Chapter 1

Coming to America

After nearly two weeks at sea, the 17-year-old hugging the ship's rail glimpsed at last the outlines of his new home, America. The uplifted torch of Liberty, set on her pedestal just two years earlier, welcomed the ship as it steamed into New York harbor. It was 1888, four years before the opening of the federally funded Ellis Island off the shore of Manhattan, which then constituted all of New York City. Instead, the new arrivals clambered onto the dock at Fort Clinton in Castle Garden, erected in what is now Battery Park to repel the invading British during the War of 1812.

As the fort that once withstood the British succumbed to the arriving immigrants, a mildly inquisitive city clerk demanded no passports or visas, administered no humiliating medical exams or intelligence tests, imposed no national or ethnic quotas. The growing young nation with its vast, untapped industrial and agricultural resources badly needed every new worker it could get. The city required merely a name, date and place of birth, and a destination. Speaking only German and a little schoolish French, the lanky, awkward-looking teenager managed a complete reply. Name: Julius Oppenheimer. Born: May 12, 1871, Hanau, Germany. Destination: New York City.¹

Fifteen years later the now highly successful Julius Oppenheimer appeared for the first time in the New York City Directory, an address book of the city’s established businessmen and heads of households (a phone-book before the advent of phones). He was listed for the fiscal year 1902-03 as an employee of the textile importing firm of Rothfeld, Stern and Company.² It was the same year that he married an American-born woman, Ella Friedman, an artist and teacher in watercolors who, a year...
later, gave birth in the Oppenheimer home on West Ninety-fourth Street in Manhattan to the first of three sons. Birth certificate number 19763 filed with the New York City Department of Health a week later lists the newborn's date of birth, April 22, 1904, and his name, Julius Robert Oppenheimer. But he was always known thereafter to his family and friends by the more American-sounding Robert, or even Bob; to his later colleagues by the familiar Oppie (Oppy or Opje); and to the public as the distinguished J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Robert was born to high-class money and privilege at a time of great cultural and economic growth in New York and the country at large. His intellectual and social outlook, personal goals, and academic perspective, for which he was so well known in later years, were all profoundly shaped from the very start, not merely by the privileges of wealth, but more importantly by the same forces that had brought a 17-year-old to New York in 1888. They permeated the environment in which the family lived during Oppenheimer's formative years in the city.

J. Robert Oppenheimer's elders followed the classic story of the American dream: the story of immigration and assimilation; the ready opportunity for rapid wealth—if one is in the right place at the right time; and, for the Oppenheimers, the rise and acceptance into mainstream society of New York Jewish intellectual and cultural leaders. It is a story that, for the Oppenheimers, began in the small German town of Hanau at the confluence of the Main and Kinzig rivers in the western province of Hesse, not far from the German financial center of Frankfurt am Main.

For the early Oppenheimers, as for other Jewish residents of Western Europe, the nineteenth century brought profound and surprising social and economic changes. For centuries most of the Jews of Europe had lived in a world apart, segregated by their Christian neighbors into subcommunities and ghettos where they practiced their own religion, spoke their own language, ran their own businesses, and attended their own schools. Excluded from agriculture and the urban trade guilds, some served as economic middlemen between the agrarian peasants and the commercial towns. Some, such as the Rothschilds, had risen to prominence as financiers to royal courts. But for most European Jews the physical boundaries of the ghetto walls circumscribed the economic and social universe they inhabited.
All that began to change in the wake of the French Revolution and the spread of the Enlightenment eastward across Europe. The famous decree of the French National Assembly granting full citizenship rights to Jewish subjects—including subjects of Napoleonic conquests—was echoed in the Oppenheimers’ duchy of Hesse-Nassau in 1808, in Prussia in 1812, and eventually throughout the later Austro-Hungarian (1867) and German (1871) empires. With industrialization overtaking the old feudal economy, Jewish segregation no longer seemed to state officials consistent with an efficient business model; nor did inequality and segregation seem to enlightened intellectuals to be compatible with the notion of the natural rights of man. Western European Jews suddenly found themselves on a more or less equal footing with their Gentile countrymen, but of course, only on terms that required the assimilation of the former into the dominant culture of the latter. In most cases Jewish citizens were only too eager to comply.4

