

Superman's Secret Identity -- The Jewish Origins of our Comic-Book Superheroes

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Superman, Batman, Captain America, Spider-Man, the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, the Avengers and the original X-Men all have two things in common: They're all superheroes and they were all created by Jews. The preeminent creators in comic book history are all Jewish men — Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster (Superman), Bob Kane and Bill Finger (Batman), Wil Eisner (the Spirit) Joe Kubert (Sgt. Rock), Jack Kirby and Joe Simon (Captain America) Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (the Hulk, Fantastic Four, Avengers, X-Men and many more) — .

The story-behind-the-story of these superheroes begins at the end of the 19th C. After decades of oppression, whole communities of Jews fled Eastern Europe, many going to Ottoman controlled Palestine, but millions coming to the New World of America. Between 1880 and 1920, 4 million Jews sailed to America, most arriving through Ellis Island and settling in New York's Lower East Side, some joining family in the Midwest. My grandparents arrived in 1900 coming to Cleveland to be with relatives.

It was specifically the Jewish immigrant experience and their religious identity that shaped the creation of what would become our comic-book superheroes. In the Old World Jews had to hide themselves in plain sight. Afraid that they might be bullied or attacked, they attempted to not look or act "Jewish". But in America, the promised land of opportunity and freedom, that fear was tentatively put aside but never very far from their thoughts. In America, these "greenhorns", these new immigrants worked hard to prove that they could become "real Americans", and more specifically that they didn't threaten the prevailing social order, so they often presented themselves in public as harmless, passive and docile.

However, they knew that to succeed, to get ahead, to get out of the slums, to make something of themselves, the Jew must become a 'man of action disguised as a man of inaction'. They would become like those legends of literature: the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro. Comic-book superheroes emerged from the imaginations of young energetic Jews who saw themselves in their creations. The alter-egos of these superheroes were weak, cowardly, overly-intellectual. Thus beneath the facade of Clark Kent was really "Superman."

Superman was also an immigrant, just like America's growing immigrant population in the early 1900's. And the poor, working-class, young, Jewish men, second generation immigrants, would create larger-than-life idealized images of themselves: the superheroes.

In the 1930's and 40's Jews whose parents were part of the 4 million that flooded America were locked out of mainstream, lucrative occupations by anti-Semitism. There were quotas or do-not-apply policies for colleges, graduate schools and upper-class jobs. And those creative artistic Jews who wanted to write or illustrate were not allowed in publishing houses or advertising agencies. Newspaper syndicates only occasionally took on a token Jewish cartoonist like Milt Gross or Rube Goldberg. It was a situation similar to that of the early motion picture industry, in which Jewish directors, producers, and studio executives who'd faced anti-Semitism in other industries built an industry of their own.

The runt of the literature litter were comic books. The first comic-books were just copies of strips that had previously appeared in Sunday newspapers. Publishing these copied strips was low-paying and exploitative. They were the cheapest rag in the publishing industry, and there were a lot of Jews that found a home there, mostly because they were not welcome anywhere else. Comic books became an immigrant industry.

That story begins during the Great Depression. Max Gaines (born Max Ginzberg and father of Bill Gaines who gave us *Mad Magazine*) regularly read newspaper comic strips called the "Funnies". He wondered if it would be possible to make something more of those daily and Sunday strips, and he teamed up with a Jewish friend Harry Wildenberg who worked for a color printing company. In 1934 they debuted the first ever comic book, cheaply purchased color reprints of Sunday newspaper comics, but by 1938 they had become very popular.

But everything was to change when Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster two Jewish teens from Cleveland came up with Superman, the first action superhero. The next year, 1939, Bob Kahn (who became Bob Kane) and Bill Finger (another poor Jew) brought Batman to the world. In 1941, Joe Kirzberg (who became Joe Kirby) and Joe Simon created Captain America. At the same time, a young Romanian Jew Stanley Lieber, (who became Stan Lee), dreamed up Spider-Man, the Hulk, Avengers, the Fantastic Four, as well as X-Men, Thor and Daredevil, making Marvel Comics (founded by Martin Goodman) a comics publisher powerhouse. These young artists and writers, much like their own creations, adopted secret identities—changing their names to create their own alter egos, names that were more “American”.

So why the specifically the Jews? It was nothing more than a re-branding of their Biblical heroes flavored with the deeply held religious expectation and anticipation of the Messiah. And Superman is a perfect example. Superman was the product of two Jewish kids in the Depression who dreamed of a muscle-bound redeemer to liberate them from the social and economic impoverishment of their lives. They were most likely inspired by the traditional Jewish expectation of the Messiah who would come from on high to end evil and redeem the world. The Jews in the middle 1930's, no different from traditional Jews of generations past, wanted, needed, and faithfully expected the arrival of an invincible hero who would defeat their enemies.

Superman is born Kal-El (in Hebrew it means “All is God”) from the planet Krypton, whose population, a race of brilliant scientists, is decimated. His parents send him to Earth in a tiny rocket ship, not unlike the ark of the baby Moses who survived Pharaoh's decree to kill all Hebrew boys, to be raised by non-Hebrew parents, who struggled to find his true place as an immigrant in a strange, new world, and ultimately saved his people.

