

# J E W



A N N E F A D I M A N

When I was writing a memoir about my father and wine, I rarely mentioned the book to a Jew without being told, “Of course, Jews don’t drink!” – an observation often tendered as said Jew raised his or her glass of wine in mock-toast. One friend told me that whenever a relative drinks too much champagne at a wedding, her family calls him Joe Goy. Another, a klezmer musician, said, “Right! Shiker iz der goy.”

“What?”

“‘Shiker Iz der Goy.’ It’s a famous Yiddish folk song. It means ‘The Gentile Is Drunk.’”

I found it later in a book called *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants*, a title my father would never have wanted on his shelves. Here is a translation of the first two verses:

The gentile goes into the tavern.  
He drinks a glass of wine there.  
Oy, the gentile is drunk.  
He’s drunk, he has to drink,  
Because he’s a gentile.

The Jew goes into the house of study.  
He looks into a book there.  
Oy, the Jew is sober.  
He's sober, he has to study,  
Because he's a Jew.

In other words, if you drink a glass of wine, you can't be Jewish.  
Q.E.D.

To my father, it didn't matter whether this was true, just whether it was perceived as true. And the perception was that Jews knew nothing about wine – the thing, along with books, that he loved more than anything else in the world. He loved wine for many reasons, among them its sensory pleasures, its historical significance, and its complexity as a subject of study. But one of the most important reasons was that, unlike him, wine wasn't Jewish.

My father, Clifton Fadiman, was a critic, an editor, an essayist, and a radio emcee. His Wikipedia entry calls him “elegant” and “patrician,” adjectives he earned through strenuous self-invention rather than birthright (and at which he would have laughed). He was raised in Brooklyn a century before it became fashionable: Brownsville, Canarsie, Bath Beach, Brooklyn Heights, Flatbush, all of them crowded with immigrants and smelling of garbage and noisy with street fights. He shared a bed with his two brothers in a succession of shabby, triple-locked apartments over a series of unsuccessful drugstores operated by his father, under whose guidance he jerked sodas, prepared salves, rolled pills, sold leeches, and dispensed condoms (which he thought were called “conundrums” and was told were used for storing toothbrushes). His father came from a village near Minsk, his mother from a village in Ukraine so small it was said you had to enter it sideways. After his birth in 1904, his mother, a nurse, settled on “Clifton” by turning the pages of the Brooklyn telephone directory until she came to a name so fancy she had never heard it before. (“Fancy,” he once explained to me, “meant Christian.”) His parents were both freethinkers, mildly socialist, and strongly secular. I asked him once if his family had celebrated Hanukkah, and he looked at me as if I had asked whether they had eaten raccoons.

My paternal grandparents hovered on the remotest periphery of my consciousness. Bettemi, who had taken the goyish name

Grace after her marriage, died before I was born. Isadore lived until I was ten, but I met him only once. I feel certain that my father was ashamed of his father's accent, his lack of education, his proletarian manners, his palpable Jewishness. And where had he learned shame? From his father. Whenever Grace spoke Yiddish, Isadore had winced; he considered it inferior to Russian, which he spoke well and she spoke poorly. The Fadimans had fashioned a little daisy chain of shame: the father was ashamed of the wife and the son was ashamed of the father, though the only one who was ashamed of the son was himself.

Isadore and Grace made a point of speaking English at home, but it was accented and ungrammatical. My father recalled saying to himself, "This is wrong – wrong in the sense that two and two do not equal five, but also practically disadvantageous." With the help of his elder brother, who had been trained in elocution by the drama coach at Boys High in Bedford-Stuyvesant (and was also the vice president of the Correct English Club), he learned English, as he put it, "as if it were Latin or Sanskrit," and developed the hypercultivated voice – a voice so impeccable no one actually spoke that way except other people from Brooklyn who wished to sound as if they weren't – that would later attract an avalanche of mash notes from female listeners when he was hosting *Information Please*, a radio quiz show to which, during its heyday in the 1940s, more than a tenth of the U.S. population tuned in every Tuesday night.

