novelist Abraham Cahan, “but also, perhaps chiefly, a land of mystery, of fantastic experiences, or marvelous transformations.”

Steven Spielberg's ancestors were part of that vast migration, settling in the hospitable midwestern city of Cincinnati, which, in the words of historian Jonathan D. Sarna, was then “the oldest and most cultured Jewish community west of the Alleghenies.” Some of his relatives remained in Russia for generations to come, and some eventually went to Israel, but many of those who did not emigrate were murdered along with the rest of their communities in the Nazi Holocaust. His father estimates that he lost sixteen to twenty relatives in the Holocaust, in both Ukraine and Poland.

The original roots of the Spielberg family, Arnold Spielberg says, may have been in Austria or Hungary, where some of his ancestors, before emigrating to Russia, may have lived in an area controlled by the Duke of Spielberg. The Spielberg family name, which is German-Austrian, means “play mountain.” *Spiel* connotes either recreation or a stage play (cf. the English word “spiel” meaning a recitation), and *berg* means mountain or hill. It is a fittingly theatrical name for a playwright and adult who works in show business and ever since his childhood has loved to build and film miniature mountains. A “play mountain” appears as a central plot device in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Richard Dreyfuss obsessively constructs in his living room the image of the Wyoming mountain where, in the film's magical finale, the alien mother ship makes its landing. A film production company Arnold and Steven Spielberg formed early on, when Steven was a college student in Long Beach, California, was called Playmount Productions.

Steven's grandfather Shmuel Spielberg, who in America would change his name to Samuel, was born in 1873 in Kamenets-Podolsk, Russia. Once ruled by Lithuanian-Polish nobles and known in Polish as Kamieniec Podolski, it is now part of the independent state of Ukraine. In 1897, a few years before Shmuel's departure for America, Kamenets had a population of about forty thousand, including about sixteen thousand Jews.

Most of the Jews spoke Yiddish as their principal or only language, and they lived as all Russian Jews did, in a tightly knit, insular community whose religious and cultural tradition brought comfort and mutual support in the midst of hostility. Although anti-Semitism permeated many of the city's institutions during the reigns of Czars Alexander III and Nicholas II, the memorial book of Jewish life in Kamenets reports, "In general, relations between Jews and non-Jews in town were correct." Even during the Ukrainian pogroms of 1881 and the widespread pogroms of 1905, there were no massacres in Kamenets, although there was some vandalism of Jewish property.

Steven's grandfather Shmuel was the second son of a farmer, rancher, and huntsman named Meyer Spielberg and his wife, Bertha (Bessie) Sandleman, who also had three younger daughters. When Shmuel was about five years old, both his parents died in an epidemic, and he was raised by his older brother, Avrom (Arnold Spielberg was given the Hebrew name Avrom in his honor). Shmuel worked on his brother's ranch as a cowboy, rounding up cattle and horses. Jews were conscripted into the czarist army for a six-year period, and Shmuel found his way into the army band, playing the baritone, a brass wind instrument. "By staying in the band," his son Arnold relates, "he managed to keep from getting killed or shot. And then he became a cattle buyer for the Russian army. He used to go up to Siberia and buy cattle, and he dealt with Manchuria. When the Russo-Japanese war started [in 1904] he just said, 'I will not get back into the army again.' He escaped to America in 1906, and then he brought my mother in 1908 [the year they married]."

Samuel (Shmuel) Spielberg's wife, Rebecca Chechik, "Grandma Becky" to Steven's generation, was the daughter of Nachman (Nathan) Morduhov Chechik and Reitzl (Rachel) Nigonova Hendler, who had eight other children. The Chechik family name, which is also spelled Tsetsik and means "linnet" in Russian, later was Americanized to Chase.

