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Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

Fannia M. Cohn papers

1914-1962

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Summary

Creator: Cohn, Fannia M. (Fannia Mary), 1885-

Title: Fannia M. Cohn papers

Date: 1914-1962

Source: Gift of Clarice Selub, 1962

Abstract: Fannia M. Cohn (ca. 1885-1962) was a labor official and educator. The papers document her career as an official of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

Access: Advance notice required.

Alternative Form Available: Microfilm The entire collection is available on 13 reels of microfilm, (*ZZ-35052). Copies of the microfilm are also available at the Labor Management Documentation Center, Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853; and at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Bobst Library, New York University, 70 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012.

Location of Originals: Copies of the microfilm of the collection are also available at the Labor Management Documentation Center, Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853; and at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Bobst Library, New York University, 70 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012

Preferred citation: Fannia Cohn Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Julie Miller; machine readable finding aid created by APEX Data Services and revised by Chatham Ewing.

Creator History

Fannia Cohn, labor educator and leader, was born in 1885 or 1888 in Russia to a middle-class Jewish family. In 1904 she emigrated to the United States, and in 1909 she began her life-long career with the

International Ladies Garment Workers Union as a member of the Executive Board of the Wrapper, Kimono, and Housedress Makers Local 41. From approximately 1914-1916 Cohn lived in Chicago, working as a general organizer for the ILGWU. In 1916 Cohn returned to New York as the ILGWU's Vice-President. She was the first woman ever to hold that post, and she retained it until 1925. Throughout her life she played an important role in worker education. From 1918 until her retirement in 1962, Cohn was the Executive Secretary of the ILGWU Educational Department. Under her leadership the union provided educational, cultural, and recreational services to members, and the ILGWU Educational Department grew to become the largest union education department in the country. Throughout her career, Cohn lectured and published on workers' education and the role of women in the labor movement. Cohn's career had many notable highlights. Cohn was a co-founder, in 1921, of the Workers' Education Bureau, a clearinghouse for workers' education programs absorbed in the 40's by the American Federation of Labor. Also in 1921, she helped to found Brookwood Labor College, a residential college for workers in Katonah, New York. In 1924 she helped to found both the Manumit School for Workers' Children in Pawling, New York, and the Pioneer Youth of America. Throughout her life, Cohn was also active in many other labor, education, Jewish organizations. Cohn retired from the ILGWU in August, 1962, and died soon after.

Scope and Content Note

The three largest series in this collection of Cohn's papers are Correspondence, Writings, and ILGWU. The Correspondence series contains letters written and received by Cohn. The Writings series contains typescripts of many of Cohn's speeches, articles, plays, and other writings. The ILGWU series documents the activities of the some ILGWU officers, and has a good amount of material on the ILGWU Education Department. Only small amounts of material document the activities of the Workers' Education Bureau, Brookwood Labor College, the Manumit School for Workers' Children, and Pioneer Youth of America, in all of which Cohn was active. These papers contain a relatively small and random sample of the much larger number of letters and documents which must have crossed Cohn's desk during her long and active professional career.

Arrangement: Nine series: I. Correspondence, 1914-1962; II. Writings, ca. 1920s-1950s; III. International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, 1920s-1962; IV. Workers' Education Bureau, 1920s-1950s; V. Brookwood Labor College, 1924-1938; VI. Youth Programs, 1932-1950s; VII. Edwin Markham Testimonial Committee Correspondence, 1928-1930; VIII. Photographs, 1920s-1962, and Oversize Items; IX. Other Groups

Key Terms

Subjects

Clothing workers -- Labor unions -- United States
Labor movement -- United States
Labor unions -- Clothing workers -- United States
Women -- Employment -- United States
Working class -- Education -- United States

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Photographic prints

Names

Cohn, Fannia M. (Fannia Mary), 1885-
Beard, Charles A. (Charles Austin), 1874-1948
Darrow, Clarence, 1857-1938
Dubinsky, David, 1892-1982

Kennedy, William, 1928-
Markham, Edwin, 1852-1940
Muste, A. J. (Abraham John), 1885-1967
Preston, Evelyn
Randolph, A. Philip (Asa Philip), 1889-1979
Seidman, Joel Isaac, 1906-
Sigman, Morris
Swerdlow, Irwin
Thomas, Norman, 1884-1968
Van Doren, Carl, 1885-1950
Wald, Lillian D., 1867-1940
Wolfson, Theresa, 1897-1972
Brookwood Labor College (Katonah, N.Y.)
International Conference on Workers' Education
International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Educational Dept
Manumit School for Workers' Children (Pawling, N.Y.)
Pioneer Youth of America
Workers Education Bureau of America

Container List

I. Correspondence 1914-1962, n.d.

The correspondence series is the largest in the collection, filling five boxes. Of these, three contain letters (including typescript copies) received by Cohn, 1914-1962, and two contain original letters, and copies and drafts of letters she wrote, 1919-1961. Letters are in chronological order. The correspondence chiefly concerns ILGWU Educational Department matters. Some correspondence with A.J. Muste concerning Brookwood Labor College, and with friends, including Evelyn Preston and Theresa Wolfson, is included. Cohn's correspondents include ILGWU officials; representatives of other labor unions; workers' education, labor, and education organizations in the United States and Europe; journals; scholars; and some prominent individuals including Charles Beard (typescripts only), A. Philip Randolph, and Norman Thomas.

a. Letters received 1914-1962, n.d.