The story was, of course, quite different in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where nearly 75 percent of European Jews resided, and where neither Napoleon nor the Enlightenment, nor the industrial revolution, had made substantial inroads. In still-feudal Russia most Jews were officially segregated within a strip of land called the Pale of Settlement. There, cut off from the larger society, they cultivated their own centuries-old religious traditions, language (Yiddish), and shtetl economy.

While Eastern and Southeastern European Jews still struggled with a ghettoized existence, many Western Jews attempted to adjust to their new status as full citizens of their respective states. Social adaptation and assimilation required relinquishing many of their traditions, rituals, and institutions, adopting the language of their countrymen, and embracing the new national identity sweeping through the European states. And, like many of their Gentile countrymen, they were eager to embrace rational, enlightened modernity: the triumph of science and reason over superstition and even religion, the growth of an industrial economy, and the liberal ideals of the rights of man. By the second or third generation of emancipated Jews—that is, by the early 1870s—the transformation for many was complete. But it had spawned a schism, especially in Germany, between the Orthodox branch of Judaism on the one hand and the Reform branch on the other. According to one estimate, by 1900 only 15 percent to 20 percent of German Jews still adhered to the Orthodox faith.5 Of those who had
immigrated to America during the 1800s, the vast majority were, like Julius Oppenheimer and his relatives, descendants of the Reform persuasion.

The Oppenheimers of Hanau mirrored almost exactly the broad transformations and changing outlooks of their German-Jewish brethren sketched above. As the name suggests, they and other noted Oppenheimer families of the era originated in the town of Oppenheim, which lies south of Frankfurt along the Rhine River before it is joined by the Main River at Mainz. At some point our Oppenheimers migrated north to Frankfurt and then east along the Main to the commercial farming village of Hanau, the birthplace of the brothers Grimm. (Today it is a crowded commuter stop on the Frankfurt rail line.) Eventually, the remaining family members would migrate farther north along the Rhine to Cologne, from which they finally fled the Hitler regime in 1937 with the help of their American relatives: Julius and his two sons, Robert and Frank.

The Oppenheimers eagerly grasped as best as they could the new cultural and economic opportunities opened to them in Western Germany. But the times and their German countrymen continued to raise hurdles to success. Jews were still excluded from the military, civil service, and many other professions. Because of this, they continued to engage in small business—as artisans, village smiths, or traders in textiles and other cottage goods. Julius's father, the kindly Benjamin Oppenheimer, whom Robert later met on family visits to Germany, was, Robert recalled, “a failed small businessman,” a local farmer and grain merchant. Perhaps for that reason, Benjamin's son and two brothers-in-law decided instead to enter the textile business. Benjamin's wife, the former Babette Rothfeld, had borne her husband three known children, of whom Julius was the eldest. Julius was followed by a sister, Hedwig, who married a Stern and later moved to Cologne and then to America with her children, Robert's cousins. Julius's younger brother, Emil Oppenheimer, also immigrated to America, arriving in New York in 1895 at age 22, where he, too, joined the family textile business—Rothfeld, Stern and Company.

Benjamin's business difficulties were not unusual. Industrialization following Bismarck's unification of the German empire in 1871 did not favor small business. As poor farmers left the land for the urban factories, rural businessmen lost their customers. At the same time, improved living conditions and medical care fostered a sudden increase in population.
Jewish residents exhibited the largest growth rate of any European group in that period: from 1.5 million (2.5 million worldwide) in 1800 to 8 million (10.5 million worldwide) by the end of the century. Of the latter, 5 million lived in Russia alone, while 3 million resided in Western Europe.\(^8\)

Such rapid population growth restricted economic opportunities for everyone. The Oppenheimers, in addition, had the misfortune of living in a Hessian duchy that had sided with Austria during the seven-week Austro-Prussian War of 1866. Austrian defeat brought annexation of most of present-day Hesse to the Prussian North German Federation, and the once-thriving financial center of Frankfurt was reduced, along with its environs, to an insignificant provincial capital.

