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The House of Twenty Thousand Books by Sasha Abramsky

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In 1969 I spent a year in London. I was supposed to be studying politics and sociology, but I spent more time at anti-war rallies and protests, at folk-music clubs and concerts, writing articles, and traveling around England and Europe, than I did in class. On a whim, however, I decided to take a course in Jewish history at University College, taught by a professor named Chimen Abramsky, whom I had not heard of before that. Despite my general indifference to academic matters, I rarely missed a session of Abramsky's course, which met in a tiny classroom. Abramsky was in his mid-50s but to me he appeared much older -- perhaps because I was only 20, but perhaps also because he had an old-world look about him. He spoke in a thick Russian-Yiddish accent, which required students to listen carefully to his lectures, which he often delivered while sitting in a chair. One of my fellow students was the daughter of Louis Jacobs, a prominent British rabbi and theologian.

I remember the aura more than the content of the course. I was not educated enough in Jewish history, or history in general, to appreciate what he had to offer. I should have taken some more basic Jewish history courses -- or read about it on my own -- before venturing into this class. But I was mesmerized by his presence, almost as if he was a performance artist.

I was fascinated by Abramsky, a tiny man who seemed quirky, eccentric, impish, and brilliant. But because I was intimidated by his brilliance and embarrassed by my own ignorance, I unfortunately didn't bother to talk with him after class or to learn anything about him or his life outside the classroom.

That was my loss. A few years ago, at a conference of activists and academics, I met [Sasha Abramsky](#), a British writer, transplanted to the United States, who has authored several excellent books, including *Inside Obama's Brain* and *The American Way of Poverty: How the Other Half Still Lives*. I asked Sasha if he was related to the professor I had taken a course with decades earlier. It turned out that he is Chimen's grandson, and he told me about his grandfather's fascinating life.

From Sasha I learned that his grandfather he was an extraordinary historian and bibliophile, a world-renowned student of Marxism as well as Jewish history, and the center of a global network of scholars and activists. When I returned from the conference, I explored the Internet to find out more. I learned that Abramsky was the son of a prominent rabbi, an immigrant from Russia, a bookseller, a self-taught scholar, and a political activist, including his years in the British Communist Party (which he left around 1957). Abramsky was immersed in the world of Jewish immigrants and became an expert on Jewish history, but he was himself a secular Jew and an

expert on Marx and Marxism. Although Abramsky had no formal degrees at the time, other scholars recognized his brilliance and invited him to teach at Oxford and then University College.

Abramsky was widely influential through his writings, his mentorship of generations of scholars, and his ability to bring people together at dinners and meetings at his London home. In 1989, his students and colleagues published *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, a reflection of his impact and inspiration. When he died in 2010, British newspapers published his obituary, like [this sympathetic one](#) in *The Guardian* and this somewhat [nasty one](#) in *The Times*, but they could not fully capture his remarkable life and accomplishments. In 2012 a donor established the Professor Chimen Abramsky Scholarship for undergraduate students at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College-London.

Shortly after Chimen died, Sasha penned a wonderfully warm and evocative [recollection](#) of his grandfather in *The Guardian*. Now he has expanded that essay into a book, *The House of Twenty Thousand Books*, which brings his grandparents and their world to life. The book is part history (about his grandparents' background and their social, political, and intellectual milieu) and part memoir (about how Sasha absorbed that world of matzo balls and Marxism).

The book won't be published in the US until the end of 2015, but you can buy it now through Amazon UK. Abramsky has also produced a five-minute [video](#) about the book that is worth watching on its own. But it will surely whet your appetite to read the book.

The House of Twenty Thousand Books tells the story of a world that no longer exists. I missed my opportunity to get to know Chimen Abramsky personally when I had the chance. But now others will get to know this extraordinary man through the eyes of his grandson.

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