

Heart of a Wife: The Diary of a Southern Jewish Woman

The Trouble with Family (and the Rewards)

By Marcus D. Rosenbaum*

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Like many other endeavors, writing about family has costs and benefits. The benefits include motivation for the author (which is always a plus) and, more important, the insider's knowledge that comes with the subject. Unfortunately, those benefits also are the costs: The author's enthusiasm and insider's perspective can adversely affect judgment of the material at hand. It's not so much that a researcher will be biased toward the subject. Although that is a potential problem, most of us are able to step back enough to look with a critical eye. Rather, our insider's connection may distort our evaluation of the quality of the material. Bluntly put, it may not be as interesting to others as it is to you.

With that in mind, let me tell you the story of my grandmother's diary.

The story begins on a balmy Florida afternoon in October 1995, nearly 50 years after my grandmother's death. We were at our family's house in Tampa, sitting on the front porch—my brother, my sister-in-law, my wife and I. My brother and I had grown up in this house, and we were taking a break from sorting through the drawers and closets and kitchen cabinets. Our father had passed away only a few days earlier, and since our mother had died ten years before, his death presented us with the bittersweet task of cleaning out the family home. My then 30-year-old niece, Dottie, who had been working on the closet in the front bedroom, walked onto the porch with a small plastic bag.

"I found the diary," she said.

"What diary?" My brother and I looked at each other quizzically.

"Nana's mother's diary."

When Dottie was a teenager, she told us, our mother had shown her the diary, which her mother—our grandmother, Dottie's great-grandmother—had kept for almost 40 years. For some

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reason we still do not understand, our mother had never shown it to us. I took the diary (diaries, really; there was more than one book) and examined the first one. The leather cover was cracking, and the stitching in the binding was coming undone, but the pages had scarcely yellowed; the paper quality was good.

It actually was a 1910 daybook, *The Excelsior Diary*. I thumbed through the pages. The handwriting was small but legible. My grandmother had ignored the dates (after all, it was *next* year's daybook) and filled each page to capacity. Sometimes she even wrote in the narrow top margin.

My nephew soon joined us (my children were young and climbing a neighbor's tree), and we started reading selections aloud, randomly. The more we read, the more interesting I found this woman I knew only from a photograph. When we got home to Washington, I read the whole diary for the first time. It was not a difficult task. My grandmother, Helen Jacobus Apte, had an informal style that is modern and conversational, making it easy for today's reader to understand her life a hundred years earlier.

Helen was born in 1886 in Hawkinsville, Georgia, which is near Macon. Her mother had immigrated as a child and thus was Americanized herself. Helen spent much of her childhood in Atlanta, married there, and then moved to Florida with her Florida-born husband, Day Apte. They lived in Tallahassee, Tampa, briefly in St. Louis, and then settled in Atlanta with their baby, their only child, my mother. In the 1920s they became South Florida pioneers, moving to Miami during the boom. They were living in Tampa when my grandmother died suddenly at age 60.

Remarkably, my grandmother did not complete high school; she dropped out at 16 because of her anemia. But she read a book (that is, a *complete* book) nearly every day, and thus was very well self-educated. It's also the reason she could write so well. And what stories she could tell! Her trip to Havana, the cigar strike that put my grandfather out of business in 1910, her brothers' going off to fight the War to End All Wars, VE and VJ Days in Times Square—and, of course, her personal life, especially the men who gravitated toward this very attractive and charming woman throughout her life.

* * *

Although I never met my grandmother—she died before I was born—I had known her husband, my grandfather, and I could recognize many, though not all of the characters she wrote

about. (The way she described my mother as a child was stunning and helped explain why my mother had never shown the diary to my brother or me, or why I never remember my mother talking about her mother.¹) If nothing else, this was a wonderful way to delve into my family's century and a half in America, who they were and how they lived. It was an opportunity to learn where I came from and, in many ways, why I became the person I am.

But this was more. When I put on my detached editor's hat, I saw a beautifully written and engaging personal diary of an unusual upper-middle-class American-born southern Jewish woman. There were stories of personal drama interspersed with up-close experiences of major events in American history, plus a smart woman's ruminations about many matters personal and political. And these were her own words, her own first-person account—not someone else's interpretation of her or her times or the world around her, but a window into an interesting slice of American history. In short, I thought it was great. My brother, who also was a journalist, thought it was pretty interesting, too, and certainly well-written. But what to do?