Lack of opportunities, combined with a backlash against assimilation and civil rights following the failed liberal revolution of 1848, encouraged Germans of all persuasions to seek their fortune abroad—in the wide-open economy of post-Civil War America. Joining the starving and exploited Irish, the German and German-Jewish emigrants of the period 1848 to 1880 represented the first of the great tides of European migration to America and the second of the three great waves of Jewish immigration. This second wave, comprising mostly German Jews, had been preceded in early colonial times by persecuted Sephardic Jews. The third wave, part of the influx of Eastern and Southern European “new immigrants” in the period lasting from 1880 to 1924, when quotas were imposed, consisted mainly of Ashkenazic Jews of Eastern and Southern Europe, many of whom were forced to flee violent, anti-Semitic state pogroms—what we would now call ethnic cleansing. So many “new immigrants” landed in that period that by 1900 roughly 76 percent of the population of New York City, which now included four other boroughs in addition to Manhattan, was either foreign born or had foreign-born parents. By 1920, 23 percent of all Jews lived in the United States, and 20 percent of all New Yorkers were of Jewish heritage.\(^9\)

Joining the second influx of Jewish migrants to America (1848-1880) were Benjamin Oppenheimer’s brothers-in-law, Sigmund and Solomon Rothfeld, better known as Sig and Sol. Sol first appeared in the New York City Directory in 1874-75; he is listed as an importer of dry goods at 55 Worth Street in lower (southern) Manhattan.\(^10\) Sigmund died in 1907 at the age of 63. His death certificate lists his year of immigration as 1869.\(^11\)
During the 1887-88 fiscal year, Sol and Sig joined J. H. Stern, the husband or an in-law of their niece Hedwig Stern, to form the textile importing firm of Rothfeld, Stern and Company at 515 Broadway and 88 Mercer Street (both in lower Manhattan). In the same year, the Rothfelds’ nephew Julius arrived to make up the “and Company” end of the business, further bolstered by the arrival of Julius’s brother, Emil, seven years later.

Economic conditions at home and his uncles’ financial success in New York surely encouraged young Julius to accept his uncles’ invitation to seek his fortune in the New World. But emigration is not an easy choice for anyone. Aside from leaving one’s home, culture, and language, much depended upon opportunity and ability. The father of another famous physicist, Werner Heisenberg, provides a revealing cultural counterpoint. Like Julius, Heisenberg’s father, August, was an ambitious young man eager for success and social advancement. Like Julius’s father, August’s father was a small businessman, a master locksmith in Osnabrück, in northern Germany. He too felt the economic pressure of population growth and rapid industrialization. August, born two years before Julius, decided, together with his father, to break the family tradition of skilled tradesmen and attempt to reach the next social stratum through the surest route then open in Germany to non-Jewish young men of the middle-class—through academic achievement, in particular attainment of a doctorate and a university professorship, preferably in classical studies. Owing to academic lobbyists, German society already regarded professors, the producers of new knowledge and the purveyors of culture and learning, as highly as other meritorious aristocrats—judges, bankers, and military officers. Their status was just below that of the landed aristocracy.12

American culture, to the contrary, has always produced its own aristocrats—not through inheritance or culture or scholarly learning—but through business success (and today through success in entertainment and professional sports). In the land of supposed rugged individualism and unlimited opportunities, financial success became an early ticket to social standing and self-esteem. Likewise, failure to achieve wealth was regarded as a failing of the individual, not of circumstance or society. American culture has to this day generally accorded little special status or financial reward to the bearers of culture, academic achievement, or erudition. Such attributes were valued rather as secondary, outward manifestations of
those sufficiently wealthy to afford the years of education required for a life devoted to contemplative pursuits. Julius himself later made this quite clear through the education of his two boys, for whom there was no thought of a business career, even in the family business.

