Abbie Hoffman belongs to a distinct generation of American radicals born in the mid- to late thirties who became synonymous with rebellion and insurrection, feminism and black power, and the antiwar and youth movements of the sixties. Abbie was born in 1936, the same year as Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers. Gloria Steinem was born in 1934, Eldridge Cleaver in 1935, Jerry Rubin in 1938, and Tom Hayden in 1939.

Unlike a great many of the radicals of the twenties and thirties, Abbie's generation had little if any direct experience with crushing poverty, no memories of Europe, and none of the cultural and psychological dislocation associated with the immigrant experience. Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Tom Hayden, and Gloria Steinem grew up with American values in the midst of unprecedented America prosperity. While they were old enough to be aware of the Cold War and McCarthyism, it was the cultural vacuity of middle-class society more than direct political repression or economic deprivation that informed their rebellion.

Abbie described the emptiness of this world in an essay entitled "Thorns of the Flower Children," which was published in Woodstock Nation (1969). There was a common experience for young people, he explained. The sons and daughters "saw their fathers disappear behind the corn flakes box and hurry off to his other life in a distant land called DOWNTOWN.... They heard from their mothers over and over again about being respectable and responsible and, above all, reasonable.... They monopolized the TV set with Bob Hope, baseball games, situation comedies about people like them and of course Ed Sullivan. They liked to 'keep up' so they read Time Magazine and the N. Y. Times on Sunday.... If there ever was a Desolation Row it climbed into the front seat of the Oldsmobile on Monday morning, checked its passport and headed DOWNTOWN."

Abbie's generation shared much the same cultural experience with the generation that was born after World War II and that came to be known as the baby boomers, but his was a transitional generation. Though they were supposed to belong to the "silent generation," they began to speak up by the time they reached college. Moreover, though they came a decade or so after the Beats, they were still young enough in age and close enough in spirit to appreciate the Beat movement firsthand. Then, too, most of them were shaped directly and profoundly by existentialism--by the notion that they could choose not to collaborate with the system of oppression and could instead become self-conscious rebels. Though Abbie and his contemporaries weren't the cultural and political fathers and mothers of the sixties, they were certainly the older brothers and sisters of the decade of defiance. They paved the way for the full-fledged rebellion of the baby boomers.

They grew up in the North and in the South, in black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods, in working-class and middle-class families, with Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant parents. The common denominator wasn't race, class, geography, or religion but a moment in history when the Pax Americana broke down, and when the underlying realities of the society--poverty, racism, and spiritual impoverishment--emerged from behind the facade of material comfort, family togetherness, and glib happiness. They came, for the most part, from the big cities and urban centers of New York, Little Rock, Dallas, and Cincinnati, but they came as well from towns like Royal Oak, Michigan; White Fish Bay, Wisconsin; and Worcester, Massachusetts. Some of their notable contemporaries in the worlds of entertainment, literature, and film included Elvis Presley, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon,
Jack Nicholson, and Francis Ford Coppola—all of whom were rebels, mavericks, and outsiders who translated their idiosyncratic styles and defiant stances into establishment success. They helped to create a popular culture that defied the old Hollywood system, the music industry, and the literary elite, but their dissident images became a part of the very system they confronted. They were rebellious, yet they belonged to the world of privilege. They celebrated the common woman and the common man, but they themselves were uncommon celebrities. Abbie shared the ability to make rebellion an acceptable--almost an obligatory--part of mainstream culture. In a world of competing media icons, he fashioned himself into a genuine icon of the American revolutionary.

In the late sixties, Abbie liked to say that he had been born in 1960—at the precise moment that the era of the sixties was born—and that he had been abandoned by a culture that had turned its back on its own children. Years later, he liked to say that he had been reborn in 1980, when he returned from the underground to begin a new life at the start of a new decade. The new, the timely, and the contemporary counted heavily in his scheme of things, and he continually aimed to give rebirth to himself, but there was also something old-fashioned about him. For all his rebellion and nonconformity, he was patriarchal, conservative, and respectful of traditional ways and family togetherness. Though he had a strong nihilistic streak and an apocalyptic imagination, he also had, paradoxically, a profound longing to venerate the past, and an impulse to preserve and to maintain the world as it was. Having roots was essential.

