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*Howard Pollack*

# GEORGE GERSHWIN

*His Life and Works*

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## Gershwin and His Family

George Gershwin's father, Morris, was born Moishe Gershovitz (Gershowitz) in St. Petersburg around January 1872. Moishe's father, Yakov, an inventor and mechanic, had served in the Russian artillery, which gave him dispensation as a Jew to move to St. Petersburg from the Pale of Settlement along Russia's western border, an area to which the country's Jews were largely confined in the nineteenth century. By some accounts, Yakov's father was a rabbi, but little else is known about the Gershovitzes, even the name of Yakov's wife (George's paternal grandmother), in part because whereas Morris immigrated to New York, most of his family apparently remained in Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Gershwin's mother, Rose, was born Rosa Bruskin (Brushkin) around January 1875, also in St. Petersburg. Her father, Gershon (b. approximately 1852), a furrier, similarly hailed from the Pale—specifically Vilna (that is, Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania). Gershon married Mariska (Mary) Dechinik (b. approximately 1858) about 1878, and the two had nine children, only three of whom survived: Rose, Bernard (Barney, b. 1888), and Katiel (Kate, b. 1890). Why the Bruskins were allowed residence in the Russian capital remains unknown, though Kate recalled something about their having more latitude than other Jews because Gershon “worked for important people in the fur business.”<sup>2</sup>

Family lore holds that Morris and Rose knew each other before they left for America, and that an enamored Morris followed Rose across the seas. But the record suggests that Morris arrived in New York—by himself, though preceded by an uncle—in 1890, and that Rose and her immediate family arrived in 1892. Some commentators also have suggested that Morris emigrated to avoid military service, though by this point the

rise of anti-Semitism in Russia had accelerated to the point that millions of Jews needed little special incentive for leaving that country behind.<sup>3</sup>

On July 21, 1895, within a few years of their arrival in the States, Rose married Morris (by this time Gershvin, though by 1920 Gershwin, a name apparently first adopted by his son George as a *nom de plume* about 1913). Four children followed: Israel (called Isidore or Izzy, later Ira; December 6, 1896–August 17, 1983); Jacob (Yakov), named after Morris’s father (though called George as early as his second year; September 26, 1898–July 11, 1937); Arthur (March 14, 1900–November 20, 1981); and Frances (“Frankie”; December 6, 1906–January 18, 1999). Morris and Rose learned English—they had grown up speaking both Russian and Yiddish, the family mother tongue—and became naturalized citizens in 1898. Still, they had been in the country a mere five years or so when George was born.<sup>4</sup>

In the first twenty-odd years of their marriage, the Gershwins resided, by Ira’s later estimate, at as many as twenty-eight different New York locations, with Morris pursuing nearly as many occupations, including leather worker, shoemaker, bookie, and proprietor (sometimes in league with Abraham Wolpin, the husband of Rose’s sister, Kate) of a stationery store, a cigar store (with billiard parlor), a summer hotel, Turkish baths, and numerous eateries, including a chain of bakeries called Wolpin and Gershv/win (W & G). The scant evidence suggests steadily increasing prosperity. In 1900, for instance, Morris earned his living making “uppers” for women’s shoes; by 1909 he had acquired two “eating houses”; and in 1914 the Manhattan telephone directory listed no fewer than four Wolpin and Gershwin bakeries, perhaps the four “stores” alluded to by Ira in 1915. In still later years, George typically referred to his father as “a successful restaurant owner” or a “businessman.”<sup>5</sup>

The fortunes of the Gershwin household may have fluctuated, but Morris “always made enough money to take care of the family,” according to Rose, who, *Time* magazine reported, was “pretty scornful” of the “rags-to-riches theme” underpinning *Rhapsody in Blue*, the 1945 film biography of her son George. “There was always enough money for Georgie’s lessons,” she asserted. “Poppa had twelve restaurants.” When their children were still young, the Gershwins employed a maid and obtained a piano and a record player, all signs of middle-class comfort. Ira’s lifelong friend and fellow lyricist Edgar Y. (“Yip”) Harburg (originally Irwin Hochberg) recalled a visit to the Gershwins’ “swank” apartment on Second Avenue, adding, “Compared to most of us, the Gershwins were affluent; Ira had an allowance and money to buy magazines, books and records.” The

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Gershwins similarly provided Frances with dancing and elocution lessons and sent her to summer camp. Rose claimed that although they could have afforded to live in a better neighborhood, they resided largely on the Lower East Side—an overcrowded and generally poor area—because she wanted her children to be “regular kids” and see “how life begins.”<sup>6</sup>

Little given to displays of emotion, Morris and Rose were a well-liked couple who enjoyed entertaining friends at home with a game of pinochle or poker, or going out to the theater or the races. Morris, who liked opera and purchased recordings, was the more musical of the two. “He could sing fairly,” stated George, “and could whistle even better. He used to give excellent imitations of a cornet, and could wax music out of the silliest contraptions, such as combs and clothespins and pencils. But this was the extent of his musicality.” George’s further description of his father as “a very easy-going, humorous philosopher, who takes things as they come” conformed with his sister’s recollection of him as “a real shnook,” a “darling person,” a gentle, kindly man who refused to honk his car at cyclists and who always gave money to panhandlers “for fear of missing someone who really needed aid.” Composer Vernon Duke remembered George “arguing violently” with Morris, with whom he was “habitually rather snappy,” but added, “they loved each other and the arguments were food of their love.”<sup>7</sup>