Julius Oppenheimer, a tall, thin, handsome man, is remembered “as a merchant prince, a very correct gentleman...He was a bit on the stuffy side, self important and somewhat formal but a fine human being.” Unlike most immigrants to the New World, who debarked into a life of poverty and struggle, the merchant prince not only joined a successful company straight off the ship near the height of an economic cycle but also arrived ahead of the hordes of destitute “new immigrants” who would follow in the years ahead.

America in the 1880s was an agrarian society, with only about a third of the population engaged in industry and commerce. The national economy was still expanding in the wake of the Civil War. The expansion in New York City had started much earlier, accelerated with the Civil War, and was beginning to slow because of overcrowding and escalating rents. By the 1880s, over half the city’s population was engaged in industrial production. Most of the city’s industry involved light manufacturing—metalworking, publishing, cigar making, beer brewing, and clothing manufacture. Most of these New York industries were nationally prominent; and by 1888, German immigrants dominated their leadership. By the turn of the century, New York had become the beer-brewing capital of the nation, surpassing even Milwaukee and Chicago in the output of German-brewed beer.

But it was in the clothing industry that, as early as the 1880s, German émigrés in particular made their mark—utilizing, as did Rothfeld, Stern and Company, their connections with the old country to transform the trade in the new.

Light manufacturing is ideal for immigrants unfamiliar with the language and customs of their new home. Germans and, to a lesser extent, the Irish, the two main immigrant groups in the 1860s and 1870s, gravitated toward the clothing industry. As is typical of New York to this day, economic and ethnic identity coincided with geographic location. Many of the Germans and Irish settled in lower Manhattan, in and around the so-called Lower East Side.
A 20-square-block region stretching from the Bowery to the East River and from Market Street north to Fourteenth Street, the Lower East Side was ideal because of its proximity to the immigration docks, its abundance of low-rent apartments (before overcrowding and the tenement era), and its walking distance to the growing number of factories along Houston Street and lower Broadway, where the Rothfelds had set up business. By the 1880s, the quasi-cottage New York clothing industry had been replaced by the more efficient factory system, and, at the top of this industry, German Jews had replaced German Gentile and Irish entrepreneurs. By 1880, roughly 80 percent of all garment factories in New York were located below Fourteenth Street, and 90 percent of all garment factories and related businesses, including importing businesses, were owned by German Jewish entrepreneurs.\footnote{15}

With high demand and low overhead, Rothfeld, Stern and Co. thrived as wholesalers to the clothing manufacturers, who experienced remarkable growth in New York after the introduction of men’s and women’s ready-to-wear clothing and the creation of the department store for mass distribution. Julius Oppenheimer rapidly rose from the stockroom to the top of his company, becoming an expert in fabric selection and color matching.

But a demographic change was having an even greater impact on the fortunes of Rothfeld, Stern and Co. Beginning in the 1880s, and accelerating after Julius arrived, the third and most massive wave of immigrants, those from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, was rapidly transforming New York City life and its garment industry. Outbreaks of brutally violent pogroms by Christian mobs in Russia from 1881 to 1884 and, later, from 1903 to 1906 and from 1917 to 1921 found official sanction in the mandates of the tyrannical Russian czar and then the Bolsheviks. Among these were the May Laws of 1882 in the Pale of Settlement, which further restricted the civil rights of Jews and further excluded them from owning land or engaging in economic activity in agriculture, industry, and the professions. Similar anti-Semitic measures appeared elsewhere in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The wealthier victims at first attempted to weather the storm, many fearing the dilution of their Orthodox traditions in the “melting pot” of secular American society. But destitute and desperate peasants, displaced from the land and their occupations, had little choice but to head for America. Some 1 million Jews, most of Eastern European
origin, arrived in New York during the period from 1880 to 1900. Even more arrived during the first decades of the new century, forced out by renewed brutality. The new immigrants, like many before them, headed for the Lower East Side, and, like many of their predecessors, they worked in the nearby garment industry.16