He satirized Worcester, his birthplace and his hometown; among friends he called it the city of "seven hills and no thrills," a cultural wasteland that was "half way between Boston and nowhere." But he also loved Worcester and clung to it tenaciously. Until 1966, when he turned 30, it was at the heart of his universe. When he went away to college, it was to Brandeis in nearby Waltham, Massachusetts: so close he often went home for weekends.

Abbie rebelled against his parents, but he visited them and maintained close contact with relatives and friends from the neighborhood. From 1960 to 1966, when he and his first wife, Sheila Karklin, lived in Worcester, they lived only a short distance from the home in which he had been raised, where his parents still lived. After he left Worcester in 1966 and settled in New York, his hometown remained a haven, and he visited there repeatedly. Even when he was a fugitive in the seventies, he slipped back into town, ate at his favorite restaurant, El Morocco, and visited old friends. The old saw "you can't go home again" simply didn't apply to Abbie. "I've never left Worcester," he told reporter Kristen Duran in 1987. That was part of the mythology he disseminated about himself. Long after he had become internationally famous, he still wanted to be thought of as the local kid who'd made good in the big world. He had, of course, moved away from Worcester, but he had taken his hometown with him. Worcester provided him with his view of society and his way of dealing with the world.

Born Troublemaker

There was nothing extraordinary about the circumstances of Abbie's birth on November 30, 1936, but over the years he created a mystique about them. After all, he was a hero, and his birth had to have heroic reverberations. He had been born a troublemaker, he insisted. He had arrived in the world, he explained to Duran, "half way between the gun factory and the circus," which seemed chosen by fate to be "exactly the right place" for a future antiwar activist opposed to weapons of destruction and a countercultural clown who made all the world his circus. In Revolution for the Hell of It he boasted, with characteristic hyperbole, that "as far as the revolution goes it started when I was born."

In his autobiography, Abbie suggested that his Russian ancestors had been revolutionaries and that he had inherited "traces of Bolshevik blood." But this was more fantasy than fact; there is no clear evidence of any family member who took part in the Russian revolutions of 1905 or 1917. Although his grandparents had emigrated from Russia, they had not been revolutionaries. His parents, John and Florence Hoffman, steered clear of radicalism and avoided the major left-wing organizations of the day, including the Socialist and Communist Parties, which claimed the loyalties of so many European
working-class Jews who had fled to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. John and Florence embraced the values of Main Street, and they expected their three children—Abbie, the oldest; Jack, the middle child, born in 1939; and Phyllis, the youngest, born in 1941—to work hard, honor their parents, and never bring public disgrace or scandal to the family.

If radicalism wasn't in Abbie's blood, as he claimed, it wasn't spawned by poverty, either: the Hoffmans were upwardly mobile and solidly middle class. Nor was it engendered by ethnic discrimination, although there was anti-Semitism in Worcester: a great many of the Irish Catholic kids who grew up and went to school with Abbie believed that Jews were rich and that they controlled the political life of the city. As a child, Abbie felt self-conscious about his Jewishness among so many Catholic schoolmates, and occasionally he even tried to pass for a Catholic. But while his uncles had had to defend themselves against physical attack from Irish and Italian kids, he was never menaced or assaulted because of his Jewish identity.

His mother, Florence, noted that he was "a difficult child to bring up": he was intensely jealous of, and often hostile toward, his younger brother Jack, and as a child he had few friends. His father, Johnnie—known to friends and family members as Johnnie—described him as "Hell unleashed," and while he derived a modicum of pleasure from his son's rambunctiousness, he was also disturbed by it. Johnnie simply couldn't understand Abbott, as he called him, because he went against everything Johnnie stood for. Johnnie had grown up hungry; Abbott's plate was full every night of the week, yet he often refused, perversely (it seemed), to eat anything. Johnnie repeatedly banished him to his room as punishment, and Abbie continually refused to knuckle under.

Very early in life Abbie expressed an almost instinctive dislike of "blind authority" and showed a penchant for causing trouble. To his parents, he was "the ultimate in Jewish nightmares" (or so he liked to think): the firstborn son who wouldn't obey the rules or follow the blueprint for his own preordained success. Johnnie Hoffman had done his lifelong best to stay out of trouble and out of the public eye. Notoriety was the last thing he wanted. Given the anticommunist crusade of the day, it's not surprising that he rarely spoke of his own birth in Russia shortly after the failed revolution of 1905, and Abbie grew up in the dark about his own family history. It was only when he was writing his autobiography in the seventies that he began to learn the history of the Hoffmans, and by then a great many memories had been lost and replaced by mythologies.