The Chechiks had a brewery in Sudilkov, a *shtetl* that no longer exists. Sudilkov was in the Kamenets area, near the larger town of Shepetovka, where some other family members lived. Arnold Spielberg relates that his grandfather Nachman Chechik "prayed and studied the Torah. His wife ran the brewery business. She was a shrewd woman. She and the children ran the business. My uncle Herschel, the oldest son, was the brewmaster. In those days, the old Jewish men, if they could get out of business and study the Torah, that's what they did." The brewery trade was forbidden to Jews by the Russian government in 1897, and some of Rebecca Chechik's siblings eventually emigrated to China. They lived in the Manchurian city of Harbin and then in Shanghai's British enclave, the setting for the opening scenes of Steven Spielberg's World War II film *Empire of the Sun*.

Samuel Spielberg, Arnold's father, worked for a few years as a grocer and a peddler in Cincinnati before he found a steady but modest living as a jobber, operating a store on West Third Street. "He'd go down to the small stores in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio," Arnold explains. "He'd buy up the merchandise that they had not been able to sell. He'd buy what they called job lots, or incomplete lots. He'd bring them to his store and he'd sell them to other merchants, or to retail; he had some retail trade. And, of course, in the wholesale trade he sold to even *smaller* stores."¹

Arnold's mother, Rebecca, was "a very enterprising woman. She took care of the kids and ran the house. She was interested in politics—we were Democrats from way back—and she'd read a lot, go to plays, go to concerts. She'd join all the Jewish organizations." Mildred (Millie) Friedman Tieger,

longtime friend of Steven's mother, remembers Rebecca as "a strong, powerful woman, very smart and more domineering" than her husband.

In addition to their son Arnold Meyer Spielberg, who was born on February 6, 1917, Rebecca and Sam had a younger son, Irvin (called Buddy or Bud), who became an aeronautical engineer and worked on NASA's space program, and a daughter, Natalie, who married Jacob (Jack) Guttman and with him ran a family business that manufactures cake decorations (Natalie died in 1992).

*

STEVEN'S mother's side of the family, the Posners, originated in Poland. "Posner" means "a person from Poznań," the name of a city and province in western Poland (also spelled Posnań or Poserń). Poznań was taken over by Prussia in the late eighteenth century, and as the late Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, dean of American Jewish historiography, noted in a 1994 interview, "Germans despise Posners. If a German says, 'He's a Posner,' it means he's held in contempt." But the Posner ancestors of Steven Spielberg had a more worldly background in Russia than the Spielbergs, for the Posner cosmopolitan hometown of Odessa, a bustling port on the Black Sea, was known as "The Paris of Russia."

In the end, however, Jews were scarcely more welcome in Odessa than they were anywhere else in Russia. Odessa was the site of regular anti-Jewish riots, and an unusually severe pogrom occurred there in 1905, the year of the attempted revolution and the mutiny by sailors on the battleship *Potemkin* (later the subject of Sergei Eisenstein's silent film classic *Potemkin*, which includes the famous Odessa Steps sequence). When Odessa's Jews celebrated the czar's promise of reforms, for hundreds of Jews were killed in retaliation during four days of mayhem. Such attacks—which also occurred in several other parts of Russia during 1905—were provoked by the authorities and executed by local ruffians with the help of policemen and Cossacks.

That year of turmoil was the year Philip Posner, born in Odessa in 1884, came to Cincinnati to make a new life for himself and his family, one he hoped would be safer from persecution and tyranny. He would remain devoutly Orthodox, resisting the modernizing influences of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement that flourished in Odessa, and the Reform movement in America. But Odessa's cultural ferment would leave an imprint on his consciousness, despite the deficiencies of his formal education. An artist *manqué*, Philip Posner would pass along his artistic inclinations to his daughter and his famous grandson.

Philip's parents, Simon Posner (son of Ezekiel Posner and Anna Fildman) and Miriam (Mary) Rasinsky (daughter of Benjamin Rasinsky), emigrated soon after him to Cincinnati, where Simon Posner, like Samuel Spielberg, became a jobber. The oldest of six children, Philip followed the same profession, selling *schmatte* (clothing) and other merchandise to support his wife, the former Jennie Fridman, and their two children, Leah and Bernard (Bernie).