As the film biography suggests, Morris enjoyed tinkering with mechanical contraptions. A 1941 article also referred to this side interest, as well as to his many businesses and residences: “A craftsman himself, he [Morris] imparted into his sons two principles: the importance of design and technique and an abiding passion for moving” (at least as concerned George, for Ira became quite the homebody in his later years). Morris’s whimsical humor provided, meanwhile, a source of amusement for George, Ira, and their friends, though the charm of some reported anecdotes in part depended on his accent, including one in which *George* sounded like *judge*. (Vernon Duke enjoyed recalling how “Pops,” on being asked by Russel Crouse, at an opening-night reception that followed one of his son’s shows, how he had liked it, answered, “What you mean how I like it? I *have* to like it.”) One wonders how the esteemed actor Morris Carnovsky prepared for his film portrayal of Morris, who died of leukemia in 1932. Perhaps he remembered the man—much of New York’s theater community came to know Morris and Rose.<sup>8</sup>

Slightly taller than Morris, Rose was a formidable housewife. “Mrs. Gershwin is level-headed and practical,” wrote playwright S. N. Behrman; “I imagine it was she who steered the family through the early years and

who helped Gershwin père to the eminence of a restaurant proprietor.” “When she wanted,” added Yip Harburg, “she had the strength of a bulldozer along with her playfulness.” The 1945 biopic emphasized Rose’s more workaday side, showing her cooking dinner, mending clothes, and worrying about money, as opposed to her penchant for playing poker, gambling at the racetracks, attending the Yiddish theater, and designing hats and dresses. “There was creativity in her family,” recalled her daughter, Frances. In her later years, after her husband’s death, she dined out nearly every night at Lindy’s, a Manhattan haunt popular with theater crowds, and dated some men as well.<sup>9</sup>

A surviving 1935 letter from Rose to Ira, written in a heavily inflected English on stationery from Miami’s Blackstone Hotel, also reveals her as extremely attentive to family matters: she tells Ira that she has just reminded George to write to him; she urges Ira to call Arthur; she complains that while George is attentive when he’s with her, he forgets about her afterward (“ . . . and soon hea lives you hea forget you”); and she wishes she had Ira or someone else with her “from home.” She frets, too, about health matters—her own and Ira’s—and hopes Ira’s “getting busy on the show.”<sup>10</sup>

This letter exemplifies George’s description of his mother as “nervous, ambitious, and purposeful,” to which he added, “She was never the doting type. Although very loving, she never watched every move we made. She was set on having us completely educated, her idea being that if everything else failed we could always become school-teachers.” Such descriptions—along with George’s 1933 oil painting of his mother, in which she looms over an isolated house with an almost fierce strength—helped fuel those depictions of her as manipulative and unaffectionate (though Gershwin plainly describes her as “very loving”) and his father, conversely, as naive and warm, that characterize most Gershwin biographies. Such interpretations found additional grist when one biographer quoted George’s psychiatrist, Gregory Zilboorg, as saying, “had Gershwin adored his mother and only respected his father, he would have become a hopeless psychoneurotic. Gershwin’s adjustment to his work and to his life . . . was made possible only because his relations to his mother and father were exactly what they were.”<sup>11</sup>

Whatever this quote actually betokens, and whatever its accuracy, the evidence points to a particularly close bond between Rose and George. “His mother,” stated his first biographer, Isaac Goldberg, in 1929, “who is of intense importance to him psychologically, is the ideal mother in Israel,—the miracle of devotion that is too often forgotten by sons and

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daughters when they have acquired a sufficiently thick veneer of the new culture to make them ashamed of a culture more ancient." In 1944, publisher Bennett Cerf wrote, "Mrs. Gershwin was adored by everybody. 'You must meet my mother,' George would tell anybody who called. 'She's the most wonderful mother in the world.' On further reflection, he would frequently add, 'and so modest about *me*.'" "She's what the mammy writers write about," George told a reporter, "and what the mammy singers sing about. But they don't mean it and I do." Late in life, Kate Wolpin, after noting that her sister Rose had a "nice figure" and "dressed very well," added, "George was very proud of her."<sup>12</sup>

George's affection for his mother could be inferred further from his letters to her, with their ever-present concern about her health, and from family photographs taken in Beverly Hills in 1937, in which mother and son tenderly embrace. Frances confirmed that George "was very sweet to my mother." Significantly, when George described his mother as "nervous, ambitious and purposeful," as "never the doting type," as someone surprisingly "modest" about her famous son, he could have been describing himself for he, too, was nervous, ambitious, and purposeful, far from the doting type, and in his own way modest. He even told Isaac Goldberg, "I believe I have more of my mother's qualities than my father's."<sup>13</sup>

After Gershwin's death, his biographers depicted Rose in an increasingly harsh light. David Ewen's seminal writings registered such changing attitudes, from his portrayal of Rose as the "soft-eyed, little gentle woman whose entire life rotated about George's many triumphs as a composer" (1938), to the "wise, gentle woman, with a heart that continually overflowed with affection" (1943), to, finally, the "proud and self-centered woman whose driving ambition for herself and her family made her continually restless" (1956). This trend peaked with Joan Peyser's monograph (1993), which delineated Rose as unrelentingly vain and rapacious. Such disparagement reflected at least to some extent the perspectives of Ira and Frances, neither of whom had the kind of warm relationship with Rose that George seems to have had. Ira and Rose even engaged in something of a tussle for control of Gershwin's estate after the latter died intestate; and after Rose died of a heart attack in 1948, Ira further disputed her will, which left him only 20 percent of her estate as opposed to Arthur's and Frances's 40 percent each, an inequity amicably resolved among the siblings. Meanwhile, Frances harbored resentments toward her mother, attributing the problems that she and her brothers had in developing "real" relationships to her mother's neglect and narcissism (she felt further that thanks to psychotherapy,

she alone among her siblings succeeded in having a mature and loving marriage).<sup>14</sup>

