Had Rose Gollup Cohen lived out her life in the small Russian village in which she was born, it is safe to say that she would never have come to the attention of historians. Even if she had developed a passion for reading, she would have had access to only a few books, most likely none of a secular nature. Certainly she would not have written an autobiography, *Out of the Shadow*, which was published in 1918 by a prestigious American firm.\(^1\)

*Out of the Shadow* is the moving story of a young immigrant’s efforts to navigate the cultural distance from Russian countryside to the tenements of the Lower East Side and beyond. A central theme of the narrative is the author’s struggle to attain expressive literacy, by which I mean the ability to read and write with relative ease and to use these skills for self-defined goals.\(^2\) Cohen’s is a non-linear story, full of stops and starts, of her journey from marginal literacy in her native language, Yiddish, to the linguistic accomplishment needed to write in English, a language she came to only in her late teens. Given the obstacles, it is something of a miracle that she became a published author. But educational deficits, limited access to books, and paternal disapproval were countered by her passionate hunger for stories: first to read them and then to write them—her own most of all.

*Out of the Shadow* is an introspective narrative that conveys with admirable immediacy the author’s evolving and painfully acquired literacy and its multiple meanings. Impressive as the story of one woman’s experience, Cohen’s narrative puts a human face on momentous historical developments, notably the transitions from traditional to modern literacy and from marginal to expressive literacy, in her case attained outside formal educational channels. Her varied interactions with print in America produced a new and definitely more "modern," that is more individualistic, identity that replaced a more traditional sense of self.

Cohen was not the only Russian Jewish woman to write an autobiography. For them and many compatriots, the move to the United States proved to be a watershed in the matter of literacy, broadly defined to include access to print and facility in using it. Of course, relatively few women or men acquired the linguistic skill needed to become fluent in a new language.\(^3\) Success in this regard depended on such factors as a family’s economic circumstances, fathers’ views on educating daughters, birth order, and, especially, age at the time of immigration. Only the last of these was in Rose’s favor—
she arrived in the United States at the age of twelve.

Using Cohen as the primary example, this paper will examine the impact of changes in place and texts on Jewish women’s identity. This emphasis may shift the focus away from what I take to be the main theme of the conference: the relationship between—and interaction of—places and texts—to one in which the change in place and texts together inaugurate a process of transformation in individual self-consciousness. It is an approach that highlights the role of readers in the reception of texts and the importance of changing contexts in access as well as interpretation.4

1. Published in 1918 by George H. Doran, Out of the Shadow was reprinted in 1995 by Cornell University Press, in a volume edited by Thomas Dublin. Otherwise unidentified quotations from Cohen are from this source (hereafter OOTS); page references are given in the text.

2. I wish to thank Helen Lang for suggesting the term expressive literacy.