He was then told that in nineteenth-century Russia the Hoffmans had gone by the name Shapoznikoff, and that they had been lower-middle-class shopkeepers who were unhappy under the czar's repressive regime and anxious to migrate to America. Jacob Shapoznikoff, one of Johnnie's uncles, purchased or perhaps purloined (the details in the "family mythology," as Abbie called it, are sketchy) the papers of a German named Hoffman and became the first member of the family to reach America. Abbie, of course, was delighted by this tale of an ancestor who had taken on a different name and identity and had traveled under false documents.

In disguise and under the name Jacob Hoffman, Abbie's grandfather had traveled via Siberia and Japan to California and then to New York, where he sent word to the rest of the family to follow him to the promised land. Morris and Anna Shapoznikoff, Abbie's grandparents on his father's side, came to America about 1910, settling first in Malden, near Boston, and then in Worcester, which was then and still is the second largest city in the state. An industrial and manufacturing city in the late nineteenth century, with a population drawn from all across Europe, Worcester was home to a large community of Polish and Russian Jews, and it could boast a dozen or so thriving Orthodox synagogues—a major attraction for the Shapoznikoff-Hoffmans.

Worcester itself had a remarkable past that Abbie knew little about. Founded in the early eighteenth century, it became a center of the antislavery and feminist movements in the mid-nineteenth century. Henry David Thoreau spoke there in defense of John Brown and his raid at Harper's Ferry. Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, the celebrated anarchists, made Worcester a brief refuge several
decades later, and there were vigorous socialist and trade union movements. Eugene V. Debs spoke in Worcester, and so did Sigmund Freud. The city was hardly provincial.

Indeed, it was "zippy and exhilarating." Samuel N. Behrman wrote in The Worcester Account, a chronicle of his early years. Behrman, who was born in Worcester in 1893 and went on to become a successful Broadway playwright, Hollywood screenwriter, and contributor to the New Yorker, was-- until Abbie's rise to fame in the sixties--Worcester's most famous native son. Abbie's grandfather, Morris Hoffman, had, however, known little if anything about the "zippy and exhilarating" world of Worcester. A street peddler who sold fruits and vegetables from a horse-drawn cart, he later became the proprietor of a small candy store, where he kept his eyes on the cash register, not on cultural improvements or the lecture circuit.

Like their Russian ancestors, the American Hoffmans were lower middle class, but they worked hard, saved their money, and planned for a better life for their children. At home they spoke Yiddish, which Abbie called "the language of survival ... half insults, half complaints," but they mastered English, learned their civic lessons, became American citizens, and bought into the American dream. By his own report, Johnnie Hoffman was a devoted son, a diligent student, and a hard worker who made sure to contribute his meager earnings as a newspaper-delivery boy to "the family pot." Like his son Abbie, Johnnie had a flair for storytelling and mythmaking, and in his own telling of the tale he was a Horatio Alger figure who climbed the ladder of success, rising from ghetto rags to suburban riches through sheer perseverance.

After high school Johnnie attended the Franklin Institute of Pharmacy in Boston and then worked in an uncle's drug store in Worcester, hoping to be taken in as a partner or to inherit the business. When the uncle died and Johnnie was read out of the will, he was resentful, or so Abbie claimed. He started his own business, the Worcester Pharmaceutical Supply Company, and made a good living selling "bedpans, Band-Aids and barbiturates in bulk" to doctors and hospitals and to the medical facilities in the city's booming factories.

A mainstay in the Reform congregation at Temple Emanuel, Johnnie belonged to the rabbi's Sunday Ayem Breakfast Club and to the Worcester lodge of B'nai B'rith and served on the Board of Directors at the Jewish Home for the Aged. In spite of his well-defined position within the Jewish community, there was a certain ambiguity about his identity beyond the synagogue and the social milieu of the Jews. When he attended Holy Cross football games, he blended in with the Catholic crowd. Abbie also remembered that his father would conveniently deny being a Jew at resorts that didn't accept Jews.