Neither Morris nor Rose, it is true, provided much support for George's early artistic ambitions, though whether this left him more defiant or regretful is difficult to say. "There is no such thing as tradition for me," he stated in 1929. "Whatever I know about music, I've wrenched out for myself. I had no parents to stand over me and encourage me in the little tunes that I used to make up. No one ever urged me on by telling me that Mozart was a great composer when he was eleven." Such lack of parental guidance made him concerned about the arts education of young people and reinforced his belief "that parents should encourage children in whatever they may want to do."<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, at least in later years, his parents took obvious pleasure in his work, in particular Morris, whom observers often described as "beaming" through performances of his son's music (though proud of his son Izzy as well, the man who referred to "Fascinating Rhythm" as "Fashion on the River" was obviously less equipped to appreciate Ira's talents). The Gershwin lore includes amusing stories about Morris whistling or humming to assist George in the act of composing—inspiring one such episode in the 1945 film—and singer Eva Gauthier was somewhat taken aback when George turned up to a rehearsal at her apartment in 1923 with Morris in tow—apparently as a chaperon, or so Gauthier thought, but more likely just for the company.<sup>16</sup>

Rose also involved herself in George's musical career, certainly more so than sometimes suggested. Although she hoped that he would become a businessman or a lawyer or, after he started working on Broadway, at least the manager of a theater (she was concerned he'd "wind up in an orchestra" and preferred to see him "make enough money to know and enjoy music on the side"), she urged her children to "keep up their interest in music," taking them to hear violinist Mischa Elman's 1908 New York debut. According to Gershwin's close collaborator in his early years, lyricist Irving Caesar, Rose—whom Caesar remembered as "a very wonderful woman, very bright"—"insisted that George should start writing [songs] with Ira." Ewen mentioned, too, "She was always to be found in a prominent seat at important first performances of Gershwin's work, and at the end of the performance she was traditionally the first from whom he accepted congratulations." Rose also invested money in some of George's shows and, like other members of the family, rendered opinions about his music that he at least accepted graciously. After Gershwin privately auditioned Anne Brown for *Porgy and Bess* (dedicated, inci-

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dentally, to his parents), he asked that she return a week later to audition for Ira and Rose, whom Brown thought “rather arrogant, a doting mother who was interested only in her son, not even her *two* sons. I didn’t like her very much.” The costume designs for the opera’s first production so displeased Rose that she went to the Lower East Side to procure for the cast shabbier garments.<sup>17</sup>

George was, in any case, a devoted son, who from early adulthood supported his parents financially and who lived with them until he was thirty-one, that is, for most of his short life. Frances confirmed that he was “a good son to his parents. After he had his own place, he would visit often. He always brought ice cream. He loved ice cream which he brought for everybody, although he would sit down and eat most of it himself.”<sup>18</sup>

George remained close to his entire family, thoughtfully returning from trips with gifts for relatives. In 1936 he gave his uncle Abraham a \$1,500 loan (with Rose’s approval) so that he could invest in a restaurant; the loan, his aunt Kate wrote to him, “thrilled me to tears,” not only because of the money “but the way you did it, your quick and sweet reply, the way you expressed your best wishes.” Years later, Kate recalled how George expected family members, including herself, to attend the opening of his shows and the premieres of his concert works, and to see him off when he sailed for Europe. On one occasion, when his grandmother, Mary, demurred about going down to the ship, he insisted, saying, “Bubby [‘Grandmother’ in Yiddish], if you don’t come, I’m not going to Europe.” Commented Kate: “He made you feel so important. . . . He made everybody that he cared for feel good about themselves. That’s a gift that nobody I know has.” When he commissioned David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1936 to paint the large *George in an Imaginary Concert Hall*, he asked the Mexican painter, in Siqueiros’s fanciful telling, to include in the first row “all of the members of my family—my father, now deceased, my favorite uncle, my father’s brother, also deceased, the wife of my favorite uncle, also deceased, and also my mother, who is alive, and my brother the wastrel and my cousin the cheater, and another cousin who started by studying for the priesthood and ended up being a gigolo.”<sup>19</sup>

This extended family, including his maternal grandparents, Gershon and Mary Bruskin, barely surfaces in the Gershwin literature—a surprising lacuna, considering that even in the 1930s George was drawing and painting their portraits, including one of his most accomplished oils, a Chagall-like portrait of his grandfather, who remained a furrier until

his death in 1917 (and whose son, Bernard, entered the fur business as well before becoming a photographer). As late as 1910, neither Gershon nor Mary apparently spoke English, conversing rather in Yiddish. Kate recalled that Gershon nonetheless knew American history better than she did. After Gershon's death, Mary moved in with her daughter Kate's family. In 1924 Ira wrote to George, then in London, "Grandma wants you to get her something when you return, says no matter how inexpensive so long as you remember her," a request that sounds very much like Rose.<sup>20</sup>

Gershwin also had some contact with Morris's family in the form of his father's younger half-brother, Aaron (b. 1889), who arrived in New York in 1913 and who, like Morris, went into the restaurant business. Aaron—who also changed his name from Gershvin to Gershwin—was as debonair and sophisticated as Morris was unassuming and ingenuous. Aaron and his wife, Zena, had one child, Emil, who became a noted illustrator of *Tarzan* and *Flash Gordon* comic strips.<sup>21</sup>