My father believed that the best way to break the daisy chain was to raise children who neither seemed nor felt Jewish. My mother was genteel: of Scots Presbyterian stock with more recent ancestral detours into Mormonism. My brother and I were brought up in a household so nonreligious (not *anti*-religious, since religion was never criticized, merely absent) that we resembled children who have been raised in an excessively antiseptic environment – Lysol on the counters, Phisohex on the hands – and have therefore developed no immunities. Our parents weren't atheists – that would have betrayed their shared commitment to rationality, since how could you know for sure? – but they were both determined agnostics. My father once wrote that he was so devoid of religious feeling that "it is as though the Great Monosyllable were a nonsense word, like xbyabt." The only vaguely pious term he

ever used was “Blessings,” the last word he said whenever he bade farewell to a family member. But it was always clear that *he* was the one doing the blessing.

If *xbyabt* was not immanent in our home, neither was much sense of identification with our father’s branch of the family. Our mother could talk for hours about her ancestors, chief among them the great-grandfather who traveled to Utah in a wagon train, became a Mormon bishop, maintained three wives in three separate households, and at one point had thirteen children under the age of fourteen. She could have drawn a verdant family tree. Our father told us amusing stories about growing up in Brooklyn; his humble beginnings were an important part of his self-deprecatory arsenal. Like James Thurber’s winsomely baroque family of flakes and screwballs, the relatives who were part of his childhood were comic fodder: the cousin who could read at age three and had a nervous breakdown at twenty-five; the uncle who was 4’7” (though my father once admitted, “I think I was being malicious when I told you that – he was four eight easy”). But on the rare occasions when his more distant family history came up, he knew few details and, as far as I could see, had little desire to learn more. He once mentioned that three of his aunts had been killed by Cossacks in a pogrom, but he didn’t know their names. He didn’t even know the names of his grandparents. How could anyone not know that?

I don’t remember hearing the phrase “bat mitzvah” until I was well beyond bat mitzvah age. At school, my class of sixty had 1.5 Jews; the .5 was not chummy with the 1. When I was invited to a Shabbat dinner by a girl I had met through my YMCA group – it had attempted to foster ecumenical sisterhood by introducing the Christians (us) to some teenagers from a local synagogue (them) – the noodle kugel seemed far more exotic than the Rumaki Puu Puu served at the Islander, a local “Polynesian” restaurant that my brother and I esteemed for the fake thunderstorms it featured every hour. When we were told that we were going to have a new tennis instructor, I had no idea that it was because the old one, doubtless chosen by our mother, worked at a Jewish country club and the new one, doubtless chosen by our father, worked at a gentile club. In the larger world, I could never tell who was Jewish. Aside from names – names were easy, they were *words* – I couldn’t even begin to guess what kinds of cues other people’s

radar picked up. When I read *Hamlet* in twelfth grade, I remember asking myself: What about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? They sound Jewish, but they can't be! Or can they? Is there such a thing as a Jewish Dane? Are they wicked and foolish because Shakespeare was an anti-Semite, and if so, does everybody know that but me?

A cousin of mine once hired a researcher in Minsk to look into the Fadiman genealogy and learned that for three generations in what is now Belarus, our ancestors were named either Fadiman or Fodiman, which seem to have been used interchangeably. (I was disappointed. I had hoped that my real name had at least five syllables, something along the lines of Feydimanovsky.) My father was undoubtedly grateful that his last name was ethnically ambiguous. He didn't have to anglicize or shorten it, unlike some of his friends and their families. George Novack was once Yasef Mendel Novograbelsky; Felix Morrow was once Felix Mayrowitz. The critic Diana Trilling tells the story of the Columbia philosophy professor who made a pointed comment about Morrow's distinguished last name. "I wouldn't know about that," Morrow replied pleasantly. "I'm the first in my family to bear it."

In the early 1970s, the writer David Wallace, the son of my father's friend Irving Wallace, went in the other direction and changed his name to David Wallechinsky, his family's original name. My father thought this was lunatic. Roots were for cutting off, not for reattaching. Who in his right mind would *choose* to be named Wallechinsky? At the time I thought his sputterings were hilarious, but I now see that they had a sharp edge. He was angry at David for thumbing his nose at the pain his father's generation – *my* father's generation – had suffered.