Johnnie wanted to be embraced by Gentiles and to move freely in their world, so he joined the Worcester Rotary Club and other like-minded civic organizations. In the world of electoral politics he was clearly uncomfortable, and he rarely discussed his beliefs or his party affiliations. The subject of politics was as taboo as sex or money. If in the fifties Johnnie was a Republican, as Abbie suspected, it wasn't because of a strong ideological identification with the party of big business and anticommunism, but because he thought that voting for Eisenhower and Nixon would be good for his own business and for the well-being of his family. Abbie's mother, Florence, was even less comfortable than her husband in the political waters of the fifties, and like many women of her generation she voted exactly as her husband told her to vote.

Florence and Johnnie were "two different kinds of people," as she put it. She was a "homebody," content to make an evening with her husband and children in the living room, while Johnnie was a mixer and a joiner, anxious to have a drink in town and to schmooze with friends. In Abbie's view, Florence was affirmative and validating, while Johnnie was negative and denigrating. Florence built him up; Johnnie knocked him down.
In fact, by almost all the reports, including Abbie's, Johnnie consistently beat him--whipped him, punched him, belted him--and, according to his brother Jack, once "threw us both down the stairs." The constant beating at the hands of his father was, it seems to me, the single most important experience of his childhood. In his autobiography Abbie noted that his relationship with his father was "one continuous, raging battle, with me refusing to cry and him huffing and puffing... After a few years, I learned that dungarees absorbed all the whammy out of a whipping." Still, the beatings must have hurt. When he turned fifty, a young filmmaker named Nancy Cohen, in her film My Dinner with Abbie (1989), asked him whether he had raised his own children--Andrew, Amy, and America--differently from the way he'd been raised. "I don't kick the shit out of them," he replied with bitterness.

Alice Miller, the German psychologist who has studied the "roots of violence," argues that a child who is beaten will very likely turn into an authoritarian adult. This certainly wasn't the case with Abbie. If anything, physical abuse seems to have made him more rebellious. Sam Keen, a psychologist and author of the best-selling book Fire in the Belly, claims in Hymns to an Unknown God that "a man beaten as a child forms his body into a permanent stance of cringing or defiance," but that description doesn't do Abbie justice either. He certainly didn't cringe, and while he did adopt a stance of defiance, he did so with a sense of humor and flexibility. What Abbie's beatings taught him was how to taunt authority figures, how to provoke them into rage so that they overreacted. Then he could sit back and point out how irrational and unethical they were.

His mother's ancestors, the Schanbergs, were Orthodox Jews from Austria, but Florence was born in Clinton, Massachusetts, and her American birth gave her an edge that her Russian-born husband didn't have. Florence had nothing to prove, whereas Johnnie always had to show how good he was, that he was an American and one of the guys. To Abbie, the Schanbergs and the Hoffmans seemed a study in contrasts: the Hoffmans were of the old world, the Schanbergs of the new; the Hoffmans were serious, the Schanbergs fun-loving. The world at large seemed an even bigger study in contrasts: there were Orthodox Jews and Reform Jews, preppies and greasers, outsiders and insiders, New England Yankees and everyone else. Growing up in Worcester meant straddling different worlds, cutting across different cultures and ethnic groups.

As a young woman, Florence Schanberg had followed an unconventional path that was opposite the beaten trail that her hard-working husband had taken. Florence was playful: she was an avid gymnast and an adept performer, and in the early thirties she traveled throughout the Northeast to compete. Once she watched and listened in stunned silence as a group of German gymnasts shouted "Heil Hitler!" "I didn't know what to do," she told reporter Fred Bernstein, who included his interview with her in a book entitled The Jewish Mothers' Hall of Fame, "so I just left."

Florence lived briefly in New York City, rooming at the YWCA while working as a bookkeeper and secretary, but the pace of life in Manhattan was too hectic for her, and she returned home. Family legend has it that she met Johnnie Hoffman, who was younger than she, at a bowling alley in Worcester. She fell in love with him--though neither he nor she was comfortable using words like "love"--and they were married on October 21, 1934, in the middle of the Depression.