In 1939, in the wake of Superman's success Max Gaines, Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz created Hawkman and Green Lantern. Other comic-book companies hired Jewish artists, writers, and editors to create new superheroes: Will Eisner and Jerry Iger launched X-Men and the Fantastic Four with Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg). Bob Kahn who became Bob Kane, and with Bill Finger created Batman.

Throughout the “Golden Age” of comic-books, 1933 to 1955, the publishers did very well, but the artists and writers, for the most part, never emerged from poverty. They were underpaid wage slaves with no rights or royalties. The characters they created were owned and trademarked by the comic-book publishers.

That all changed in 1978--exactly forty years after Superman's first release. During a TV talk-show promotion of the first *Superman* movie, an elderly gentleman rose from the audience and said in a soft voice: “My name is Jerry Siegel. I co-created the character Superman on which they're making this movie, and I work at a supermarket bagging groceries.” The studio audience gasped. A campaign was launched against Warner Brothers, who owned DC Comics and the Superman copyright. Eventually the studio bowed to considerable pressure from hundreds of organizations. Siegel and Schuster received a “created by” credit in the movie, and an annual stipend which continued for the rest of their lives. (Shuster died in 1992 and Siegel in 1996) That credit continues today when a movie, TV series or comic-book features Superman. Bill Finger, the original writer and co-creator of Batman died impoverished in 1974.

Stan Lee (born Stanley Martin Lieber) however is another story. Facing a career crisis in 1961, after twenty-one years in the business, this writer, editor, and production manager at the Goodman Publishing Company was tired of being an industry no-name. Lee told his boss Martin Goodman (also Jewish) that he was quitting, but Goodman challenged him to come up with a new superhero team that would outperform DC's *The Justice League of America* (Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, Aqua Man, and the Flash: the original seven).

Lee was given free reign, and he probably saved the comic book industry which was in serious decline. In November 1961, he and Jewish artist/co-creator Jack Kirby unveiled the *Fantastic Four*, four heroes who exhibited complex human emotions and often fought with each other, a rarity in the good-guy, nice-guy superhero world. Readers could empathize with such characters as Benjamin Grimm despite--or perhaps because of--their flaws. It was not revealed until 2002 that Ben Grimm/The Thing was Jewish and celebrated a belated Bar Mitzvah. To his fellow superheroes, Ben could be a hotheaded jerk, but fans attributed Ben's bad

temper to his being trapped in repulsive orange skin and empathized with him when he was rejected by the attractive Sue Storm (his partner superhero who could turn invisible) . Like many Marvel characters, the emotionally challenged Ben became a metaphor for Jews and other minority outsiders who faced discrimination because of their skin color or ethnic roots.

But Stan Lee was just getting started. He gave birth to Captain Marvel, Spider-Man, Silver Surfer , and then in September 1963 Lee and Kirby introduced The X-Men--a superhero team of five men and one woman born with an extra “mutant” gene that endowed each with a different superpower, and called together by Charles Xavier (thus the “X-Men”).

But by 1975, sales of *The X-Men* were falling fast. Marvel execs ordered Jewish comics writer Chris Claremont to turn things around. He decided to rewrite the backstory of The X-Men’s saga. So he cast Magneto as a Holocaust survivor embittered by humanity’s silence in the face of Nazi barbarity. He now had a complex villain and at the same time a tragic figure who wanted only to save his people.

In 1979 Claremont introduced Katherine “Kitty” Pryde, a young Jewish girl who possessed the mutant ability to walk through walls. She was modeled, he said after an Israeli teenager wearing a miniskirt and carrying an Uzi he’d seen one day in Tel Aviv.

Marvel Comics then added:

- Sabra, Ruth Bat-Seraph born in Israel, was a superhuman agent serving in the Israeli secret service. She appeared first in a battle with Hulk, whom she believed with working with Arab terrorists in Israel.
- Legion, born David Charles Haller is the mutant son of Charles Xavier (of the X-Men) and Israeli Holocaust survivor Gabrielle Haller. He suffers from dissociative identity disorder, with different personalities manipulating his superpowers.
- Volcana, born Marsha Rosenberg, started out as a regular human day care worker in Denver. [If ever there was an indicator of the intended audience for these comics—here it is!] Yearning for power, she agreed to serve Doctor Doom in exchange for her superpowers. Though Volcana began as a villain, Doctor Doom’s ally, she eventually became a superhero with the Avengers.
- Wiccan, born William Kaplan, is a member of the Young Avengers. He was born to doctors Jeff and Rebecca Kaplan in a Reform Jewish home. One day Scarlet Witch of the Avengers encouraged him to stand his ground against bullies and touched his head giving him superpowers. Wiccan is one of the few openly gay superheroes.

The Jewish creators of the first comic-book superheroes hid their own religious identities behind non-Jewish names in the much the same way that Superman disguised himself as Clark Kent, and Batman as Bruce Wayne. In the 80 years since then, as American Jews have become establishment-acceptable, so their comic-book creations too have come out of the phone booth and out of the closet. All together an All-American story.