With German-Jewish employers in the Schmata (rag) industry, the new immigrants were less subject to discrimination. Together with their employers, they revived the once popular contractor system, whereby in this case the factory owners farmed out rough-cut, manufactured pieces to Eastern European immigrant contractors for finishing. As the contractors further contracted their wares, the tenement house, providing more housing for more workers in “sweatshop” conditions, became the primary workplace for the hordes of unskilled new arrivals at the bottom of the industry chain.

The infamous sweatshop system expanded rapidly after the recession of 1893-1895, when, due to an inopportune federal tariff wall, the city was awash in textiles. Demand for imports evaporated. Many garment factories fell idle and one third of the nearly 100,000 garment workers in the city were unemployed.17 Rothfeld, Stern and Co. lost heavily, but the only noticeable effect was brother Emil’s arrival and a change of address, probably to a smaller office, at 92 Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village.

By 1900, the company, now recovered and on an upswing, focused on the importation not of dry goods in general but of cloak linings in particular. In 1902-03, the newly engaged Julius Oppenheimer appears for the first time in the city Directory as a company partner. Sol died the following year of arteriosclerosis, the same year that Julius’s first son, Robert, was born.18 In 1906 the company offices moved to 126 Fifth Avenue and in 1911 to their final location, Room 400 of a building at 221 Fourth Avenue, all in lower Manhattan.

Shortly after the company made the move to Fifth Avenue, Sol’s brother Sigmund died, also of arteriosclerosis.19 As had been planned since at least 1902, Julius became president of Rothfeld, Stern and Company upon Sigmund’s death, and brother Emil became the company’s secretary-treasurer. Julius remained president of the company until his retirement in 1928, whereupon he and Emil sold the business. One year later the stock market crashed.
The Rothfeld brothers must have realized that they could not go on forever when they made Julius a partner in 1902. At the same time, they urged—and probably helped—their now 31-year-old nephew to find a wife, which he did within a year. In the same period, Julius, like his uncles, moved from rental quarters in lower Manhattan to ownership of a spacious apartment on the Upper West Side (west of Central Park). Again these changes reflected broader demographic developments.

For many of the immigrating millions of Eastern European peasants, financial success was secondary to the preservation of their religious traditions and ethnic identity. In each respect their aims were at odds with those of the now wealthy German Jews who had preceded them. As the sweatshop industry expanded, successful Eastern European entrepreneurs replaced the German-Jewish owners, who in turn moved up or out into other businesses. Similarly, as Yiddish-speaking Jews moved into the German neighborhoods of lower Manhattan and the Lower East Side, the wealthier Germans and German Jews migrated uptown. Many of the non-Jewish Germans settled in Yorktown and nearby streets on the Upper East Side, east of Central Park. Many of the wealthy German Jews, however, moved to the opposite side of Central Park, on the Upper West Side, between Fifty-ninth and 110 streets.²⁰ (At the same time, newly immigrating Italians displaced the "old" Irish on the Lower East Side, many of whom migrated to the Chelsea section of Manhattan.) The wealthy Rothfeld brothers had already made the move north and west, as early as 1887. In 1904 the newly wedded Julius Oppenheimer purchased an apartment in a building at 250 West Ninety-fourth Street, in the center of the Upper West Side. There two of the three Oppenheimer boys were born. His bride had a personal connection to that street.