According to Florence, she named her son Abbie after her brother Abraham (Abie) Schanberg, who had died from injuries sustained in an automobile crash on the Massachusetts Turnpike while en route to Boston to buy a diamond ring for his fiancee. Abbie knew, of course, the story of his uncle's tragic death, but he doesn't seem to have been moved by it. In his autobiography, for example, he describes his namesake Abraham simply as "One of my mother's brothers." He was haunted, however, by the story of his Aunt Rose, Abraham's sister--"Crazy Rose," Abbie called her. Rose had been a student at Middlesex Medical College but had a nervous breakdown when she heard the news about her brother's death. Institutionalized at Worcester State Hospital, she was given a frontal lobotomy, then came home, never to realize her dream of becoming a doctor. Aunt Rose was a living reminder to Abbie of human frailty and the thin line separating sanity from insanity.
As Abbie grew up, the family moved up in the world, literally as well as figuratively, from a small apartment at 264 Chandler Street to a larger apartment at 5 Geneva, and then to a comfortable house of their own at 6 Ruth Street, with each home higher than the previous one in the hills of Worcester. Like the Hoffmans, most of the other Jewish families also moved up the social ladder in the forties and fifties, from the working and lower middle classes to the middle- and upper-middle-class ranks. Like many of the middle-class Jews of Worcester, the Hoffmans attended Temple Emanuel, the most popular synagogue in the city. A red-brick building with stately white pillars, it looked then and now like it was trying to pass for a Yankee institution, just as many of the Jews were trying to assimilate into American life. This assimilationism disturbed Abbie as a young boy. "Slowly, my parents got sucked into the social melting pot, where they were to simmer uncomfortably for the next thirty years," he wrote in his autobiography.

Johnnie and Florence insisted that their son attend synagogue, and though he didn't like the idea, he went along with the scenario. In 1949, on his thirteenth birthday, he was bar mitzvahed in Temple Emanuel. The ceremony went smoothly, much to the family's delight, and afterward he posed for photos with Anna and Morris, looking like a near-perfect bar mitzvah boy in his suit and tie.

For the most part, Abbie's boyhood was untroubled by war, poverty, social injustice, or political upheaval. His own family life was often stormy—the beatings were certainly painful—but he grew up in a social environment that was relatively tranquil. Decades later, he would define himself as a child of the atomic age. "The world really began for us on March 6, 1945," he would say, using the collective "us" to describe the postnuclear generation of baby boomers with whom he would identify. Though he was nine years old at the time and mature enough to grasp the significance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the dropping of atomic weapons on Japan didn't impinge on his boyhood world or his youthful imagination, and neither did the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

As an adult he would resent the fact that neither his teachers nor his parents had told him of the trial and execution in 1953 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as atomic spies for the Soviet Union. He was incensed, too, that no one had told him about the mob lynchings of black men in the South, which took place as late as the fifties, or about the "race riots" by blacks in the forties to protest segregation and inequality. Nor had his textbooks mentioned the extermination of Native Americans, though he had been taught everything there was to know about the historic battles of the American Revolution at nearby Lexington and Concord.

His battles with his father aside, he seemed to grow up happy and carefree, perhaps as happy and as free as an American boy could be in the forties and fifties. "There will never be a time like the late Forties," he wrote in a 1971. article for Esquire entitled "Yo-Yo Power!" Indeed, it was an extraordinary historical moment to be a middle-class, white man-child, when the troubles of the world could be shut out, and when all the world seemed to be contained on the baseball diamond or at the park. He played baseball, football, tennis, basketball, and Ping-Pong. He bowled, roller-skated, and became a yo-yo champion, performing all the tricks, from cat's cradle and skin-the-cat to shoot-the-moon and monkey-on-a-pole. With Johnnie he went fishing and to Fenway Park and the Boston Garden to watch the Red Sox and the Celtics, bringing home photos of his athletic heroes, which he put up on the walls of his bedroom. When Babe Ruth died in 1949, Abbie thought the world would never be the same.

Abbie often seemed to be the epitome of the nice Jewish boy. He sang in the glee club, took dancing lessons, learned the fox-trot and the waltz, and at social gatherings was a latter-day version of Little Lord Fauntleroy. That is precisely his persona in many of the family photos from the mid-forties. In a white shirt and tie, a needy folded handkerchief poking out of the pocket of his jacket, and his hair combed across his forehead, he looks like a perfect young gentleman. But Abbie was also moody and introverted. He would disappear behind the locked door of his bedroom with a stack of library books--to read, his mother assumed, but just as often he'd daydream or lose himself in thought instead of reading. Then, too, there was another side to Abbie, especially as he approached adolescence: he liked
to have devilish fun, to play trick-or-treat on Halloween and perform wild pranks just about every day of the year. Most of his activities were harmless. But before long, as a teenager, he began getting into more serious trouble, stealing license plates from cars parked in the street, smoking stolen cigarettes, and using his peashooter and his slingshot to annoy the neighbors.