Much has been written about the anti-Semitism of gentiles in the first half of the twentieth century, but not so much about the self-alienation of Jews – not all, not even the majority, but a large number of secular intellectuals that included my father and many of his friends. It led to such farcical moments as my father telling Diana Trilling, when they were reminiscing about a literary magazine to which both he and her husband, Lionel Trilling, had contributed, "I don't think we thought of it as a Jewish journal." They were talking about *The Menorah Journal*. This was like saying they didn't think of *Canoe & Kayak* as a magazine about

boats. Lionel once declared in the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, “I know of no writer in English who has added a micromillimeter to his stature by ‘realizing his Jewishness.’” Today this sounds like denial bordering on paranoia, but whenever I have the urge to go back in time and tell them to knock it off, I remind myself that I don’t have a clue what they were up against and never will.

In 1920, after graduating from Boys High at the age of fifteen, my father crossed the East River and enrolled at Columbia, where he not only paid the bulk of his own tuition (\$256 a year, of which a state scholarship covered less than half) but saved enough for an occasional stretch in a dormitory (\$67.50 a semester), though most of the time he commuted from Brooklyn by subway. He washed dishes, waited tables, sorted mail, tutored classmates, took attendance, sold magazine subscriptions, ran a bookshop in Penn Station, wrote reviews for *The Nation*, listened to a retired Wall Street speculator with a weak bladder declaim Shakespeare’s erotic verse, gave lessons on French symbolist poetry to a blind actress, served as a companion to a mentally impaired boy who enjoyed tossing him down a small hill in Harlem, and broke in pipes.

Broke in pipes?

I remember him patiently explaining this to me when I was a child. The rich boys smoked expensive pipes; new pipes were unpleasant to smoke until a layer of carbon had built up inside the bowl; he was therefore paid to pre-smoke them for a few weeks. This struck me as a Sisyphian tragedy. (He had, of course, recounted to my brother and me the myth of Sisyphus, along with the other essential chestnuts of Greek mythology.) What could be worse than having to give up something just when it got good and start all over again with something bad?

The rich boys were all WASPs, of course. They were the ones who bought the upper-crust regalia advertised in the *Columbia Spectator*: solid gold Sheaffer pencils, Rogers Peet luggage, Tom Logan golf shoes, Earl & Wilson detachable collars (“The informal dance at the country club is not so informal that you can afford to wear a collar you are not sure of”). My father should have hated them, but when he talked about them his tone was always amused and more than a little envious. He didn’t want to dethrone them; he wanted to become them.

I now see my father's envy as a painful but potent motivator. His generation of highly educated Jews who rose from the lower middle class – the sons of grocers, peddlers, druggists, tailors, haberdashers, fishmongers, pants pressers, night watchmen, suspender makers, jewelry salesmen – fell into two categories. When they left their immigrant neighborhoods for college, they took a good look at the WASP establishment and were either so angry that they wanted to tear it down (in which case they became Communists and fellow travelers) or so dazzled that they couldn't wait to join the club (in which case they often became academics).

At the turn of the twentieth century, fewer than 10 percent of Columbia's students were Jewish. By the time my father arrived as a freshman in 1920, the figure had risen to 40 percent. I learned this only recently, and it surprised me: I had always assumed his circle was a small, beleaguered minority. I was wrong about the small part. Columbia had more Jews than any other Ivy League school because it was in New York City, into which, starting in the 1880s, hundreds of thousands of immigrants had poured. This was a problem, because Jews – especially Eastern European Jews, my father's strain, as compared with German Jews, who were considered more cultivated – were viewed as uncouth strivers with iffy personal hygiene and the potential, as Dean Frederick P. Keppel put it, of making the university “socially uninviting to students who come from homes of refinement.” (Keppel was careful to add that after a generation or two in adequate social surroundings, Jews could become “entirely satisfactory companions.”)

A fraternity song from the 1910s went like this:

Oh, Harvard's run by millionaires  
 And Yale is run by booze  
 Cornell is run by farmers' sons  
 Columbia's run by Jews.

A later verse contained the lines “And when the little sheenies die / Their souls will go to hell.”

