

# The Family Kaplan

A writer comes to terms with her  
famous ancestor and her half-Jewish self

by Beth Kaplan

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I first knew my great-grandfather, Jacob Gordin, as a majestic bronze bust in the hall of my grandmother Nettie's apartment. I would gaze at the larger-than-life bronze with its thick curly hair, straight nose, and hooded eyes. Above the face was a wide, intelligent forehead and brooding brows, and below the imposing beard of a Russian Jew. His bronze shoulders rested on a pile of books; the classic mask of tragedy was carved below his heart. My great-grandfather had once been the best-known Yiddish playwright in the world: the "Jewish Shakespeare." But to me he was obscure and silent, a glowering head in the distance. We did not talk about him.

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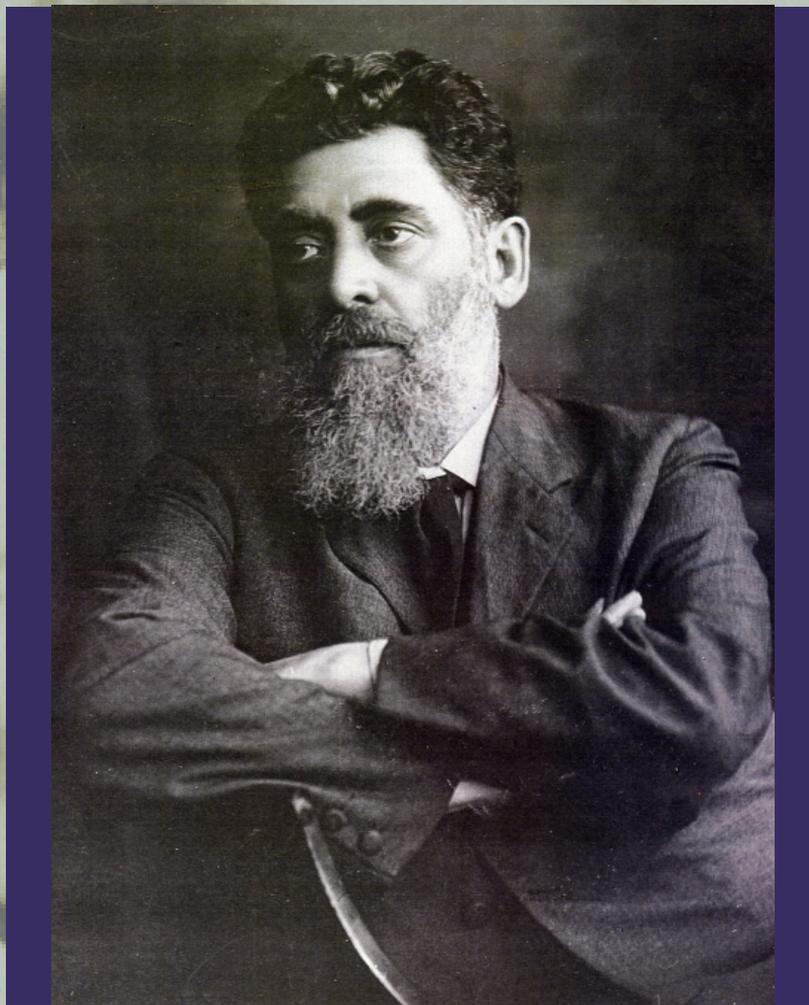
THIS IS MY FULL NAME: Elizabeth Kaplan. My parents didn't bother with a middle name because there are twenty-seven derivatives of Elizabeth, one of which did, finally, settle on me. Kaplan is my father's name; in the fifties there was no question of being named for your mother and anyway, I wouldn't have wanted to be a Leadbeater. But the surname I've borne all my life has not been without trial. During a visit to our student apartment, my Irish roommate's mother muttered, loud enough for me to overhear, "Kaplan – that's a Jewish name, isn't it?"

Of course Kaplan is a Jewish name, though I have met one non-Jewish Kaplan, a blonde Czech with a delicate nose. But then I, with brown hair and resolute nose, am also, technically, a non-Jewish Kaplan. My mother, *née* Sylvia Mary Leadbeater, is not a Jew, and so by Jewish law my brother and I are not either. My father, Jacob Gordin Kaplan, most definitely was.