"He was the kind of kid who, if you said 'don't do it,' he did," his Aunt Dorothy remembered in an interview. There was a story, perhaps apocryphal, that he once mounted a horse and rode it bareback into his parents' house on Ruth Street. Needless to say, his horseplay got him into trouble with his parents, especially his father, who thought that physical force was necessary to control his wild son. Abbie was "stubborn" and "never changed his attitude," even when he was spanked, Johnnie complained in 1968 to James Gourgouras, a reporter for the Worcester Telegram and Gazette. "He always had to show off."

Much to Johnnie's chagrin, Abbie insisted on being the star of the Hoffman family situation comedy on Ruth Street, and he demanded, by Johnnie's standards, an inordinate and unhealthy amount of attention. Indeed, for Johnnie, who had made it his business to go through life without notoriety, his son's need for constant attention—which seemed to outstrip by far his need for food—was profoundly disturbing and ultimately inexplicable. Florence was less severe and far more forgiving, but she too noted that Abbie "demanded a lot of attention." Almost everyone in the Hoffman clan noted Abbie's urge to perform and to be noticed. One cousin recalled that as a boy Abbie continually "mugged for the camera." When Abbie acted up at home, Florence called Johnnie at work and asked him to come home and discipline their son. Long after her son had grown up, she placed the bulk of the blame for his bad behavior on herself and her husband. "I don't think we really communicated," Florence told reporter Fred Bernstein. "There was nobody to give Abbott direction."

A Cut-Up

When he cut up at home, he was spanked and banished to his room. When he cut up at school, he was ordered to the principal's office. But the more he was punished, the more he seemed to act up and act out. Rebuke and recrimination made him even more rebellious. "He was a rebel without a cause—before the movie," his Aunt Dorothy remembered. He carved his initials on school property, put snakes in teachers' desks, cracked jokes in the classroom, used four-letter words, and called teachers by their first names or else by their last names without the polite "Mr." or "Miss." He smoked in the lavatory, bullied younger kids on the playground, and generally turned into a juvenile delinquent.

In turning to delinquency he wasn't alone, of course. In the early to mid-fifties, a generation of young men began to express their boredom, frustration, and hostility, and the commercial culture reflected their attitudes and behavior in movies like The Wild One, on TV shows like American Bandstand, in Mad magazine, and in Elvis Presley's early recordings. Like the hoodlums of the day, Abbie wore a black leather jacket, pointed shoes, and pegged trousers. He rode a motorcycle, drag raced, picked up girls, and took them to drive-in movies.

By today's standards his bad behavior seems tame, but in Worcester in the late forties and early fifties his rebellion from middle-class Jewish traditions and values was unusual. Everyone in the neighborhood and at his high school knew about Abbie's wild exploits, and everyone knew that he was giving the family a bad name. By the time he was a high school sophomore, his adventures were the stuff of legends, and like most legends they had a way of snowballing. To his cousin Sydney Schanberg, who went on to become an award-winning reporter for the New York Times, he was a larger-than-life figure who seemed to have stepped out of a movie.

Abbie and his friends—who called him "The Abs" and considered him "Mr. Cool"—formed the "Ruth Street Stomping Society." Abbie and the gang played cards, rolled dice, and gambled at the racetrack. They wore pegged trousers and pointy shoes, just like the "hoods" they read about in Life and Look
and in books like Harold Robbins's A Stone for Danny Fisher, which was published in 1952 when Abbie was 16, and which he claimed was a major influence on him at this point in his life.

Eventually he crossed the line that divides legal mischief from blatantly illegal enterprise. He hot-wired cars and went joyriding, participated in violent gang fights, and got into trouble with the law for speeding on the streets of Worcester and driving without license or registration. By most reports, Johnnie fretted about his son--who was "on everyone's tongue" for all the wrong reasons--but he continually came to his son's rescue, hoping he'd eventually go straight.

Abbie's freshman and sophomore years were spent at Classical High, the public school for college-bound students. His junior and senior years were spent at Worcester Academy, a private school on the other side of town. How and why he made the switch from Classical to the Academy isn't clear. The details of the story changed with each telling, year after year, but Abbie always insisted that he had been expelled from Classical because of his bad behavior. In one account he explained that he had hit one of his teachers and was "thrown out of high school." In another account, he claimed that he had written a paper "questioning the existence of G-dash-D," and his English teacher called it "heresy" and "ripped it up." In still another account, he claimed to have been ejected for writing an essay in which he argued that "God fucked up a lot."