Philip Posner was "a very emotional man," his son-in-law Arnold Spielberg recalls. "A religious, very observant man. He used to go to the synagogue in the morning, in the evening, *any* time. He was at one time quite well-to-do, and then the Depression took him under, along with many other people."

One time, Leah recalled, her family did not have enough to eat for several days until her father made ten dollars buying and selling old jewelry. He used the money to take them on a holiday. "We were poor, but there was no depression in our house."

Philip worked mostly out of his home, and Steven loved to play in his grandfather's attic, which was crowded with his merchandise—shoes and socks and shoelaces, belt buckles and tie clips.

Norman Cummins, a fellow Jewish merchant who ran a discount clothing store, would buy Philip discontinued stock “as a *mitzvah*—a blessing,” Cummins’s wife, Edith, remembered. “Mr. Posner was a little, slight, sweet sort of man. He had a very nice, pleasant little house. I would go there with my husband, and I’d talk to Steven. He was a real skinny tyke, very lively. Who knew he was going to be this big man? He’d sit there and eat a cookie and dip it in a glass of milk. When he had finished his glass of milk, his grandmother would strain the cookie out of the milk and put the milk back. I was very impressed by that. I don’t know if it was poverty or just frugality.”

Like the violin-playing Papa Mousekewitz in *An American Tail*, Steven’s Grandpa Fievel poured his heart not into his business but into his music, playing the guitar and dancing ballet. Leah, who inherited her father’s love for music, felt his creativity was sidetracked by his struggle to make a living. Fievel’s brother Boris was the first known relative of Steven Spielberg to enter show business. He was a Shakespearean actor in the thriving Yiddish theater of the period; Leah remembers Boris declaiming Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy in their living room, in Yiddish. Boris was also a vaudevillian, singing and dancing with a straw hat and a cane, and he later became a lion tamer in the circus. (In Spielberg’s 1995 animated film *Balto*, set in Alaska during the 1920s, there is a Russian Jewish refugee goose named Uncle Boris.)

Leah’s mother, Jennie, born in 1882, was a native Cincinnati. She was the second oldest of ten children born to Russian émigrés Louis Fridman, who had come to the United States by way of London in 1870, and Sarah Leah Nathan. Louis Fridman’s father, a cigarmaker named Israel Fridman, was born in Poland in 1830—the earliest date of birth that can be traced for any of Steven’s ancestors—and died of emphysema in Cincinnati in 1883. Louis practiced his father’s profession for a while, but he also worked as a horse cart driver and a traveling salesman.

Steven’s Grandma Jennie was a lively, hardworking, and self-reliant “American lady,” as family friend Millie Tieger described her. “Both of [Steven’s] grandmas were more assertive than the grandpas.” Immigrant men often found that to be the case, for their traditionally dominant role in the old country tended to wither away in the face of the harsh economic realities and more liberal mores they encountered in America.

Before her marriage to Philip Posner in 1915, Jennie briefly ran a millinery shop with her sister Bertha. Jennie also majored in English at the University of Cincinnati, and Arnold Spielberg remembers her as “a very bright woman and a cultured, gentle woman.” She called everyone she liked “Dolly,” including her daughter Leah, who was born on January 12, 1920, and inherited her effervescent, outspoken personality from her mother.

Jennie “was never too domestic,” Leah admiringly recalled. Jennie worked as a milliner and cleaner for a while after her marriage. Later she taught English in her home to German Jewish immigrants, many of whom were refugees from Nazism and had their tuition paid by local Jewish charities to help them acclimate to life in America and to prepare for citizenship applications. And yet the husband of this thoroughly modern American lady never lost his old-world ways.

Fievel Posner had a long white beard and wore the traditional Orthodox garb of black coat and hat. While growing up, Steven became so embarrassed by his grandfather’s appearance and frequent *davening* (praying) that he tried to keep his gentile friends away from the house when Grandpa Fievel came to visit. One day when Steven was eight years old and living in Haddon Township, New Jersey, he was playing football with some friends in the street, “and suddenly my grandfather, with the yarmulke, comes out of our house, two houses down, and yells: ‘Shmuel! Shmuel!’ [Steven’s Hebrew name]. I’m not answering him. I’m pretending I don’t know him. I’m denying that name. My friend says, ‘He’s looking your way. Does he mean you?’ They point at me, and I’m saying ‘No, it’s no

me,' and I'm denying the existence of my own grandfather."