Gordin, as my father was called, was raised in the embrace of a prosperous, exuberant family in New York City; his grandparents on both sides once penniless immi-

grants from Eastern Europe. Though the Kaplan tribe was never devout, from one generation to the next its members continued to live within the social boundaries of the city's Jewish community. My grandparents Nettie and Mike probably didn't know a single gentile until six-foot-tall Miss Leadbeater sailed over from London in 1947, to visit the handsome Yank she had fallen in love with during the war.

I picture the first encounter between the two most important women in my father's life: Nettie, Gordin's dark-eyed mother, tiny and thickset, surveying with suspicion verging on hatred the willowy English beauty's blue eyes and porcelain skin. Before her encounter with Jacob Gordin Kaplan, Sylvia had never even met a Jew. She had certainly never heard of his namesake, Nettie's father Jacob Gordin, king of the Yiddish theater, the Shakespeare of the Jews. She didn't know that in certain circles his famous grandfather granted her tall, dark, handsome soldier a nearly royal status. Despite her ignorance, despite the extreme differences in their backgrounds – or perhaps because of these things – Gordin and Sylvia married suddenly one weekend in 1949.



**Inset: Jacob Gordin, circa 1904.**

**Background: A family picnic celebrating Jacob Gordin's birthday, May 1, 1909, shows Gordin (bearded, at right) as well as the author's grandmother, Nettie Kaplan (second from left).**  
Photographs courtesy of the author.

My grandmothers reacted in opposite ways to the news of the wedding. From my mother's village of Potterspur, England, Marion Edith Alice Leadbeater, whose world housed as few Jews as my Jewish grandmother's did *goys*, wrote to her daughter to assure her that marrying a Jewish man was wise and practical because "Jews make good providers." But Nettie Kaplan of Manhattan, once Nadia Yakovovna Gordin of Odessa, was not in favor of the match. "She loves you now," she warned her adored first-born, "but one day, you mark my words, she'll turn around and call you a dirty Jew."

Nettie was wrong. My parents' marriage was a nearly forty-year "duel of the titans," but even at the stormiest times my mother never denigrated my father's background. His Jewishness was an issue neither of them dwelled upon, at least out loud. My flaxen-haired mother identified herself, if she had to, as "Church of England," though the important part to her was England, not the Church. My father, a socialist biologist, rejected all religions, including or perhaps especially, Judaism. His only gods were rationality and science. No religious doctrine, no matter how innocuous, entered our house; I was brought up to believe that people who believed in God were mentally defective, except for Albert Schweitzer.

At Mum's insistence, we did celebrate a traditional Christmas with a tree, stockings, and presents, followed by the full turkey dinner with Christmas crackers and plum pudding. My father hated every minute of it. He yowled out his own version of Christmas carols; his favorite was "Deck your balls with cloves of garlic." My good Jewish friend Carol Ann liked to come over to admire our Christmas decorations. In a twist of Jewish logic, her parents allowed her to experience Christmas at our house, because we were Kaplans.

All this happened in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where my father moved, with my mother and me, shortly after my birth in Manhattan in 1950. With a new Ph.D. from Columbia University, Dad accepted his first job not close to home but in a foreign country, at Dalhousie University on the east coast of Canada. He had been a member of the Young Communist League in the thirties, as had many idealistic young Jews; he had wanted to fight with the Republican Army in Spain. A dozen years later, with Joseph McCarthy's paranoia penetrating every corner of America, my enraged father decided to take his leave of the United States. Perhaps he also wanted to put some distance between his new family and the Kaplan clan; the

1,000 miles that lay between Halifax and New York amply justified a single yearly visit.

And so my father, a nonconformist, rabble-rousing, boastful, atheist Jew born in Manhattan, and my mother, a polite, law-abiding, self-deprecating Anglican agnostic born in a thatched cottage in the English countryside, found themselves at the end of 1950 in a fishy Canadian town that was both hide-bound and anti-Semitic. Halifax had a tiny, self-protective Jewish community. Carol Ann told me she never felt discriminated against or excluded from anything, because her family was sheltered within the Jewish enclave. My father had no interest in shelter of any kind, or in any community defined by race or religion.

Very like his grandfather politically and even physically, my father was an activist: after recovering from a nearly fatal bout of polio, he spent hundreds of hours raising money for the March of Dimes. In the early sixties he agitated to Ban the Bomb and wrote articles to prevent the United States from dumping nuclear waste off the shores of Nova Scotia. He founded an academic private school that thrives to this day, was made president of the Dalhousie Faculty Club, hosted a controversial debating program on television, and played second violin and viola in a string quartet composed primarily of Jewish scientists. His dearest friend was a bawdy businessman with a poet's heart, cherished for his vast lore of filthy jokes and salacious Yiddish words.

