

## **Siegel, Shuster and Superman: Cleveland's and Glenville Neighborhood's Own**

**Jerry Siegel (1914-1992 )**

**Joe Shuster (1914-1996)**



Jerry Siegel (left) and Joe Shuster (right)  
(Image: *monkeysfightingrobots.com*)

Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both born to Jewish immigrants.

Siegel's parents had fled antisemitism in their native Lithuania. Siegel, the youngest of six children, was born in Cleveland, Ohio. His parents, Michel (formerly Sigalowitz) and Sarah (Sore) Siegel, started a small clothing store. As a child, Siegel immersed himself in stories from newspapers, and consistently wrote in to be featured in local columns. In 1928, the family moved to Glenville.

Born in Toronto, Canada, a young Joe Shuster was a newsboy at the *Toronto Daily Star* to help the family through difficult financial times. His parents, Julius and Ida Shuster (previously Shusterowitz), were from the Netherlands and Ukraine. They moved to Canada in order to leave behind widespread antisemitic violence in Europe and pursue work. Struggling with rent, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio in May 1924, where the Richman Brothers clothing store factory offered the promise of economic security.

New York and Toronto had been thriving Jewish communities that more than equaled in spirit and numbers those the two families left behind, but neither family knew what lay ahead in Cleveland.

Back then, Cleveland was home to 85,000 Jews, which was more than 10 percent of the city's population, and nearly half of them lived in the Glenville area. The neighborhood was 70 percent Jewish.

Most fathers were small businessmen, like Michel and Julius; Sarah Siegel was an active volunteer in a number of Jewish organizations.

### **Early Years and School Days/On the east side and Glenville**

Jerry Siegel shared the Old-World Jewish heritage of his comic book colleagues, growing up in the same American ethnic melting pot. The Jewish Center (on East 105<sup>th</sup> Street) was on its way to becoming the largest Conservative synagogue in America. (Neither Jerry nor Joe had much use for its basketball court and huge swimming pool.)

When the two went outdoors, it was Yiddish not English they heard – from the ragman, the bread man, the iceman, and the fruit and vegetable men. When the boys said they didn't grow up very Jewish, they meant they didn't go to synagogue much, but Glenville then was comparable to Israel today. The culture and street life were teeming with Jewish life.

At age 14, Shuster enrolled at Alexander Hamilton Junior High School on Cleveland's east side, where he regularly submitted short comics to the school newspaper, *The Federalist*. In 1929, the family moved to a new neighborhood, prompting Shuster's enrollment at Glenville High School.

When the Siegel family moved to Glenville in 1928, a teenage Siegel spent much of his time writing stories on his typewriter or deeply engrossed in reading science fiction magazines. In his first year at Glenville High School, Siegel devoted himself to the school's newspaper, the *Glenville Torch*, where he practiced writing short stories and serialized crime dramas for a young audience.

Around 1930, Siegel and Shuster became fast friends and ended up creating comics together. Shuster's drawings combined with Siegel's passion for science fiction and writing became a popular feature of the school's newspaper.

Siegel initially conceived of Superman, and Shuster brought the character to life through sketches, sometimes drawing his creations on brown wrapping paper or the back of wallpaper. The two friends drafted the first Superman comics in Siegel's childhood home in Glenville.



Superman Plaque – Located at the intersection of St. Clair Avenue and E. 105<sup>th</sup> Street in Cleveland; erected in 2003 by the Ohio Bicentennial Commission and The Ohio Historical Society

At the age of 16, both Siegel and Shuster were already accomplished comic artists. Shuster drew a comic about a character named Jerry the Journalist, and Siegel sold his works under the name Hugh Langley. Together they tended to work on sci-fi inspired comics or stories inspired by the folk tale of John Henry. They created a story based on these ideas about a villain they called “Superman”, though Superman as a villain didn’t last long. The pair created a new hero, also named Superman, who developed into the hero known today.