• • •

It is not quite the "paradise for the Hebrews" extolled by a nineteenth-century Ohio historian, what the Spielbergs and Posners found in the Queen City of the West was a stolid, largely German American burg where Jews and gentiles lived in relative harmony and prosperity.

Arnold Spielberg had only "a little" trouble with anti-Semitism when he was growing up, such as an incident when a man wearing a Ku Klux Klan insignia on his belt called him a "Jewboy." "But my street was the best street in the world," he nostalgically recalls. "During the wintertime, the city would block it off and we had sled riding. The street went right down into a park. We had a ballfield there. We had a woods to go play in. It was a wonderful place for a kid to grow up. You couldn't have asked for a better place."

Even though its Jewish population has always been modest compared to those of cities on the East Coast—Jews made up only about 5 percent, or 22,000, of Cincinnati's 475,000 citizens when Steven Spielberg was born—Cincinnati was long regarded as "a Jewish version of the American dream." Jonathan D. Sarna wrote in his and Nancy H. Klein's 1989 history, *The Jews of Cincinnati*.

The roots of the city's Jewish community date back as early as 1814. As the birthplace of the Reform movement, founded in the mid-nineteenth century by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise to liberalize and Americanize traditional Judaism, Cincinnati is home to such renowned Reform institutions as Hebrew Union College, *The American Israelite* newspaper, and the American Jewish Archives. Spielberg's birthplace, the nonsectarian Jewish Hospital in Avondale, is the oldest Jewish hospital in the United States. Partly because of its strong German influence, Cincinnati has never been immune to anti-Semitism, and Sarna concludes that "in many ways, the Jewish vision of Cincinnati was simply too good to be true." But Jews arrived early enough in Cincinnati to have won the status of pioneers, and they have long been seen as an integral part of the city's social, political, and cultural establishment, even if they were not always as readily accepted in all parts of the business community.

Among the many hurdles Russian Jews, such as Spielberg's grandparents, faced when they began pouring into America in the late nineteenth century was the hostility of many German Jews who had preceded them. German Jews who had settled in America viewed themselves as far more educated, more solvent, and more cultured than the hordes of newcomers seeking their help and kinship. For much of Spielberg's grandparents' and parents' lives in Cincinnati, their German Jewish neighbors "held Eastern Europeans in utter contempt," Jacob Marcus said. "The German Jews were predominant socially, culturally, and financially, but for every German Jew there were at least five or six Eastern Europeans, which included Russians, Poles, Rumanians, and Eastern Hungarians. It was only around the 1930s or the 1940s that a few individuals of Germanic origin began to marry into the families of Eastern Europeans." In housing, too, the German Jews were "always a street ahead [of the Eastern Europeans] and ne'er the twain shall meet," he observed. "The lines were drawn very sharply until about 1950."

With the coming of the automobile around the turn of the century, Cincinnati, like the midwestern city of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, found itself "heaving up in the middle incredibly." And as Cincinnati heaved and spread by annexing the outlying suburbs of the horse-and-buggy days, the old inner city was left a slum, occupied by Negroes and the poorest whites. Avondale, the genteel suburb that first drew Jews leaving the West End, by the 1920s became the city's largely Jewish enclave. It was there Spielberg's grandparents and parents lived, where Steven was born and where he spent his

first two and a half years.[±]

The more fashionable streets north of Rockdale Avenue in Avondale initially were the domain of German Jews. As the WPA's guide to the city put it, "The Orthodox Jews infiltrated the southern part of the suburb and gradually moved north, establishing a lively shopping district along Reading Road near Rockdale Avenue." Beginning less than a block from Arnold and Leah Spielberg's apartment at 817 Lexington Avenue, across the street from the Conservative Adath Israel synagogue on Reading Road, that district included the neighborhood movie house, the Forest Theatre. When Arnold was a boy, "Every Saturday we used to get a nickel and go to the Forest Theatre. I used to like to watch movie adventure movies, all the Douglas Fairbanks movies, all the serials."