In his autobiography, he explained that in June 1953, when he was sixteen years old, he wrote a paper that questioned "the concept of a Supreme Being." Abbie argued (or so he claimed) that there really couldn't be a God, because if God existed he would dispense rewards and punishments fairly and justly, and obviously that wasn't the case. Mr. Brooks, his English teacher, called him a "little communist bastard," tore up the paper, and hurled the "confetti at me," Abbie wrote. He overturned Mr. Brooks's desk and tackled him before he could be restrained. He later told me that this incident had been his "first rupture with the establishment," a turning point in his life, and a premonition of bigger things to come. By his own calculation, he was "the only Jew in the history of Classical High School to be expelled," and maybe he was. By the early sixties, other students, including Jews, would be expelled for violating school infractions--such as wearing long hair and jeans--but Abbie was ahead of the times. Whether the encounter with Mr. Brooks took place as Abbie claimed, however, is uncertain. There are no school records, no eyewitnesses to corroborate Abbie's tale, and no copy remains of the essay in question. Moreover, no Mr. Brooks has come forward to affirm or deny the allegations. Alfred Cravadi, Abbie's math teacher, remembers that Abbie and Mr. Brooks "had words," as he put it, but that is all he recalls. What is clear is that Abbie wanted to mythologize himself as a troublemaker and rebel, a teenage Prometheus, who stood out from the crowd by questioning not only the teacher's authority and power but even the status of the Almighty.

After the "expulsion" from Classical--the fall from the good graces of the public school system--Abbie discovered Worcester's downtown pool halls, and the older men who spent their lives there smoking, drinking, and gambling. In his own downward mobility he defied his father's upward mobility. For the first time he saw the city from the bottom up, providing an enlightening perspective on class and status and an identification with outcasts and losers. In Abbie's eyes, the poolhall hustlers were spiritual warriors and high priests; they carried their cue sticks like "rifle butts" and took on the identity of "old Buddhas" engaged in "ritualistic dances," he wrote in Revolution for the Hell of It. Here were father figures with whom he could identify, and here was a place where--unlike school, temple, or his parents' house--he could feel at home and like a man. For the rest of his life he would feel comfortable in a pool hall, even in places like Chicago during the riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention or in the various places he frequented during his time underground in the seventies. Moreover, he would celebrate the pool hall as the institution that had taught him how to size up a situation, how to read the moment, and how to be ready to meet the world.

When he went back to school in the fall of 1955, he was a lot wiser and a lot more shrewd. He had indeed learned how to play the game. This time his parents enrolled him at Worcester Academy, which had once served only the sons of the Anglo-Saxon elite; by the mid-fifties, barriers had been
broken, and it was accepting Jews. "Yids were pouring into the place like the eleventh plague," Abbie would say. The inclusion of middle-class Jews in the world of the Yankees taught him that "money is power"; his particular admission into the Academy may also have shown him that rebellion had its rewards.

Worcester Academy wasn't a top-name prep school, but it was a step up in the world from Classical High, and Abbie had no inhibitions about flaunting his newfound status in the world of the preppy Holden Caulfields. Now he was part of the "in" crowd. The school yearbook tells us that he joined the chess club, played on the tennis team, and at five feet, six inches tall and 135 pounds was a scrappy halfback on the junior varsity football team. His grades were so good that Johnnie helped him buy him a '52 Ford, though he complained that his "brilliant" son "wouldn't crack a book."

The good student wasn't prepared to give up his role as bad boy. He broke the school's rules by drifting downtown for "wild escapades," until he was finally caught and placed on "indefinite bounds and probation," according to the 1955 school yearbook. He affected what he later called "a Jewish drugstore cowboy persona," greasing his hair and combing it back in the manner of rock singer and actor Sal Mineo, who appeared in Rebel without a Cause (1955). He was "a real bee-bop-a-luba," his brother Jack remembered: he loved listening to rock 'n' roll and to disc jockeys like Alan Freed, who played the music of Fats Domino, the Drifters, and Elvis Presley.