Morris and Rose began their married life on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the epicenter of the city's Jewish immigrant population, but after Ira's birth they moved to 242 Snedicker Avenue, near Pitkin Avenue, a two-story brick building—large enough to board a Mr. Taffelstein of the Singer Sewing Machine Company and his family—in the then semisuburban East New York section of Brooklyn, where George was born in September 1898. The family returned to the Lower East Side, first to 425 Third Avenue in 1899 and then to 21 Second Avenue, where Arthur was born in March 1900, though by June of that year they were back in Brooklyn at 1310 8th Avenue, near Prospect Park, where the census takers caught up with them and where Rosie Fabalin, a seamstress from Russia, resided as well. About 1904 the peripatetic Gershwins moved to 126th Street in Harlem, another largely Jewish neighborhood, and about 1906 they again returned to the Lower East Side, where they lived at various residences on Second Avenue, Grand Street, Forsyth Street, and Chrystie Street, including a fairly large apartment complex at 253 Grand in 1910. In February 1915 they moved to 108 West 111th Street, just north of Central Park off Seventh Avenue, leaving the Lower East Side behind them for good. And in September 1917 they returned to Harlem, moving to 520 West 144th Street, just east of Broadway.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the popular moniker of Gershwin as a "Brooklyn composer"—as when borough president Abe Stark declared him a "native Brooklynite" on the occasion of George Gershwin Day on September 26, 1963—was rather misleading. George spent nearly all of his childhood

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and adolescence in Manhattan, no doubt attending a school in Harlem when very young, then Public Schools 20 and 25 on the Lower East Side, followed by nearly two years at the High School of Commerce (1912–1914) at 155 West 65th Street before cutting short his sophomore year in order to pursue a musical career (Commerce High, incidentally, was largely demolished in 1965 to make room for the Juilliard School at Lincoln Center). He spent the remainder of his life primarily in Manhattan as well.<sup>23</sup>

Although Morris and Rose lived mostly in neighborhoods with a high percentage of Jewish immigrants, they presided over a rather assimilated household. At the same time, they spoke Russian and Yiddish as well as English at home. Stravinsky remembered George knowing some Russian words, while actor Edward G. Robinson (born Emanuel Goldenberg in Bucharest, though also a child of the Lower East Side) recalled conversations with Ira and George in Yiddish.<sup>24</sup>

As for the role of religion in the home, the evidence is somewhat contradictory. Most sources state that Ira was the only son to become a bar mitzvah and that the family rarely attended synagogue or observed religious holidays. According to Michael Feinstein, who worked for Ira for nearly a decade, George and Ira would even ask their parents “to pull down the curtains so the neighbors wouldn’t see that they were not observing the holidays.” On the other hand, interviewed in 1938, Rose claimed that although she had put religious orthodoxy—other than a “devout belief in the Ten Commandments”—behind her, when her children were young the family “adhered rigidly to the Jewish faith. The home was strictly orthodox. They [Ira, George, and Arthur] were taught by rabbis, and were all bar mitzvah.” And Aunt Kate remembered that Morris and Rose regularly hosted Passover seders.<sup>25</sup>

How seriously George took his Jewish heritage in later years is similarly difficult to ascertain. He at least aspired to find a Jewish wife, and in a number of letters, he thanked or blessed God for one thing or another (Gershwin once wrote to Irving Caesar, as the latter recalled, “I pray to God that he will send me a good blues for my concerto,” to which Yip Harburg, hearing this, responded, “Well, he may have [prayed to God] inside—but he was on a very special, playful relationship with God”). Moreover, anti-Semitism at home and abroad would have made him that much more aware of his ethnicity; he reportedly kidded his friend Kay Swift about living on East 86th Street in the heart of Manhattan’s German American Yorkville neighborhood, a hotbed of pro-Nazi sentiment, by saying, “This little Jewish boy has a hard time walking through

the German section!" During his later years, he also supported various Jewish causes.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, writer Carl Van Vechten stated, "It's absurd to talk about Jewish tradition in George Gershwin. There was nothing notably Jewish in him at all. Why, we never thought of it." And although actress Kitty Carlisle remembered attending a Passover seder with the Gershwins in the mid-1930s in which pianist Oscar Levant, assisted by George, presided over the service "in a kind of mad jazz rhythm," she added that it was "all a big joke." The entertainment world was certainly highly assimilationist, as evidenced by the widespread practice—as in Gershwin's case—of changing names that sounded too ethnic. And aside from his aborted opera *The Dybbuk*, he showed little interest in working with explicitly Jewish themes or materials. "My people are Americans," he famously stated in 1927. "My time is to-day."<sup>27</sup>

The relative secularism of the Gershwins in part may have reflected Morris's and Rose's roots in St. Petersburg as opposed to the more insular towns and shtetls of the Pale. But secularized Jewish households, bolstered by the prominence of socialist and other progressive movements of the time, were actually a commonplace on the Lower East Side, where Gershwin spent most of his adolescent years. "The fixed rituals that had bound the east European Jews broke down under the weight of American freedom," observes Irving Howe. "The patterns of social existence had to be remade each day. The comedy of social dislocation gave edge and abundance to life." Those Jews overhauling traditional religious mores were inclined to question inherited American ones as well, and many challenging voices emerged from this milieu.<sup>28</sup>

A colorful neighborhood, and one of the world's densest in terms of population, the Lower East Side teemed with pushcarts, horse-drawn wagons, and throngs of men, women, and children. The general area contained scores of churches and synagogues, factories and shops, schools and theaters, bars and brothels, squalid tenements and middle-class flats. Delinquency, gambling, prostitution, disease, and labor unrest were common. "No child raised in the immigrant quarter would lack for moral realism," writes Howe; "just to walk through Hester Street was an education in the hardness of life."<sup>29</sup>