South Avondale was a *haimish*—warm and unpretentious—Jewish neighborhood of extended families and *landsleit*—people from the old country—who all pulled together to survive. Although his grandfather Samuel Spielberg died a year before he was born, Steven grew up with an advantage few of today's children share, that of having three grandparents living in the same neighborhood.

Leah's parents, Philip and Jennie Posner, had rented a white frame house at 819 Glenwood Avenue since 1939, the fifth home they had lived in since their marriage. Arnold Spielberg remembers it as "a very nice home. When I was going to school at the University of Cincinnati, they lived just one block over. Leah would go over to their house, I'd come back after school, and we'd sit down and have Sabbath lunch. Then we'd pray after lunch and sing songs. I learned all their songs."

Sam and Rebecca Spielberg had lived in ten homes before the family settled in 1935 into half of a red-brick duplex they rented at 3560 Van Antwerp Place. "Our street was ninety-five percent Jewish," Arnold recalls. "And all of them were successful people, doctors, dentists, or lawyers. It was very education-oriented. My brother and I were the only engineers that came out of that street. We used to brag to each other as to how religious the families were. My friends were almost all Orthodox. We were one of the few Conservative families on the street." After Sam's death, Rebecca continued to live there, supported by her children. Although Sam's grandson would amass a fortune estimated by *Forbes* magazine in 1996 at \$1 billion, Sam's estate amounted to only \$1,728.57, of which Rebecca received \$1,182.15 after the costs of his final illness, burial, and probate.

By the time of Steven's birth, many of Avondale's old homes had been cut into duplexes or subdivided into three or four apartments, with the former maid's quarters on the top floor often serving as the tiny apartment of an elderly or unmarried family member. After Arnold's discharge from the U.S. Army Air Forces in September 1945, he and Leah rented their modest first-floor apartment on Lexington Avenue from Mrs. Bella Pritz, who lived upstairs with her daughter (the apartment occupied by the Spielbergs was one of two on the first floor). Though Avondale was already being vacated by German Jews, who kept moving northward into fresher and more rustic suburban acreage, it still was only "lower middle-class at worst" in those years, historian Jacob Marcuse recalled. With housing growing scarcer as veterans began coming back from the war, the newlywed Spielbergs were lucky to find a decent apartment.

"It was a lovely neighborhood," recalls their neighbor Peggie Hibbert Singerman. The houses had "big backyards, huge porches on the front, swings. They were elegant houses, with wonderful woodwork in some of them." Many of those beautiful old homes remain well preserved today, long after the white flight of the 1950s that saw the Jewish population abandon Avondale to blacks climbing the economic ladder behind them. The house where Steven lived as a young child is still standing; it is a rental property owned by the Southern Baptist church, which in 1967 bought the Adath Israel building across the street, now a national historic landmark.

IN their growing restlessness with the comfortable but limiting environment of Cincinnati's Jewish enclave, Arnold and Leah Spielberg were typical of many second-generation American Jews whose postwar ambitions for themselves and their children would lead them to turn their backs on their aging hometowns and depart for the brave new world of suburbia.

Arnold Spielberg, his sister Natalie Guttman recalled, "was always a questioning, exploring, and highly intelligent youngster whose quest for learning was and has never really been quenched." But when Arnold was attending Avondale Grade School, he was regarded as "a nerd," according to his schoolmate, Dr. Bernard Goldman. "He didn't fit into the group. Other kids played ball, but he never seemed to join in that. He wasn't a spectator. He probably had his own interests."