Ella Friedman, beautiful, slender, and of distinguished culture and bearing, was the daughter of the German-Jewish immigrant Louis Friedman and his American-born wife, the former Cecilia Eger, the non-Jewish child of a German father and an Austrian mother. It was from his mother and grandmother that Robert Oppenheimer inherited his brilliant blue eyes. Ella had studied art in Baltimore and Paris and offered private painting lessons at home and in art classes at a local college.²¹ After Louis Friedman died in the early 1890s, Ella remained with her widowed mother in the family apartment at 148 West Ninety-fourth Street.
Probably she met the future president of Rothfeld, Stern and Co. through the Rothfelds, who may have known her father through the textile trade or through mutual friends in the Society for Ethical Culture. Although the Rothfelds and Oppenheimers were prominent members of the society, the Friedmans were not.  

On March 23, 1903, Julius and Ella were married in a non-Jewish ceremony witnessed by S. B. Goldsmit, the husband of Ella's sister Clara, and presided over by Dr. Felix Adler, described on their marriage certificate as “Leader of the Society for Ethical Culture.” The certificate also lists Julius as 32 years old, his wife Ella as 34. Like German certificates of the era, which display a particular interest in religion, the American documents reveal the corresponding prejudice in the requirement of a listing of “color” and, later, “color or race.” Religion, of much less concern to American bureaucrats than race, was never requested, while race has survived to this day as a defining datum of American demography.  

Soon after their marriage, Ella and Julius moved into their new apartment down the street from Mrs. Friedman. In 1909, Mrs. Friedman moved to the Oppenheimer apartment when her health began to deteriorate. Early in 1912, with the birth of Frank impending, the family moved, together with Grandma Friedman, a governess for Robert, and a collection of paintings that included at least two original Van Goghs, to an even more luxurious, nine-room apartment on the eleventh floor of a redbrick building at 155 Riverside Drive, near West Eighty-eighth Street. The apartment offered a sweeping view of the Hudson River and the Jersey Palisades to the west. Mrs. Friedman remained with the family until her death in 1926, by which time Sigmund’s widow, Betty, and Julius’s younger brother, Emil, had also moved to Riverside Drive, then regarded as Manhattan’s “gold coast.”  

Many of the west-side German Jews, who preferred to call themselves American Hebrews, not only inhabited a neighborhood at nearly the opposite end of Manhattan from their Yiddish-speaking brethren (some of whom moved even farther north into Harlem and the Bronx), but also lived in completely opposite cultural and religious worlds within their new nation. The opposites helped focus and solidify the social consciousness of each group, which had already diverged in the Old World. The New World emphasis at that time on melting-pot conformity encouraged German
Jews to embrace even more strongly the enlightened ideals of secularism and assimilation, and to further relax their traditional rituals and beliefs and their ethnic identity itself. But to the new immigrants, these “uptown Jews” who did not speak Yiddish and did not follow Orthodox rules and rituals were hardly to be considered Jews at all.  

The uptown Jews were equally appalled at the perceived crudity of the Yiddish-speaking peasants. An uptown journal, *The American Hebrew*, declared: “The thoroughly acclimated American Jew...has no religious, social or intellectual sympathies with them. He is closer to the Christian sentiment around him than to the Judaism of these miserable darkened Hebrews.”  

The large numbers of the newer immigrants also caused difficulties for the acclimated Jews. Although one recent commentator argues that the huge influx of Eastern European Jews saved the American Jews from complete assimilation, the American Jews were especially worried that the peasant crudity of the Eastern Europeans and their uncompromising adherence to Orthodox practices would only intensify the already increasing anti-Semitism in America and threaten their own efforts to compete within the upper echelon of New York society. In an accompanying editorial to a special issue of *The American Hebrew* in 1891 celebrating “The Progress of the Jew,” the editors congratulated themselves on their progress toward assimilation, and on their readiness to discard the old for the new: “The first thing a Jew does when he arrives is to learn the language and literature of the land...At all events we are quick to discern and to discard those habits which are offensive to those with whom we associate.”  