The challenge was where they went *before* they died – specifically, when they were around eighteen years old. How could they be discreetly steered away from Morningside Heights, to which the subway so conveniently led from the Lower East Side and Brooklyn? Columbia's president, Nicholas Murray Butler, had a

few ideas. Starting in 1919, he required applicants to state their religious affiliation, specify their father's birthplace, and submit a photograph. He introduced nonacademic criteria – including “straightforwardness,” “clean-mindedness,” “public spirit,” and “geographical range,” along with a psychological examination designed to winnow out swots whose ambition exceeded their “native intelligence” – that allowed the university more wiggle room in its admissions decisions. Dean Herbert Hawkes, Keppel's successor, wrote, “We have honestly attempted to eliminate the lowest grade of applicant and it turns out that a good many of the low grade men are New York City Jews.” Two years after my father arrived, the proportion of Jews in the incoming class had been successfully reduced to 22 percent. If he had been two years younger, would he have been admitted? Or would he have ended up at City College (more than 80 percent Jewish)?

No matter how brilliant they were, my father and his circle could not shrug off the label. When he was in his seventies, he sent me a 1927 essay by Mark Van Doren called “Jewish Students I Have Known.” It was a series of sketches of seven undergraduates, referred to by letters, whom Van Doren had recently taught at Columbia. In an accompanying note, my father provided a key:

- A = Henry Rosenthal
- B = Clifton Fadiman
- C = Meyer Schapiro
- D = John Gassner
- E = Herbert Solow
- F = Lionel Trilling
- G = Charles Prager

C was erudite and loquacious; F – my father's closest college friend – was fastidious and melancholy. B was worldly and amusing, a gifted mimic with a mischievous tongue and the air of having read everything ever written. “His tongue did not wait to strike; it was always playing,” wrote Van Doren. “B could adjust himself to any condition. He could pick up any extra money he needed; he could impress any superior; he could write on any subject.” (In his note to me, my father observed, “The portrait of me is inaccurate in many respects. Mark did not see that I was scared, impractical, sentimental. Which, of course, I still am.”)

There is not a single negative word in Van Doren's essay, but reading it is an odd experience. It's like a field guide to an exotic but unappreciated bird species compiled by an ornithologist who is highly pleased with himself for noticing identifying features (iridescent plumage! forked tail! curved beak!) that others have overlooked.

When Van Doren's birds were at Columbia, there were four Jewish faculty members. Jews were viewed as clever and industrious, but their brand of diligence (a trait one Harvard observer called "underliving and overworking") was not what Ivy League humanities departments were looking for. How could an uncultured person transmit culture? In New Haven, an aspiring English professor was informed, "Mr. Cohen, you are a very competent young man, but it is hard for me to imagine a Hebrew teaching the Protestant tradition to young men at Yale." (Elliot Cohen managed to dust himself off and become the founding editor of *Commentary*.) It was said that another Mr. Cohen — a philosopher named Morris who ended up at City College — was turned down for a Yale position because he did not know how to wear a dinner jacket.

My father, who had overworked but not underlived and, by the time he finished college, probably knew how to wear a dinner jacket, started graduate school at Columbia with the hope of being appointed to the English faculty, which (in the words of Alfred Kazin, a City College man), was "as crowded with three-barreled Anglican names as the House of Bishops": Harry Morgan Ayres, Jefferson Butler Fletcher, George Philip Knapp, William Witherle Lawrence, George Dinsmore Odell, William Peterfield Trent. Joining them would have allowed my father to spend the rest of his life studying literature, the only thing he loved as much as wine. It would also have constituted the ultimate proof that he had left Brooklyn behind.

One day the head of the department informed him, "We have room for only one Jew, and we have chosen Mr. Trilling."

My father never got over that moment. Many years later, he wrote that he had always dreamed of being "a scholar, perhaps even a college professor" but had instead ended up in "activities that have resulted in my becoming a kind of hemi-demi-semi-professor, or perhaps only a hemi-demi-semi-quasi-professor." Be-

cause he made more money and became more famous than any professor, his readers doubtless assumed that this was just another characteristic volley of false self-deprecation. It wasn't. He said he lacked the brains, but the real reason he didn't get the job was that he lacked the pedigree.