From early boyhood, Arnold's primary interests were scientific: "The earliest influence was the son of the man who lived upstairs [in my building]. His son used to tinker around with radios. I was a little kid then, about six or seven years old, and I used to go down to the basement, watching him build stuff. Then another guy moved into the house next door—he was a radio repairman, and he gave me parts. And I was going to Avondale School one day—I'll never forget this—I was walking up the street on Windham Avenue, and I looked in the wastebasket. There was a bunch of radio stuff. I picked up that radio stuff, ran home, and opened the door—'Mom, don't throw this out!' I went to school, barely made it to class, came home—it was a crystal set that somebody had tried to fix. I just put the wires to the nearest connection and I got it to work. This was in 1927 or '28; I was ten years old at the time.

"I'll never forget putting the earphones on my uncle's ears when he came over from Manchuria to America. It was the first time he ever heard a radio. The family thought I was nuts, you know, 'crazy-head scientist.' I was always into magnetics and electrical stuff. Making magnets, burning up batteries, making shocking machines out of batteries from the old battery-radio sets. I used to go around to people's houses and say, 'Have you got any used-up batteries?' They'd give 'em to me, I'd get some power out of 'em, connect 'em all in series, make sparks. Typical kid stuff."

Arnie and his brother Buddy, who was only a year younger, shared the same hobby. "They went into electrocuting rats in the attic," their nephew, Samuel Guttman, relates. "Arnold was a ham operator [from the age of fifteen], and somehow he had an antenna system that ruined the radio reception in the neighborhood. The two terrorized the neighborhood. My mother once got so crazy she threw a punch at 'em through a glass door." Arnold "was remarkably intelligent in school, and he would fool around at home—he did all kinds of smart scientific things," recalls family friend Mill Tieger. "He built a television set in the 1930s, before anybody else did, before anybody knew what television was. Everybody said, 'Arnold, what *are* you doing?'"

Some of Arnold's visionary qualities can be attributed to his avid interest in reading science fiction, a habit he later passed on to his son. "I've been reading science fiction since I was seven years old, all the way back to the earliest *Amazing Stories*," Arnold says. "*Amazing, Astounding, Analog*—I still subscribe. I still read 'em. My kids used to complain, 'Dad's in the bathroom with a science fiction magazine. We can't get in.'"

Sam and Becky Spielberg, who spoke mostly Russian around the house, were struggling to make their ends meet during the Depression, and they could not afford to send Arnold and Buddy to college. After his graduation in 1934 from Hughes High School, Arnold barely missed out on a college scholarship and had to take a job far beneath his potential, working as a clerk in a chain of small-town department stores across the river in Kentucky, run by his mother's relatives, the Lerman brothers.

Before becoming a store manager for the Lermans, Arnold worked as an assistant manager in Cynthiana, Kentucky, for his older cousin Max Chase, a nephew of Rebecca Spielberg. Starting the process that eventually would make Arnold's son Steven into a filmmaker, Max gave Arnold his first movie camera during the early 1930s. "I started taking home movies when I lived in Kentucky," Arnold recalls. "My cousin bought one of the earliest 8mm movie cameras. He didn't know how to use it, so he said, 'Here, you use it.' I was about seventeen years old when I started doing that. I used to take a lot of junk movies, you know what I mean? Family and stuff like that. But no class. Just pictures."⁸

Arnold continued to work for the Lermans until the coming of World War II. He enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps in January 1942, but was soon transferred into the Army Air Forces. After serving as an airplane-parts shipping clerk in Karachi, Pakistan, he parlayed his ham-radio experience into a post as a radio operator. Stationed first in Karachi and then outside Calcutta, in the China-Burma-India theater of operations, he was part of a B-25 bomber squadron that destroyed Japanese railroad lines, shipping, and communications in Burma, earning them the nickname of "The Burma Bridge Busters." Arnold recalls that although he "flew a couple of missions," he spent most of the war running the squadron's communications room: "At first I signed on to be a radio gunner, but they said 'No, if you know how to fix radios, you're better off on the ground.' They wouldn't let me fly anymore." He was rotated back to the United States in December 1944, serving out the rest of the war at Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio.