### **Following High School Graduation**

In 1933, Shuster delivered groceries and sold ice-cream bars, and Siegel took a job at a printing plant, earning four dollars a week. Also that year, Siegel aimed to expand his reach by self-publishing a magazine titled *Science Fiction*. Within it, Siegel and Shuster unveiled their newest short story collaboration: “The Reign of Superman.”

### **Finding a Publisher**

Beginning in 1935 the pair began selling comics to National Allied Publications, and spent years attempting to make Superman a daily comic strip. Together they entered the new comic book business in 1936, not with their Superman character but by writing and drawing other adventure strips for New Fun Comics, Inc. Eventually they sold their concept to Detective Comics (DC-National Comics) for just \$130. Superman began as a thirteen-page story, one of several anthology features in the National Periodical Publications Action Comics #1 in June 1938. If it did well, Shuster and Siegel would be kept on, for ten dollars a page, to be split between them. The contract stipulated that

the initial payment also gave Detective Comics all the rights to the Superman character. But the pair had never before had the chance to earn so much money, so they signed. The strip proved so popular that National launched Superman into his own self-titled *Action Comics*, the first for any superhero, premiering in the summer of 1939.



Joe Shuster, one of Superman's two creators, attends a freehand drawing course at Fenn College taught by Cleveland artist Hans Busch. At Shuster's left is fellow student Marian Henderson. 1942

Cleveland Public Library Digital Gallery

### **World-Wide Popularity – “Truth, Justice, and the American Way”!**

One of the reasons for the early success of Superman was how Siegel wrote about real issues that affected everyday people. They included a lot of things that had happened in Ohio’s history such as the mine accident in Athens, Ohio on November 5, 1930. As time passed stories included Superman fighting off anti-Semitic people. With Hitler’s rise in Europe with his anti-Semitic words and the negative stereotypes of Jewish people, Siegel and Shuster were pushed to make a hero that defended the weak. They often would portray Superman protecting the weak and those who were mistreated. He was a hero the world needed as World War II began in Europe. Shuster and Siegel worked hard to tell stories of hope that would cheer people on as things looked hopeless, even as they struggled to keep the rights to create those stories.

One of their more popular stories included Superman confronting Hitler and exposing the horror that was being inflicted on the Jewish people of Europe. Siegel and Shuster got the attention of the Nazi regime when they were commissioned to write a comic showing how Superman would end the war.

During and after World War II, the Superman comics would go on to tell stories about the oppressed and make commentary on the state of the world. Even after the war was finished comic books pushed different social issues to the forefront. Superman endorsed fitness for John F. Kennedy. He once fought the KKK in *The Adventures of Superman* radio show and worked to combat racism. Superman even reminded people to buy bonds and stamps.



Photo Credit: Gail Greenberg

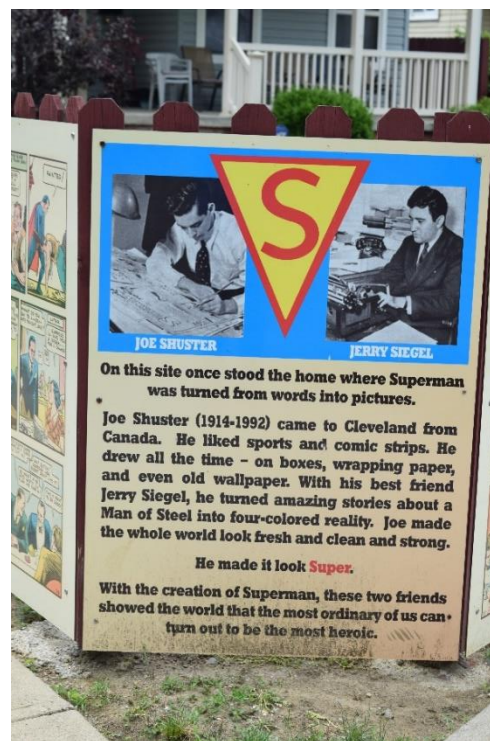


Photo Credit: Gail Greenberg

*Birthplace of Jerry Siegel: 10622 Kimberly Avenue (nine blocks north of Joe Shuster's house). Pictured panels are part of the cover and first 13 pages of Action Comics #1, the first Superman story, which was published on April 18, 1938.*