- b. 1 1914 - 1928
- b. 2 1929 - 1936
- b. 3 1937 - 1962, n.d.

b. Letters sent 1919-1961

- b. 4 1919 - 1932
- b. 5 1933 - 1961

II. Writings ca. 1920s-1950s

Included are typescripts of Cohn's speeches (including her ILGWU convention addresses for 1934, 1947, 1950, and 1956); articles; essays for ILGWU pamphlets and other publications; texts of discussions; and plays, some written with Irwin Swerdlow, on labor topics for use by union members. Her topics are chiefly workers' education, labor, the activities and history of the ILGWU and its Educational Department (including her 21 chapter essay *The International Ladies Garment Workers Union: Its History and Development*, n.d.), and the role of women in labor. Writings are alphabetical by title. Untitled writings are alphabetical by their first lines. Some fragmentary writings are included.

- b. 6 A - I
- b. 7 I - T
- b. 8 U - W; reprints; list of pamphlets and reprints 1960

III. International Ladies Garment Workers Union 1920s-1962

A variety of documents, ca. 1920s-1950s, relating to the Educational Department and to the ILGWU as a whole are gathered here as general files. Included are statements, lists, notes, accounts, plans, statistics, conference documents, and letters sent and received by various ILGWU officials, including presidents Morris Sigman and David Dubinsky, and including a few by Cohn. Also included are scattered minutes of various ILGWU bodies, including the Education Committee and the Education Council, 1920s-1940s; reports, both typescript and printed, 1920s-1950s; announcements and lists of courses, lectures, panel discussions, trips, and social events offered by the Educational Department, 1920s-1960s; descriptions of courses, 1920s-1930s, offered by the Educational Department to its members on labor and liberal arts topics (lecturers included William Kennedy, Joel Seidman, and Carl Van Doren); typescript lectures, research papers, and student writings; panel discussion presentations, 1940s-1950s; lists of program attendees, union members, and other individuals; letters and mimeographed material relating to the ILGWU Student Fellowships, 1940s-1950s; and clippings (some in Yiddish) and printed material.

- b. 9 General files; minutes and reports; announcements 1920s-40s
- b. 10 Announcements, course descriptions; lectures 1950s-60s
- b. 11 Lectures; panel discussions; student fellowship; lists of names; printed material

III. International Ladies Garment Workers Union (cont.)

b. 12 Printed material

A strike notice addressed to members of ILGWU Local 41, Tuckers, Hemstitchers, Pleaters, and Novelty Workers, in Yiddish and English, n.d., has been placed in oversized box 2.

IV. Workers' Education Bureau 1920s-1950s

General files contain a mixture of memoranda, letters, lists, minutes, press releases, conference documents, accounts, and reports. A few issues of Workers' Education Bureau periodicals, and some printed material, are also included.

b. 12 1920s - 1950s

V. Brookwood Labor College 1924-1938

Correspondence, 1924-1937, consists chiefly of letters to and from Chair of Faculty A.J. Muste. By-laws, reports (of note is a report, probably by Muste, on Brookwood delivered at the Second International Conference on Workers' Education, Oxford, England, 1924), minutes, and printed material are included. Also included is a file of letters, accounts, and legal and other documents, ca. 1926-1938, concerning Brookwood's financial problems. See the Writings series for addresses by Cohn on Brookwood.

b. 13 1924 - 1938

VI. Youth Programs 1932-1950s

a. Manumit School for Workers' Children 1932-1933

Included are minutes of the Board of Directors of Manumit Associates, Inc., June 13, 1932, and minutes of the school's board, August 7, 1932, August 12, 1932, and November 19, 1933. A fundraising circular, 1932, is also included.

b. Pioneer Youth of America 1950s

Scattered minutes of meetings of the Board of Directors, 1950-1956, and reports, memoranda, and printed material, 1950s, are included.

VII. Edwin Markham Testimonial Committee correspondence, personal ephemera; fragments. 1928-1930

Included is a file of letters, 1928, written in response to Herman Bernstein's invitations to serve on the Edwin Markham Testimonial Committee. The committee, on which Cohn served, was created to organize a tribute to Markham on the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of his poem "The Man With the Hoe." Charles Beard, Clarence Darrow, Lillian Wald, and other prominent figures are among the respondents. Letters dating to 1930 concerning other tributes to Markham are included. Personal ephemera consists of certificates awarded to Cohn by the ILGWU and the American Federation of Labor; a dedication, in Russian, torn out of a Russian book; and printed material. Miscellaneous, fragmentary, and unidentifiable items relating to Cohn's professional activities are also included.

VIII. Photographs, and oversized items. 1920s-1962

Included are candid and posed, group and individual portraits of Fannia Cohn. Many show her participating in ILGWU Educational Department activities, including classes, lectures, museum trips, plays, and events at Unity House. Also included are photographs of Cohn at the Second International Conference on Workers' Education, Oxford, 1924; on the boardwalk during the 1934 ILGWU convention at Atlantic City, New Jersey; and at her 1962 retirement luncheon.

Oversized items from all parts of the collection are stored with the photographs.

IX. Other Groups

Reprints of articles, brochures, flyers, and other printed material issued primarily by workers' education and labor groups.