The country's shared sacrifices and its victory over fascism, coupled with the eventual discovery of the full dimensions of the Holocaust, contributed to the postwar advancement of social acceptance and economic opportunities for American Jews. The Cold War climate of fierce American competitiveness with the Soviet Union also helped open doors in higher education, science, and business during the postwar years, while helping make Christians somewhat more tolerant in their social interactions with Jews, or at least less overt about their anti-Semitism.

The most immediate and far-reaching benefit of wartime service for Arnold Spielberg was the GI Bill of Rights, which finally enabled him, like 2.2 million other American veterans, to attend college. The GI Bill gave veterans what one of them called "a ticket of admission to a better life."

It was that for Arnold Spielberg, making it possible for the former department store manager to earn a degree in electronic engineering from the University of Cincinnati in June 1949 and launching him on what would turn out to be a highly successful career in computer engineering. Arnold remembers that just before his father died, he was "so proud" to see his son enter college.

"Arnold blossomed in an academic setting," family friend Millie Tieger observed. "Arnold was such a turn-around person. He married Leah and she encouraged him to go to college. She *pushed* him. She was already a graduate of the University of Cincinnati; she was a smart girl, talented, very outgoing. I think she wanted Arnold also to have a good education. He turned out to be a brainiac, absolutely brilliant, a pioneer in computers. When Arnold was working in New Jersey, doing early computer research, he used to come to Cincinnati, and he would sit down at our kitchen table and calculate numbers to the thirteenth power. I had no idea what he was talking about. I would say, 'Shut up, Arnold.'"

*

WHEN Steven Spielberg's mother attended Walnut Hills High School, the college preparatory school for Cincinnati public school students, she was "kinda mousy. So was I," recalls fellow student Edie

Cummins. “We weren’t the prom queen types. She was very plain.” “I was different-looking,” Leah told Fred A. Bernstein, author of *The Jewish Mothers’ Hall of Fame*. “But I never wanted to change. I had had a tiny pug nose, maybe I wouldn’t have had to develop a personality. But instead, I learned to play piano. I was somebody. I loved my life, and I believed in me.”

“She was so different from the Spielbergs,” notes Millie Tieger. “She had a sparkle. They were a bigger, dark, and here is this under-five-foot young lady, blond, her eyes flash, she talks like this [moves her head and eyes rapidly as she talks]. Arnold was super-smart and accomplished, but I think Leah had a more all-encompassing ‘people’ personality. She’s a very insightful creature.”

Leah started dating Arnold Spielberg in 1939. Arnold attended high school with Leah’s brother Bernie. “We all played tennis together,” Arnold’s sister Natalie recounted. “Leah was going with somebody else at the time, but when she broke up with her boyfriend I introduced her to Arnold because I thought that would be a good match.”

During the early 1940s, Leah pursued her musical ambitions as a student at the renowned Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, affiliated with the University of Cincinnati. She planned a career as a concert pianist and did some public performing, much to the pride and delight of her family. Leah was “a very talented concert pianist,” Arnold says. “She contributed a lot of artistic talent to Steven.”

Leah, a home economics major in college, was graduated and took a job as a social worker for the Travelers Aid Society at the city’s Union Terminal. She married Arnold in South Avondale’s Adath Israel synagogue on February 25, 1945, while he was still in active service at Wright Field. Joining him in Dayton, Leah worked for the local social services department. After his discharge later that year and their return to Cincinnati, Leah helped administer electrocardiograms for a few months at the Jewish Hospital, but quit that job shortly before Steven was born at the same hospital. With her own artistic career sidetracked by the demands of raising a family, she passed on her artistic ambitions to her son, but never stopped playing the piano.

“The first piece of furniture we got when we were married was a piano,” Arnold says. “We borrowed a bed, and we bought a Baldwin spinet.” Arnold, who took piano lessons as a boy, was always an avid music listener. “We had a big collection of classical records,” he recalls. “We had classical music playing in the house all the time, way back, early on.” While pregnant with Steven, Leah spent much of her time playing classical pieces on her piano, and when he was an infant in diapers, he would sit on her lap on the piano bench, listening and learning to tap out the music. Sometimes Arnold also got into the act: “I knew enough to know the notes, so when she’d play, I’d turn the pages.”