Unfortunately, those with whom they associated in New York high society showed no interest at the time in admitting any Jews to equal status, no matter how wealthy or cultured. The prestigious *Social Register* excluded all Jews outright until after 1900, and none were admitted to the best social clubs for years thereafter. Even German Gentiles, who usually welcomed German Jews as fellow countrymen and generally rejected overt anti-Semitism, did not allow their countrymen into their most exclusive clubs. Discrimination in holiday resorts and hotels in the area was rampant, as several notorious incidents from the time attest.  

In response to the difficulties of the Eastern Europeans and to the problems they were perceived to cause, many German-born American Jews attempted to help them adapt to American culture as quickly as
possible. They funded numerous educational and social programs to help Americanize the new arrivals—both out of genuine compassion for their desperate plight (especially after the renewed pogroms of 1903–1906) and in the hope that the aversion of high society toward their co-religionists, and thus toward them, could be ameliorated.30

It is clear that Julius and Ella Oppenheimer shared the views of their peers and that their son noticed and internalized such views as part of his own social outlook. This is evident in their social associations as well as in several brief but revealing episodes. Eager to assimilate into American society as both German and Jew, Julius wasted little time learning English and the social graces of New York society. When later asked about the languages he had learned at home as a child, Robert replied that he had acquired some French from a governess, but that he had learned German only from study. “We didn’t talk it at home,” he said, “my mother didn’t believe in talking it.”31 Although neither father nor son changed the family name, the son, as noted, always preferred the American Robert or Bob over the foreign-sounding Julius. Julius himself was so eager to anglicize that he studied English with an Oxford tutor during an extended visit to England on company business. The tutor taught such perfect English diction that he reportedly replaced most of the Julius’s German accent with an Oxonian one. Nevertheless, like so many immigrants torn from their homes, Julius retained a love for Germany and German culture to the end of his life. Only the strenuous efforts of his two sons prevented him from returning to his birthplace one last time before he died in 1937, at the height of Hitler’s Reich.

The sensitive and perceptive Robert was acutely aware of his family’s urge to assimilate. Aside from closeting their Germanic origins, Robert wrote to a friend in 1923, the parents were most proud of what he called the two central jewels in the Oppenheimer crown. These entailed the overcoming of two “obstacles”: their Jewish heritage and their guilt at their enormous wealth in view of the desperate plight of others. On a long car trip to Quebec with Robert and one of Robert’s friends, Paul Horgan, whom they dropped off in Buffalo, the parents allowed the crown to slip a little, revealing “an intricate panorama of complications.” The parents, wrote Robert, “tried to apologize for being Jews” and then “whined and shied clumsily about richesse and poverty.”32
The continued efforts of his parents to abandon their ethnic heritage in favor of another and their discomfort with their economic status must have caused profound difficulties for a sensitive young man known throughout his life for his fragile personality and need for acceptance by others. There is no evidence that he ever adhered to Judaism or identified with Jewish culture. He revealed his own difficulties with his parents’ “obstacles” only a few years before the car trip, during a trip west with his high school English teacher. Robert had become ill during a family trip to Europe in 1921 following his high school graduation. To aid his recovery—and to dissipate his depressive condition—his father paid one of Robert’s teachers, Herbert W. Smith, to accompany the young man on a trip to the American Southwest. Smith later noted that Robert had been brought up believing it was “a shame...to belong to the Jewish Group.” He realized how deeply Robert experienced discomfort at his Jewish heritage when, in the relatively non-Jewish Southwest, Robert asked Smith if he could use his name and if he could travel with him as his younger brother. Smith firmly refused.

Wealth, privilege, culture, and the family trade defined the Oppenheimer world, but they all remained sensitive points for Robert, as for his parents. Once, during the same trip west, Smith was hurriedly packing to leave and asked Robert to fold a jacket for him. “He looked at me sharply,” Smith later recalled, “and said, ‘Oh yes. The tailor’s son would know how to do that, wouldn’t he?’”

The Oppenheimers’ ethnic and social ambitions found strong social support and a well-reasoned philosophical, moral, and ethical foundation through their active participation in Dr. Adler’s Society for Ethical Culture.