*Display is located at the corner of Amor Avenue and Parkwood Drive. The street signs for the neighborhood feature the Superman insignia, and honorary names – Joe Shuster and Lois Lane -- paired with the actual names of each street.*

### **Rights, Royalties, and Litigation**

Siegel and Shuster signed over their rights to Superman to DC Comics in 1939. Superman proved to be DC Comics' most important

and popular character and made a lot of money for the company. Superman soon became one of the best-known characters in the world. The Superman stories flew off the shelves. It was this popularity that made Siegel and Shuster realize they had been swindled into selling the rights to Superman. Siegel was told that he and Shuster could be easily replaced. The offer was simple, keep writing and drawing a character they poured their heart and soul into, or allowing someone else to take complete control. Even though they would not become rich off Superman they agreed to keep working on the comics.

During the 1940s, Siegel and Shuster sued DC Comics for a portion of the profits. The two men received royalties for Superboy, another character that they had created. The partners had to forsake all rights to the Superman character.

### **Epilogue**

By the 1950s, both men had left DC Comics. Shuster eventually left the comics business, while Siegel returned to DC during the early 1960s. In 1968, Siegel and his family moved to California where he struggled with debt and an inability to find work. Siegel never gave up on the comic book industry, and continued to search for positions with other publishers while enjoying life with his wife.

Shuster later joined Siegel in San Diego, moving in across the street and harkening back to their high school days. In 1975, Siegel and Shuster sued DC Comics for a share of the profits once again. They lost this case, but DC Comics agreed to pay each man a yearly stipend of thirty-five thousand dollars. The company also gave credit for Superman's creation to the two men. Siegel died on January 28, 1996. In 1999, the Siegel family successfully won a court case, granting the family fifty-percent ownership of the Superman character.



*Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage  
Photo Credit: Gail Greenberg*

## More on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and Superman

*Links to other sites will open in a new window.*

### Online Articles

"About Siegel & Shuster Society." *The Siegel & Shuster Society*, <https://supermanincleveland.com/>.

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"Literature Honorees — Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster." *THE JEWISHAMERICAN HALL OF FAME*, [amuseum.org/index.php/literature-honorees-siegel-shuster/](http://amuseum.org/index.php/literature-honorees-siegel-shuster/).

Reynolds, David. "Superman: From Cleveland to Krypton - an Exhibit." *Cleveland Public Library*, [cpl.org/superman/](http://cpl.org/superman/).

"Shuster, Joseph: Encyclopedia of Cleveland History: Case Western Reserve University." *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History | Case Western Reserve University*, 10 Oct. 2020, [Joseph Shuster](#).

"Siegel, Jerome: Encyclopedia of Cleveland History: Case Western Reserve University." *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History | Case Western Reserve University*, 6 Oct. 2020, [Jerome Siegel](#).

"Superman: Encyclopedia of Cleveland History: Case Western Reserve University." *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History | Case Western Reserve University*, 12 May 2018, [Superman](#).

### Books

Nobleman, Marc Tyler, and Ross MacDonald. *Boys of Steel: The Creators of Superman*. Dragonfly Books, 2013.

Ricca, Brad. *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster--the Creators of Superman*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2014.

Tye, Larry. *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*. Random House, 2012.

Voloj, Julian, and Thomas Campi. *The Joe Shuster Story: The Artist behind Superman*. Super Genius, 2018.

## **Video**

### **"It's A Bird, It's A Plane: Honoring The Creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel & Joe Shuster"**

Honoring the Induction of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster into the Jewish-American Hall of Fame – November 15, 2021

YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyOmqiQM0dY>

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/CombatAntiSemitism/videos/577827363450254>

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[www.ClevelandJewishHistory.net](http://www.ClevelandJewishHistory.net)