The area harbored not only a large Jewish community but Irish, Italian, and German enclaves as well. Jewish children ventured into these other neighborhoods at their own risk; the young George reportedly suffered a brain concussion attempting to flee an Irish gang. But it was too tempting for most Jewish children not to explore these nearby sections

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or, for that matter, Chinatown farther south. “Venturing into gentile streets,” states Howe, “became a strategy for testing the reality of the external world and for discovering that it was attractive in ways no Jewish voice had told him.” Nor were the various neighborhoods as segregated as all that. For example, the Gershwins’ apartment building at 253 Grand, though predominantly Jewish, housed a number of Irish, Italian, and Greek families. Meanwhile, the Gershwins’ intermittent residences in Harlem brought them into contact with a burgeoning African American population there.<sup>30</sup>

George was an active if not hyperactive child, haunting the busy thoroughfares of the Lower East Side, playing stickball, and diving into the East River. His early heroes included superathlete Jim Thorpe and baseball star Christy Mathewson, and he himself became a local roller-skating champion. In contrast to his reserved older brother, he regularly got into scrapes and scuffles, engaging in fisticuffs, breaking glass, setting fires, and stealing food from pushcarts. Once, after urinating behind a wagon, he had his ear twisted by a policeman. On another occasion, a horse kicked him on the bridge of his nose. A deep scar by his right eye bore witness to such rough play. Some neighbors thought him a “fresh kid” and even his adoring aunt Kate remembered him as a “wild boy,” like her own son Arnold. “He was the one,” she added, “that used to get punished by the father [Morris],” who predicted that George would “grow up to be a bum.”<sup>31</sup>

Nathaniel Phillips, one of Gershwin’s teachers at Public School 20, remembered him, on the other hand, as “a nice lad—modest and retiring.” Located at Rivington and Forsyth Streets, Public School 20 during these years included among its student body not only George and Ira but such future notables as Irving Caesar, Harry Golden, Jacob Javits, Paul Muni, and Edward G. Robinson. Phillips attributed the school’s success to its emphasis on discipline, noting that during a three-day absence on his part, his class carried on without him. “It was shoes shined, nails clean . . . every day,” he remembered. “No coming to class without a tie.” (Ira once credited a sixth-grade lesson at the school about varying pronunciations of the word *neither* as planting the seed for the song “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.”)<sup>32</sup>

And although Ira explicitly referred to his brother as “a poor student at school,” Gershwin’s aptitude for mathematics at least led to admittance to the High School of Commerce, where it was thought he might train to become an accountant. In a 1936 letter to a friend, Gershwin himself wrote, “In public school I was considered pretty good at com-

position, but for some reason or other (I'm not bothering much with reasons lately) I never kept it up." His surviving letters indeed reveal a good command of language and a bold, clear penmanship. He no doubt honed such skills in the public schools of the Lower East Side, where teaching English to immigrant children took high priority. Yip Harburg, for example, warmly recalled the "terrific" education he received at the neighborhood's public schools, with their "inspiring teachers" who introduced him to English lyric poetry and the dramatic arts.<sup>33</sup>

Gershwin even evidenced some attraction to academic life in a 1930 letter to Rosamund Walling, a young friend then at Swarthmore: "The picture you painted of college life (*your* college life) in your last letter seemed so wonderful that I shall never misunderstand you[r] preference for that life to all others. The books you read, the fact you could walk the woods alone and think, the fact that you were very happy doing it made me realize how attractive it really was. None of the sordidness of the outside world. And constantly learning. How lucky you are." "I think he was very sorry he never finished school," reflected his sister. "He had a great feeling for learning. He was very bright and he wrote wonderful letters that were just to the point."<sup>34</sup>

Ira, who would play a crucial role in George's life, was the true scholar of the family, however. As early as 1908, the studious twelve-year-old began compiling a remarkable scrapbook of newspaper and journal articles on everything from "How Phrases Originate" and "Points of Constitutional Law" to "The First Taxicab" and "Saturn the Great Celestial Wonder." He read voraciously, and by the time he finished grade school, he had devoured the popular classics of Horatio Alger, James Fenimore Cooper, Arthur Conan Doyle, Alexandre Dumas père, Anna Sewell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Jules Verne, among others.<sup>35</sup>

While at Townsend Harris Hall (1910–1914), City College's preparatory high school for exceptional students located on the Lower East Side, Ira contributed cartoons and light verse to the school newspaper, the *Academic Herald*, sometimes in collaboration with his classmate Yip Harburg. "Ira was the shyest, most diffident boy we had ever known," recalled Harburg. "In a class of lower east side rapscallions, his soft-spoken gentleness and low-keyed personality made him a lovable incongruity. He spoke in murmurs, hiding behind a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles." He also continued reading novels—he was reading Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy in 1912—but he and Harburg shared a special interest in a long line of light, satirical poetry from Renaissance parodists and W. S. Gilbert to the latest newspaper verse of Franklin P. Adams, Bert

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Taylor, and the young Dorothy Parker. Carolyn Wells's anthology of society verse in particular became an indispensable resource as the two boys experimented with such classic forms as the ballad, limerick, ode, rondeau, and triolet. In time, these two friends—along with such like-minded colleagues as Lorenz Hart and Cole Porter—would help usher in the so-called golden age of American popular song by applying the traditions of sophisticated light verse to modern lyric writing.<sup>36</sup>