Mr. Trilling went on to become one of the great literary scholars of the twentieth century; my father went on to become, in the view of Dwight Macdonald, the editor of the *Partisan Review*, a middlebrow who, along with Thornton Wilder, John Steinbeck, Archibald MacLeish, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and psychoanalysis, polluted modern America with the "tepid ooze of Midcult." Mr. Trilling taught university students; in his twenties, my father taught salesgirls, stenographers, truck drivers, merchant seamen, night watchmen, and clerks in the Great Books classes he led in libraries and YMCAs, and, later on, millions of Americans who read his essays and reviews and forewords and afterwords and anthologies, or listened to him on the radio, or watched him on television, or heard his intermission lectures at the Boston Symphony, or subscribed to the Book-of-the-Month Club, for which he spent more than five decades as a judge. Although middlebrows considered him a highbrow, highbrows disowned him. Jacques Barzun, one of the few gentiles in his Columbia cohort, loyally argued that my father's career was a noble crusade to civilize the philistines, though his defense shone with a little too much sweat; he had to admit that, as he put it, "popularity was the fatal stain." My father couldn't have guessed that the young Mr. Trilling so grievously envied his early fame as a critic that he became discouraged about his own prospects; Diana Trilling believed this contributed to a severe depression during which he lied to her about working on his dissertation when he was really spending his days at the movies. But Mr. Trilling never envied my father as much as my father envied him.

None of this would have happened if my father had been born an Episcopalian.

So I believed him when he told me that of all the factors that made him feel like an outsider – being poor, being short, having parents who spoke improper English – the most important was being a Jew. He said, without irony, that he was certain all Jews felt like that: Jewish governors, Jewish millionaires. He once told

my brother that whenever he looked at a page in a book or a newspaper, the capital *J*s – which he reflexively assumed were attached to the word *Jew* – immediately leapt to his eye, “the way I might spot my own initials.” He also said that when he revisited one of the neighborhoods in which he had been raised, “I was right back there. I was a little Jew boy walking the streets of Brooklyn, and I still am.”

My college boyfriend was half-Jewish, like me, but until I met my husband, his longest-running successor was an alumna of Groton who bore the almost parodically WASP name of Sedgwick and would someday rest in a circular cemetery plot in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, called the Sedgwick Pie, with his feet pointed toward the center, where his great-great-grandfather was buried. It was said that the deceased Sedgwicks were oriented this way so that when they rose on Judgment Day, they would see no one but other Sedgwicks.

“Do they mind that you’re a half Jew?” my father asked me once.

I explained that “they” had already managed to absorb *entire* Jews. He seemed unconvinced.

Now I think he was worrying not about what the Sedgwicks would think of me but about what I would think of myself. I’m sure he wanted me to marry a WASP, but not *that* much of a WASP. (I did end up marrying a WASP, though not a Sedgwick. The Colts don’t have a pie-shaped cemetery. Also, George doesn’t look like a WASP. When he was young he was told he resembled Bob Dylan; when he was older, Philip Roth.) My father feared that if I entered the Sedgwick family, the curtain would fall away, and all the things he’d worked so hard to make me feel were naturally and deservedly mine – the big house, the private schools, the fine restaurants, the French accent, the cook summoned by the buzzer over my mother’s knee – would be revealed as fraudulent, the rightful province only of people who had enjoyed them for generations. In fact, though the Sedgwicks had an even bigger house, it was scruffier than ours, and though they had a cook until their youngest child left for boarding school, she served dinner at the kitchen table. The Fadimans had overdone it. On Judgment Day, when the Sedgwicks rose from the Pie, I’d be unmasked.

In 1984, when I was asked to write a magazine article to mark the occasion of my father's eightieth birthday, he told me that he would prefer I not mention he was Jewish. "If I had no legs and you wrote a piece about me," he said, "I would prefer you write about me as a man."

I gaped at him. "I don't feel that being a Jew is equivalent to having no legs," I said.

My father didn't believe me. He simply could not imagine a time when being a Jew, or even a half Jew, was not a disability.

It was safer to raise his children so they could pass.

It was better to lay down a cellar full of first-growth Bordeaux, because each bottle brought him closer to something he could never reach, but in whose direction, like a plant bending toward the sun, he could still turn. *Shiker iz der goy.*