The first task was mechanical: I had to get the diary into a form that other people could read. In this day and age it's just too difficult for anyone to trudge through page after page of handwriting, even relatively good handwriting. I hired a high school student to transcribe the whole thing. (Fortunately, she was intrigued by the project and was able to do it all in a few weeks' time.) Then I went through the document two or three times, comparing portions of the transcription that didn't make sense with the original manuscript. In the end, I had a computer file that was approximately 95 percent accurate (over time, and with additional readings, I was able to correct the other 5 percent).

Now I had something I could show around. I called a friend who teaches American Studies at the University of Minnesota and asked her if she would read it. "Sounds great," she said, picking up on my enthusiasm. I packed up a print-out and shipped it off. She called just a few days later.

¹ For instance, here is what she wrote about my mother when my mother was 12 years old: "In a way I am a little disappointed in Alice. There is nothing of the prodigy about her, and she did give the promise of that as a baby Alice must have a brain above the average because she has gotten an 'A' in every study every year, and has stood at the head of her class in every grade She has a very quick, bright, and retentive mind, a clear, accurate intelligence like her Daddy's, but what I miss in her is imagination. She doesn't like poetry and fairy tales bore her. When I remember the soul-satisfying joy I got from poetry, I grieve for her. Of course I'd rather she have Day's brain than mine. She is just exactly like him, even to her taste in literature. She isn't like me in a single way."

“I stayed up all night reading it,” she said, adding that she kept her husband up, too, by reading him passages, and kept calling a friend of hers who specializes in Jewish women’s studies to read parts to her.

Needless to say, I was encouraged. Now I will admit there was a moment’s hesitation about whether to make public something so personal. But that hesitation was very short-lived. It ended the moment we turned to the first page of the diary. Marked Saturday, January 1, 1910, the manuscript began with these words:

The Heart of a Wife
By
*Helene Jacobus Apte*²
Tallahassee, Fla.
June 24, 1909

What woman would give her diary a *title* if she didn’t expect someone else to read it? It was a clue we could not ignore. In a different time, I came to believe, my grandmother would have been a writer, but this was a profession out of reach of most women of her era. The publication of her diary seemed to be something she would have relished.

But then I made my first mistake. Instead of thinking through what to *do* with this find—what a *book* would look like—I immediately engaged a literary agent. The agent liked the diary, but she was unable to sell it. There was just a diary. It needed something more. It needed context. It needed a *concept*.

For months I pondered what to do. Finally, I settled on writing about 10 explanatory essays to explore elements of the diary. Some were personal, such as my interpretation of Helen’s voracious reading appetite and how what she read influenced her beliefs. (Reading too much, I posited, could be as bad as not reading enough. Helen was so caught up in her reading that she always saw herself as a character in a Victorian novel, “a Maggie Tulliver [from *The Mill on the Floss*] caught in a never-ending struggle between duty and desire.”³ In reality, life is rarely so dramatic or black and white.) Most of the essays, though, were about historical events or the times in which they occurred. For instance, I researched and wrote an essay about the 1910 Tampa cigar strike and another about the frightening danger of childbirth in those days—for mothers, not just for babies. (I discovered that maternal deaths in childbirth plunged between the

² Her name was Helen, not Helene; the “e” was a youthful affectation.

³ *Heart of a Wife*, Helen Jacobus Apte, ed. by Marcus D. Rosenbaum, Scholarly Resources Inc., 1998, p. 99.

1920s and the mid-1940s not because of antibiotics, which did not become widespread until after World War II, but simply because women began to routinely go to the hospital to give birth.) I also composed an essay about being Jewish in the South, and another about the 1933 assassination attempt on Franklin Roosevelt, in which the mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak, was fatally wounded.

It was an exercise in which I learned that shorter is indeed harder; the longest essay is only eight pages. But it was the approach that landed the book contract and also turned this fascinating diary into that “something more” that the project needed.