Although Ira's musical interests were not nearly as deep or far-ranging as George's, his abilities in that area naturally enhanced his eventual career as a lyricist. Taking some piano lessons with Aunt Kate about 1910, he acquired enough skill to play a duet, "The Fairy Waltz," with her, and to entertain friends in 1917, writing with characteristic self-deprecation in his diary, "I divinely played with 1 finger of the right hand & three of the left and almost my entire repertoire consisting of Pink Lady waltz, a Spanish waltz (introducing a trill herenthere) and a few simple old songs like 'Singing Polly woodywoodle all the Way,' 'Annie Laurie,' and such in the simplest keys." The possessor of a capable singing voice—he sang better than George did, by most accounts—he made a number of home recordings, including one of the score for *The Firebrand of Florence* (for which he had written the lyrics) with its composer, Kurt Weill, at the piano, in a voice that reminded one listener of Groucho Marx. And his extraordinary memory extended to his recall of tunes, no small advantage when his collaborations often entailed setting words to finished melodies.<sup>37</sup>

Ira entered City College in the fall of 1914 as an English major, happily immersing himself in the novels of Theodore Dreiser and Henry James and the plays of James Barrie, Henrik Ibsen, and G. B. Shaw. He also continued publishing light verse in a variety of journals, sometimes with Harburg as "Yip and Gersh." In the spring of 1916, either during or after his sophomore year, he quit City College as a full-time student, to his mother's dismay. Over the next three years, he worked as a cashier and bookkeeper for his father's bathhouses, B. Altman's department store, and even a traveling circus while pursuing some night classes (possibly with the idea of becoming an accountant or a doctor, as Rose hoped) and writing and sometimes publishing light verse along with stories in the tradition of Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry. He especially valued the counsel of journalist-playwright Paul Potter, who after reading one of his stories suggested that he learn "American slang" and become "an attentive listener and observer."<sup>38</sup>

During these years, Ira was drawn gradually into the world of musi-

cal theater, in part because of George's activities in that arena. In 1916 he began to keep record of his attendance at plays and musical shows, and during the 1917–1918 season he wrote vaudeville reviews for the *New York Clipper*. He was particularly charmed by the work of P. G. Wodehouse, who, along with Gilbert, became an inspiration for his own increasing preoccupation with lyric writing, which by 1920 had reached the point that he gave his profession as “lyric writer.”<sup>39</sup>

George and Ira began to collaborate on some songs in the late 1910s, and though they did not work exclusively with each other, especially at first, by the mid-1920s they had become a famous songwriting team, Ira establishing himself as one of the finest lyricists of the age. Lorenz Hart, when asked about his fellow lyricists, for example, stated, “First there is Ira, then me; then nobody.” Similarly, Wodehouse, who thought the lyrics of Cole Porter “terribly uneven” and those of Hart without “charm,” considered Ira the “best of the whole bunch” and the “greatest lyricist of them all” (after reading Hart's lyrics to *Pal Joey*, Wodehouse wrote to his friend, Guy Bolton, “Ira is worth ten of him”). George himself stated that the “wistfulness” and “whimsicality” of his brother's lyrics placed him “among the foremost of lyric writers in America.”<sup>40</sup>

In later years, such insightful observers as Lawrence Stewart (1959), Deena Rosenberg (1991), and Philip Furia (1996) helped chart Ira's great achievement. In a helpful summation, distinguished writer and impresario Lincoln Kirstein wrote, “Without condescension or parody he [Ira] created a new prosody, a new means for lyric-writing which incorporated the season's slang, references to local events, echoes of the vernacular rhythms of ordinary speech in a frame of casual thrown-away elegance which was never false, insistent or self-conscious. He seemed to have stumbled on what was right, fitting, appropriate, surprising and charming, as if such had been coins tossed in his path.” Ned Rorem, another admirer, thought Ira's verse “less bathetic and a good deal tighter than some of the poetasting used by, say, Schubert and Fauré. Witty too, and ingeniously confected.” They “make you glad of whatever education you have,” stated John O'Hara in 1941, “but sad that you didn't stay around for a little more.”<sup>41</sup>

In the course of their fruitful collaboration, Ira helped supervise George's career, while George galvanized and prodded Ira, who claimed that had it not been for George, he would have been “contented to be a bookkeeper.” Ira's great admiration for his brother became one of his most remarked-upon characteristics. When George played through his opera *Porgy and Bess* for director Rouben Mamoulian for the first time, the latter noticed Ira looking back and forth between his brother and himself

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“with half-open eyes and pantomime with a soft gesture of his hand, as if saying, ‘*He* did it. Isn’t it wonderful? Isn’t *he* wonderful?’” S. N. Behrman similarly observed, “At the Gershwin parties, with everyone spell-bound around the piano, while George was playing and singing Ira’s lyrics, I would steal a look at Ira, standing on the outskirts of the crowd, a small, benignant smile on his face, stirred to happiness by the effect his brother was creating.” (When Behrman suggested to Ira that he was “every bit as good as George,” the latter responded, “No, George was more original.”) Such affection was mutual; commented Ira’s wife, Leonore: “I never saw a greater love than the love George and Ira had for each other.”<sup>42</sup>