Yet I grew up completely unconnected to the Judaism signaled by my name except for two distinct realities: our annual visits to New York, and our nonvisits to the Waegwoltic Club. In 1958, a few years after the birth of my brother, my dad approached his pillar-of-the-community boss and friend to ask him to sponsor a membership for us in the Waegwoltic Club, a delightful private club on the water where my schoolmates were learning to swim, sail, and play tennis. Everyone in Halifax seemed to belong. "Please, Gordin, don't ask," said his boss. "It would hurt me to have to turn you down." The Waeg, he made dear, did not accept Jews, even erudite, violin-playing professors. My father was incensed. "My children are only half-Jews," he growled, echoing Groucho Marx. "Perhaps they can join if they promise only to wade in the pool up to their navels."

I couldn't understand it. What had we done? I celebrated Christmas and hunted Easter eggs; I'd never been inside a synagogue – or any house of worship, for that

matter. And if I was Jewish, why did that mean I couldn't swim with Gillian and Kathy? Carol Ann's family belonged to a club that catered to Jews, but my father would no more have joined a club for Jews than he would have repented on Yom Kippur. So my summer days, before our annual trips to New York, were spent reading or on freezing Atlantic Ocean beaches. Invited to the Waeg once on a guest pass, I spent the day in a turmoil of resentment and rage; on all sides, I saw

bigots disguised as friends. How dare they shut us out?

My parents had bequeathed the worst of both worlds: I couldn't skip school on Jewish holidays, and I couldn't meet boys at the Waeg. Surely, being "sort of" Jewish was impossible, like being sort of pregnant; you either were or you weren't. But what, exactly, was I? Which part of me is Jewish, which is gentile? Clearly one side has had a far greater impact on my identity and understanding of the world, as well as my choice of career.

It wasn't until I began to look into my heritage that I also began to assess and come to terms with the conflicting aspects of my life. After a decade as an actress, I left the stage to take a graduate degree in writing, and chose as my thesis subject a biography of Jacob Gordin. I knew almost nothing about him; my father and many of his relatives had always denigrated their famous forebear, and one of my tasks was to find out why. Aided by my friend the invaluable Sarah Torchinsky, who translated countless Yiddish articles and books, I have spent more than twenty years uncovering the story of my great-grandfather's life, and of the family's connection to him.

Through the years, I invented imaginary readers for my work, as writers do. I conjured up not an admiring audience fascinated by my topic and my prose, but a group of exacting elderly Jews – my father and his family. I heard my grandmother Nettie, who was disappointed that I wasn't a ballerina or a pianist, and my grandfather Mike, who waited impatiently for newspaper clippings and reviews of



Author Beth Kaplan with her father, Jacob Gordin Kaplan, in a 1951 family photo.

my acting and other ventures and wished there were more. I actually gave the first draft of the thesis to my brilliant Uncle Edgar, who immediately got out his red pen. "I've read five pages," he announced a short time later, "and I've found only seven abominations."

Most dearly I saw my father, who believed that responsible parenthood meant making his children aware of their deficits rather than their strengths. He wanted a nonconformist daughter, a loud and angry

rebel just like him – someone I could not be. From the Church of England side, on the other hand, I received the admonition to be correct, self-deprecating and unnoticed.

These two sides of my life, the masculine Jew and the feminine gentile, have always found fault with each other. Which side to turn to, which to claim? I felt, and still feel, the profound schizophrenia of the half-Jew. Even as I write now, I sense the disapproval of the Protestant side. "Washing dirty linen in public, writing about yourself – how vulgar," I hear, in an English accent. "Must you?"

More keenly I feel the stern regard of my Jewish forefathers, their minds sharpened by centuries of Talmudic argument. They are sitting, arms folded, in a row, and they are looking at me.

I write to honor them. Though there is great charm in my mother's heritage of pastoral villages, stern Victorian grannies, and English eccentrics, I am drawn to my father's family's tales. I love the lush, dark flow of the Russian language; the stories of Elizavetgrad and Odessa, Tolstoy and tsars, *shtetls* and pogroms, and the painful steamer trip from one century to another, from the precarious comfort of home to a rich, indifferent land. My years of research have shown me, at last, where I belong: to writing and the theater. To the Shakespeare of the Jews. PT

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*Beth Kaplan, an actress and writer in Toronto, Canada, is currently completing her Gordin biography, Finding the Jewish Shakespeare: A Family Journey.*