* * *

This panel focuses on writing about family and whether there are any benefits or drawbacks to doing so. For me, writing about my grandmother—even though I never met her—gave me a tremendous vantage point from which to understand the way she thought and how she saw herself in the world. Her *attitudes*, which had been passed along to my mother and then passed along to me, rang so true. I am not sure I could have understood how she integrated being Jewish, being southern, and being American if I had not experienced it the same way. If you will permit me to quote myself from my essay on being southern and Jewish:

Readers of this diary may find it curious that so little in it is identifiably “Jewish.” In some ways, of course, *everything* in it is Jewish. Judaism was behind Helen’s clearly liberal social conscience. Her religion not only guided her views of life and death but also shaped her views of duty and responsibility. She talks about Judaism in her first diary entry, writing that she would light candles every Friday night. She started a Sunday School class in Tampa in 1910. She was active in Jewish women’s organizations throughout her life, and Day was a leader of the Reform synagogue in every city in which they lived. Helen was proud to be Jewish. “How some Jews can be ashamed of being Jews has always seemed to me inexplicable,” she wrote. “In me burns the ancient pride of race.”

On the other hand, Helen, like so many other Southern Jews of her time—like so many American Jews today—did not think of herself primarily as a Jew. She saw herself as a Southern American who happened to be Jewish, decidedly *not* as a Jew who was merely living in the South. She loved the South. She loved the easy, friendly pace of life, the culture, the chivalry, the Florida beaches, the cool, green southern Appalachian mountains, the sweet smell of orange blossoms, the acceptance she felt from the wider community. When she saw the Stars and Stripes or heard “Dixie,” her heart swelled with pride. Judaism was her moral compass. America was her country and her native land. The South was the place of her heart. Helen was not less of a Jew for being a Southerner, nor was she less of a Southerner for being a Jew. Both were part of her

core being. Another Southern Jew, Joe Isenberg, a former state representative in Georgia, summed it up this way: “There’s a lot of Jew in this-here Southerner, and a lot of Southerner in this-here Jew. And there’s no separatin’ the two.”⁴

* * *

Before we left Tampa that autumn, we made another discovery. The house had an attic access that was just a trap door. You could stand on a stool, push the cover aside, and hoist a few suitcases or boxes into it. On our last day in town my sister-in-law decided to take a peek to see what was there. She found three or four old boxes. Stuffed into one of those boxes were scores of letters between my grandmother and Day before they were married.

Here, it turns out, was another drama. My grandfather had attended Boys High in Atlanta, while my grandmother went to Girls. He had fallen madly in love with her, and he refused to give up on her after he graduated in 1904 and moved to Tallahassee to work in his uncle’s cigar factory. For five years he courted her by mail, pledging his undying love in five- or six-page missives (so lengthy they often arrived postage-due), while she would respond with protests that the “dear boy” was being far “too personal.” She was a beautiful young woman with an active social life in a bustling city. He was a working stiff with big ears in a small town. But over time he wore her down, she clearly fell for him, and they were married.

So in addition to the question of what to do with the diary I was faced with the question of what to do with the letters. On the one hand, they are very sweet, if a bit callow; they are, after all, written by people in their teens and early twenties. They also offer an opportunity for some historical context. They tell, for instance, of occasional long-distance telephone calls. My grandmother had a phone in her house; my grandfather had phones at home and at the office, but only the office phone could be connected to long-distance and it was very expensive. My grandfather apologized once for hanging up abruptly, but said he had told the operator to cut in after three minutes because he could afford no more. Another interesting facet was the way they were always writing about all the dances and concerts they had attended. It took a while for me to realize that the reason they went to so many dances and concerts was that in those days before phonographs and radios, they were the only way to hear music outside what you produced yourself.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Another plus to the epistolary material was the intriguing way the storyline develops in letters, as opposed to a diary. In a diary all the action happens up front; the author writes about what happened. In letters, much of the action—especially the action concerning the developing relationship—happens “off camera.” The correspondents know what occurred each time they meet, for example. They don’t need to write each other about their changing feelings; the outside reader must infer them from a shift in their style.

But on the other hand, was this really interesting to anyone else? Was there a way I could make it interesting?

I have been mulling this over for 10 years now, and I have not yet come up with a satisfactory “yes” to either question. Perhaps a fictional account could work, but that is outside the realm of this conference.

* * *

What is the lesson from all of this? It is actually pretty simple: Don’t shy away from material because it pertains to your family. Indeed, your family connections can be a benefit, because they provide an incentive for your research, and present you with a leg-up on the knowledge researchers need to complete their task.

At the same time, though, it is necessary to look at your material from a detached perspective and to answer one question positively: Is this interesting—or can I make this interesting—to anyone else? In other words, if this were someone else’s family story, would I want to learn about it?