In September 1926, Ira married Leonore Strunsky (1900–1991), who in Merle Armitage’s phrase “moved smoothly into the picture.” George and Ira had known the vivacious and attractive “Lee” for some years; she was the sister of one of George’s dearest friends, Emily Paley (1897–1990), at whose 1920 wedding she and Ira first met. Born in San Francisco to a Jewish family of Russian heritage, Emily and Leonore relocated to New York with their parents, Albert and Mascha Strunsky, after the 1906 earthquake. “Papa” Strunsky, who acquired a fair amount of Greenwich Village property, became known for his charitable behavior on behalf of artists unable to pay rent (he’s depicted with other local notables on a mural in Manhattan’s Christopher Street subway station). George enjoyed entertaining friends at one of Strunsky’s establishments, Three Steps Down, on West 8th Street. Leonore and Emily also had a brother, William English (“English”), named after their uncle, William English Walling, a dedicated socialist well known for his activities on behalf of trade unions and civil rights, and the husband of Albert’s sister Anna, a radical writer who enjoyed a lifelong friendship with Jack London.<sup>43</sup>

Leonore, by some accounts, was originally in love with George and married Ira as a second-best alternative. Ira himself admitted that the Gershwin name meant much more to her than to him. Or perhaps she was emulating her sister Emily, who also married a lyricist, Lou Paley. In any case, Leonore proposed to Ira a number of times before he accepted. According to Michael Feinstein, “Ira was impressed with Leonore because she was a real flapper.” Aunt Kate added that he thought highly of her intelligence.<sup>44</sup>

Leonore skillfully helped arrange Ira’s and George’s busy social lives, in the process gaining a reputation for hospitality that surpassed Rose’s. “There is no more gracious hostess in the world,” opined Behrman; her management of the Gershwin ménage, according to Oscar Levant, revealed “qualities of feminine tact, sensibility and patience which existed,

as far as my experience is a criterion, only in her.” At the same time, she had an imperious side that revealed itself more and more with the passing years, perhaps related to her increasing reliance on prescription drugs; even as early as the 1945 biopic, Julie Bishop played her with a kind of arch sangfroid. Describing their experiences with Leonore on tour with *Porgy and Bess* in the 1950s, Maya Angelou remembered her face as “sour with propriety” and found her “maternalistic attitude” infuriating, while Truman Capote portrayed her as a haughty grande-dame who, on seeing the imperial Russian jewels at the Hermitage, said, “I feel so dissatisfied, I’d like to go home and crack my husband on the head.” Michael Feinstein found it “extraordinary” that Emily—whom he thought “the most delightful, gentle, and kind person” that he had ever met—and Leonore “came from the same family.” In discussing his two sisters, English himself remarked that although both were strong women, “Emily was interested in the world, while Lee was interested in herself.” George was solicitous toward but reportedly somewhat critical of Leonore, at least according to Aunt Kate, who remembered him feeling that “every woman—particularly without children—should do something.”<sup>45</sup>

George also maintained—more so than did Ira and Leonore—a warm relationship with younger brother Arthur, described by Frances as “the funny one of the family. He had a great sense of humor.” “I used to be George’s pal,” remarked Arthur. “We used to go to ballgames together and all the fights together.” However, the two saw less of each other after Gershwin’s first trip to Hollywood in 1930, a development that represented one of a number of disappointments in Arthur’s life. Another concerned his floundering musical career. He briefly studied violin, learned to play the piano by ear, and composed his own songs. A salesman of motion pictures early in life, he gave up his later vocation as a stockbroker in the 1930s in order to pursue music full-time. George featured two of Arthur’s songs, “Slowly but Surely” and “Home James” (lyrics, Eddie Heyman), on his 1934 radio show; and in 1945 Arthur enjoyed a modest success with a musical comedy, *The Lady Says Yes* (lyrics, Fred Spielman). But his career never got off the ground. After hearing some of Arthur’s songs in 1968, Ira found them—to his surprise—“very good in ‘a Sigmund Romberg operetta’ kind of way,” according to Michael Feinstein, who expressed his own particular liking for “After All These Years.” Another of Arthur’s songs, “Invitation to the Blues,” turned up in the film comedy *Tootsie* (1982).<sup>46</sup>

Though the baby of the family, Frances helped pioneer the Gershwins’ break into show business. By age ten, perhaps coached by George, at the

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time a song plugger, she was singing and dancing on the vaudeville circuit, assisted by Rose in the perhaps unexpected role of stage mother. Frances—described by Vernon Duke as “a chubby chestnut-haired flapper”—continued performing in vaudeville and musical comedy, including the unsuccessful 1928 edition of the hit 1926 show *Americana*. Also in 1928, while traveling in Europe with George and Ira, she consented, at Cole Porter’s behest, to sing a set of Gershwin songs in a lavish Parisian revue for two weeks—the climax of her short-lived stage career. Frances remembered George as lovingly if prudishly overprotective, while George expressed “great fondness for her as a person as well as the usual brotherly love.”<sup>47</sup>

In 1928 Frances began dating her future husband, Leopold Godowsky Jr. (“Leo”), a violinist and personal assistant to his father, the celebrated pianist. (Though an archconservative, the senior Godowsky, who attended the premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, regarded Gershwin’s talent highly, as his son remembered, and was personally “very fond of him.”) George and the younger Godowsky had known each other since the early 1920s through their frequent visits to the Palais Royal to hear the Paul Whiteman Orchestra; and both studied composition with Rubin Goldmark about this time as well.<sup>48</sup>

After Frances married Leopold in 1930, she gave up her singing career but continued to perform in a voice variously described as “small, somewhat husky,” “a light soprano,” and “sweet but unexceptional.” George, who admired her renditions of his songs, featured her singing his “Oh Gee!—Oh Joy!” on the same 1934 radio broadcast on which he programmed Arthur’s music. In 1973, well into her sixties, Frances released a recording of Gershwin songs she had been singing all her life. Like Ira and George, she took up painting as well, her art teachers including her cousin, Henry Botkin, and Morris Davidson. Meanwhile, Leopold, with his old friend pianist-composer Leopold Mannes (the son of famed violinist David Mannes and the nephew of conductor Walter Damrosch), remained passionately involved not only with music but with photography, the two coinventing the Kodachrome and other color-photography processes for Eastman Kodak in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup>