Sometimes the music would affect Steven in unexpected ways. “Steven always had a highly developed imagination,” said Leah. “He was afraid of everything. When he was little he would insist that I lift the top of the [piano] so he could see the strings while I played. Then he would fall on the floor, screaming in fear.” But Millie Tieger, who remembers watching him as a small child sitting at the piano with his mother, suggests that the early influence of Leah’s music is “the key to the understanding” of his creative development: “What went into Steve when he heard his mother play music so beautifully?”

Like fellow *Wunderkind* director Orson Welles, whose father was an inventor and whose mother was a concert pianist, Spielberg acquired his dazzling blend of artistic talents from a synthesis of his parents’ disparate abilities. He once said he is the product of “genetic overload.” His father described Steven’s personality as “a lucky piece of synergy,” explaining that Steven’s mother is “a very musically creative person, she’s a good dancer. And she’s a zany type. I’m a little more grounded. But I also like creative things. I was a great storyteller. I love science fiction.”

Arnold's pioneering creativity within his own field of computers has brought him several patents. When Steven was an infant, his father would put him to sleep by the imaginative means of using an oscilloscope to reflect wavy lines on the wall. Though Steven showed no interest in following his father into engineering, he picked up his interest in filmmaking from his father. Steven's fascination with all kinds of cutting-edge technology and his mastery of the tools of filmmaking have been evident from the earliest days of his professional career.

The influence of music is also strongly evident in Spielberg's career. He played the clarinet (though not very well) in his grade school and high school bands, and sat in as first clarinet for composer John Williams in the beach scene of *Jaws*. He still noodles on the instrument for pleasure and relaxation. He has been a passionate collector of movie scores since childhood, and has said, "If I weren't a filmmaker I'd probably be in music. I'd play piano or I'd compose. I'd probably be a starving composer somewhere in Hollywood right now, hopefully not starving, but I probably would not have been successful."

In the view of Williams, who has written the scores for most of Spielberg's films, he is being overly modest about his musical sense: "Steven could have been a composer himself. He has the rhythmic sense in his whole being, and I think that is one of the great things about his directing—the rhythmic, kinetic sense he has."

Through his parents, Spielberg inherited his love of music from Grandpa Shmuel, who performed in the Russian army band, and from Grandpa Fievel, the Russian immigrant Jew who was not allowed to go to school but used his music to proclaim "How wondrous are Thy works."

Perhaps the most joyous scene in all of Spielberg's movies is the ending of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, in which the scientists finally devise a way of communicating with the alien mother ship by using their computers to play synthesized music together. The musical interchange between the humans and their extraterrestrial visitors starts as a few tentative notes and quickly becomes a rapturous duet of spiritual celebration.

"When I saw *Close Encounters*," Millie Tieger recalls, "I thought, There's Leah with the music and Arnold with computers. That's Steve, the little boy. Steve wrote a movie about Mommy and Daddy."

* While Spielberg's maternal grandparents were Orthodox, his mother kept kosher only intermittently and his family attended Conservative synagogues.

† Steven Allan Spielberg's Hebrew name, Shmuel, is a tribute to his grandfather, who died before he was born. Asked why Steven was not given the first name of Samuel, Arnold says, "We gave him an Anglicized 'Steven.' We just artificially made it that. Leah and I wanted to give him a non-Biblical name. 'Allan' came from the Hebrew Aharon. And we just liked the name Allan, out of nowhere."

‡ Spielberg announced in 1989 that he planned to make a movie dealing with his childhood years in Cincinnati, from a script by his sister Anne, *I'll Be Home*. The movie would have to be shot on location, he said, because "there's nothing in L.A. that looks like Cincinnati—nothing."

§ Arnold is still shooting home movies today, mostly of his travels, using a Sony High-8 video camera and a professional-quality Avid editing system his son gave him. In his current occupation as an electronics industry consultant, Arnold also has been making industrial films: "Ever since I retired, they say to me, 'With the name Spielberg, you've got to be able to make movies.' So they get me making movies."

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