**Oedipus in Worcester**

In his autobiography, Abbie describes an endless war between himself and his father. From his own account it seems as though they were in a continual state of rage. Abbie says that as a boy he had resented the fact that Johnnie had been classified as "4-F"--physically unfit--and rejected from military service. He was disturbed that his father had not taken up arms to stop Hitler's war "to get the Jews," as he called it, and he thought of his father as a coward. He had been embarrassed by his father's continued presence in the home while other adult men were overseas. He was also angry that his father "never spoke of family history," never confided in him, and "never spoke of intimate things." He was saddened and disappointed, too, that Johnnie didn't take more notice of him, didn't accept or approve of him. Moreover, he was angry that his father imposed rules and regulations about almost everything, from the right way to eat and sleep to the right way to walk and talk. In the end Abbie seems to have been angry at Johnnie simply because he was there, blocking his way, dominating him, and making him feel small and insignificant. The timeless Oedipal conflicts between father and son played themselves out in the house at 6 Ruth Street. Moreover, Abbie's childhood rebellion against Johnnie was a rehearsal for his adult rebellion against the establishment. In the sixties, when he urged kids to dismantle the "parent culture," burn down their parents' homes, break down the nuclear family, and "kill parents," he was magnifying and projecting the anger that had its origins in his own turbulent boyhood.

Abbie was usually resentful when scholars suggested that his own rebellion, and the rebellion of the sixties, was motivated by psychological rather than social, political, and cultural conditions. But occasionally he admitted that psychology had played a part. His early relationship with his father, he explained, established a pattern that was to be repeated in his encounters with authority figures later on. "I used to see everything as a struggle with my father, just transferred to various institutions," he wrote in his autobiography.

The anger and rage that he felt toward Johnnie were only a part of the psychological picture, however. As a kid, he had marveled at his father's apparently magical ability to score bubble gum and bring home meat from the butcher when government rationing was in effect and other families were going without. As an adult, he liked his father's talent for schmoozing, his skill as a finagler and a wheeler-dealer. Then, too, he admired his father's skill at crossing social boundaries: his ability to penetrate the world of the Yankees and of the goyim.
As a child, Abbie had identified strongly with his mother's brother, Sam "Schmully" Schanberg, who was even more patriotic, more American, and more middle-class than Johnnie. In the forties, Schmully was Abbie's real-life all-American hero. "He was a Jew accepted and liked in the most redneck Polish-Irish town imaginable," Abbie boasted in his autobiography. "They even made him head of the American Legion Post." Not only was Schmully prosperous, but he flaunted his prosperity, driving a pink Cadillac. Moreover, he married a shiksa, a "snazzy dame with flaming red hair and a thick Irish brogue." Abbie loved the fact that Schmully and his wife "were in love and showed it--unlike my other relatives who hid their affections."

There was a strong part of Abbie that wanted to assimilate into mainstream America, as Schmully and his father had done, but he never gave up his identity as the Jewish outsider, exile, and wanderer. "I came into this world acutely aware of being Jewish and am sure I'll go out that way," he wrote with characteristic hyperbole. For Abbie, being Jewish meant having to face awful dilemmas and make difficult choices.

"Jews, especially first-born male Jews, have to make a big choice very quickly in life whether to go for the money or go for broke," he wrote in his autobiography. Most Jews, he said, want to fit in, to become "'better' Americans." Then there were the other Jews, the "wiseguys who go around saying things like 'Workers of the world unite,' or 'Every guy wants to screw his mother,' or 'E = [mc.sup.2].'" Even as a young adult Abbie wanted both—to go for broke and to go for the money, and those double desires generated a lifelong sense of ambiguity.

Being Jewish, he would explain, meant surviving by "ambiguous gestures" and "ethical ambiguities." It meant anxiety, guilt, uncertainty, unhappiness, and the sense of impending doom that we associate with the prophets, the patriarchs, and the rebels of the Old Testament: the defiance of David against Goliath, the blindly destructive yet liberating rage of Samson. Being Jewish also meant laughing at anxieties and making jokes about death and dying: the humor of Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, and the borscht belt tummlers, comedians whose jokes were half in Yiddish and half in English, and who made the rounds of the Catskill resorts.

"The person who could tell my story better than anyone was Isaac Bashevis Singer," Abbie wrote in a 1978 essay entitled "Bye-Bye Sixties, Hollywood-Style" (collected in Square Dancing in the Ice Age). He was indeed much like many of the Jews in Singer's novels: haunted, superstitious, and impish. Moreover, like Singer's tormented heroes, he would grow into manhood wrestling with his own private demons, trying to do the right thing and to be a real mensch in a time of unfolding troubles.