George’s death on July 11, 1937, devastated his family. “For the last two weeks the loss has hit me harder than ever,” wrote Ira to his mother on August 17. “An hour doesn’t go by but that some memory doesn’t suddenly hit me. I know it’s the same with you, Mom, and we’ve just got to be brave about it. Maybe time will smooth off the edges of our pain. Let’s hope so.” Ira eventually resumed work, and in later years suc-

cessfully collaborated with Jerome Kern, Kurt Weill, Aaron Copland, Arthur Schwartz, Burton Lane, and Harold Arlen. But by the mid-1950s he had essentially put lyric writing behind him and devoted himself to overseeing the Gershwin estate, answering fan mail, and annotating an anthology of his verse, *Lyrics on Several Occasions* (1959). When Michael Feinstein went to work for him in the late 1970s, the young pianist-singer discovered that Ira's home had become a veritable shrine to his brother's memory and that he talked to George in his sleep, carrying on conversations "filled with anger, centering around Ira's desire not to stay here on earth and George's insistence that he stay."<sup>50</sup>

Though generous to favored friends and family and utterly bound by their devotion to George's memory, Ira and Leonore maintained what was taken to be a cold, unhappy marriage by many, including actress Lotte Lenya, who in 1944 told her husband Kurt Weill that it would be a "blessing" if they had the decency to separate. For their parts, both Arthur and Frances faced the similarly heavy burden of caring for their famous brother's legacy and even artifacts, which played some part in Arthur's rocky marriage to singer Judy Lane (b. 1917) and Frances's decision to enter psychotherapy. Gershwin clearly had been something of the glue that had kept his family together, and without his presence, family ties, though cordial, began to unravel.<sup>51</sup>

Whereas Ira and Leonore had no children, Arthur and Judy had one child, Marc George (b. 1943); and Leopold and Frances Godowsky, four: Sandra ("Alexis") (b. 1934), Leopold III (b. 1938), and the twins, Nadia and Georgia (b. 1945). In 1980, shortly before Arthur's and Ira's demise, Marc and Leopold became trustees of the George Gershwin estate; while over time, Ira's nephew and English's son, Michael Strunsky, assumed responsibility for the Ira Gershwin estate (with musical theater historian and Gershwin scholar Robert Kimball becoming the estate's artistic advisor in 1982). These assorted cousins in many ways followed paths forged by their forebears. Like English, Michael Strunsky was a businessman; like Arthur, Marc Gershwin became a stockbroker; like his paternal grandfather, father, and uncle George, composer-pianist Leopold Godowsky III emerged an accomplished musician, the *Chicago Tribune* deeming his 1998 recording of Gershwin's Concerto in F under José Serebrier "one of the most romantic and heartfelt . . . in the last three decades";<sup>52</sup> and like their mother Frances, Sandra—who adopted the name Alexis Gershwin—performed popular songs on the stage; Georgia Keidan, after some early involvement in musical comedy, turned to painting (though she thought her art more playful and lyrical than her mother's); and Nadia Natali be-

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came a dancer, eventually working as a dance therapist and pursuing a doctorate in somatic psychology. Meanwhile, two of Marc's sons, Adam (b. 1971) and Todd (b. 1975), who along with their brother Alex (b. 1986) alone among their generation of cousins inherited the Gershwin name, assisted in the running of the Gershwin music business.

Although Gershwin never married, he may have fathered a child. So, at any rate, claimed Alan Gershwin, who in 1959 announced in *Confidential* magazine, "I Am George Gershwin's Illegitimate Son." Alan Gershwin was born Albert Schneider in Brooklyn on May 18, 1926 (Alan was his nickname, and he eventually adopted Gershwin as his surname). He asserted that his mother, a married chorus girl named Margaret Manners, had had an affair with Gershwin after meeting him through lyricist Buddy DeSylva, and that he was the child of that liaison. Manners (originally Mollie Charleston of Brooklyn, the Charleston family name having been changed from Charlkovitz) allegedly gave the boy to be raised by her sister, Fanny Schneider, and remarried sometime in the mid-1930s. Alan remembered surreptitious meetings with Gershwin, whom he resembled physically, and recalled, further, that money changed hands between Gershwin and the Schneiders.<sup>53</sup>

Although Ira and other family members rejected Alan as an imposter, Charles Schwartz, in his book on Gershwin (1973), concluded that the case deserved further investigation. In her own biography (1993), Joan Peyser supported Alan's general story after finding corroborative witnesses, notably Gershwin's valet Paul Mueller, who reportedly helped arrange the boy's visits with his presumed father. Reunited with Alan in 1988, Mueller even presented him with a cherished Gershwin self-portrait in his possession, saying that he thought the composer's son should have it. (Peyser reproduced this 1934 drawing, inspired by Edward Steichen's celebrated 1927 photograph of the composer, in her monograph.)

Peyser's allegations did not go uncontested, however. Reviewing her biography, Laurie Winer opined, for instance, that the author's factual unreliability and questionable journalistic practices cast serious doubt on her credibility. That Alan Gershwin's remembrances contained some implausibilities and inconsistencies, and that Mueller, who died before the book's publication, could not confirm or amplify statements made on his behalf raised additional uncertainty. Moreover, Alan apparently never submitted a request to either George's or Ira's estate for DNA samples to help bolster his claim. In short, the evidence remained circumstantial, and the matter, unresolved.<sup>54</sup>