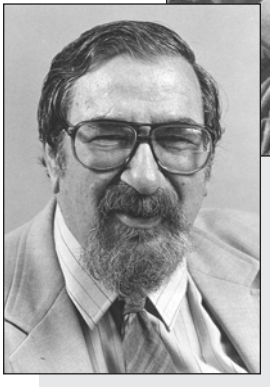
Jewish History, Family History, Autobiography: My Grandmother, My Father, and Myself

Jeremy Popkin

In December 1999, I caused a scandal at the annual Association for Jewish Studies meeting. I delivered a scholarly paper, based on original research in primary sources, on the subject of my grandmother. Word got around, and at the meeting of the program committee, a prominent member of the association somberly warned his colleagues of the danger posed to the organization if it allowed the spread of "grandmother studies." Jewish studies has struggled too hard for academic respectability to risk its status by letting the AJS program become an opportunity for anyone with Jewish ancestors and a Ph.D. to come and tell family stories.



Richard H. Popkin (1923-2005). Courtesy of Jeremy Popkin.

So, what were Grandma and I doing at AJS? She—Zelda Popkin (1898–1983), novelist and public-relations person—was doing, posthumously, what I had often seen her do when she was alive: showing off. After all, hadn't she written one of the first American novels with a Holocaust theme—*Small Victory*, set in occupied Germany after the war, and centering around the treatment of Jewish survivors in the DP camps, published in 1947—and hadn't she also written *the* first American novel about the creation of the state of Israel? Yes indeed, my grandmother should have been Leon Uris: her book, *Quiet Street*, appeared in 1951, seven years before *Exodus*. It drew on the impressions she had gathered during a two-month visit to the newborn state of Israel in late 1948, and, by 1999, it seemed appropriate to note that the first novel on the subject had been written by a woman author and told the story through the experiences of female characters. Admittedly, my grandmother's two novels were commercial failures, but surely they entitled her to a modest place in the story of American Jewish literature and in Jewish women's history.

Zelda Popkin sizes up her grandson and future biographer. Courtesy of Jeremy Popkin.

But what was I doing channeling my grandmother at AJS? I am a professional scholar, but my normal bailiwick is the history of the French Revolution. To be sure, at the University of Kentucky, I have taught an undergraduate course on the Holocaust since the late 1970s, but I have never committed myself to do much scholarly research in that area. The only reason I wrote about the author of *Small Victory* and *Quiet Street* was that she was my grandmother, and that I had been surprised to learn that the standard study of American fiction about Israel, Andrew Furman's *Israel Through the American-Jewish Imagination* (1997), made no mention of her book. Zelda had certainly loomed large in my life. When I was a child, she was the family celebrity. Her Manhattan apartment seemed unbelievably glamorous compared to our house in Iowa City, Iowa, where my father, the historian of philosophy Richard H. Popkin, was a university professor, and her chain-smoking, Scotch-drinking lifestyle was my initial image of sophistication. On visits to the East Coast, my other grandmother tried to interest me in her vegetable garden, while Zelda—she taught her grandchildren to call her by her exotic first name—explained to me the best ways to commit undetectable murders, a subject she had mastered in order to write the detective stories that had started her writing career.

Zelda might not have approved of the way I turned my interest in her into a scholarly project. "Write something that will sell," she always told me, advice I still haven't learned to follow. At her death, she had left her literary papers to the Twentieth-Century American Authors collection in the Boston University library. Working in BU's rare book room, I was in my world, not hers. A one-time journalist, she liked to be out talking to people, not sitting at a desk. The proof was

in the notes in the tiny spiral notebooks from her trip to Israel that I found in her files, from which I could see how she transformed her experiences into a book. Her letters conveyed the bitterness with which she reacted to her novels' failures: she blamed American Jewish readers of the early 1950s, who, she concluded, were scared to identify with Jewish characters. With the superior wisdom of those who come afterward, I noted that she reached this conclusion just as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth were proving otherwise. But I did (together with my mother, the literary agent Julie Popkin) succeed in getting *Quiet Street* back in print (with Bison Books, in 2002). For that, Zelda might have forgiven me for burying her under a pile of footnotes in an article published in *Shofar* a year earlier. It was a way for me to make a small connection with the world of Jewish scholarship—and to see that my own ambivalent relationship with Jewishness was part of a family tradition.

And then my father died, in April 2005. By that time, I had moved beyond my original specialty in French history and begun to write about autobiography and life-writing: when I saw my father for the last time, I was able to show him the first copy of my book, *History, Historians and Autobiography*, and remind him that some of my first insights into the subject had come from listening to him thinking out the issues involved when he was writing an autobiographical essay for his own *festschrift*. His death had a much greater emotional impact on me than that of my grandmother. In addition to everything else that he represented for me, it was his example that I had followed when I chose my own profession. And if Zelda had been Jewish because, having grown up with and then rebelled against Orthodox immigrant parents, she couldn't be anything else, my father had modeled a far more complicated relationship to Judaism. Allergic to almost everything having to do with religious practice, he was nevertheless fascinated with the Jewish past and especially with the intellectual legacy of the Marranos. In his scholarship, he had elevated them to the status of the progenitors of modern thought.

IN THE LETTERS, I COULD HEAR MY FATHER'S VOICE, AND ENJOY THE SENSE OF HUMOR WITH WHICH HE HAD TURNED OUR FAMILY ADVENTURES INTO STORIES FOR HIS STORY-WRITING MOTHER'S BENEFIT.

I didn't have to launch scholarship on my father by myself. UCLA's William Andrews Clark Library, where he worked for the last two decades of his life, sponsored a two-day conference on his contributions to the history of philosophy and Jewish studies in June 2006, and an even larger meeting is scheduled to take place in Brazil in October 2007. The Clark Library generously invited me to participate in their conference, but, beyond representing the Popkin family, what was I to contribute? At first I thought I would just share some personal stories, but then my academic instincts took over. My mother still had Dad's old correspondence: could a historian resist the lure of such documents? Above all, there were twenty-five years' worth of letters my father had written to Zelda, and which she had stuffed into an old hatbox that my parents had inherited when she died. My father hadn't been interested in looking at them, but he had let me put them into chronological order. Now, I actually sat down and read them.

In the letters, I could hear my father's voice, and enjoy the sense of humor with which he had turned our family adventures into stories for his story-writing mother's benefit. I relived my own childhood, as my father recounted it, and, even more poignantly, that of my sister Maggi, who died tragically and unexpectedly just a month after my father. And I realized I could offer something to the scholars interested in my father's thought: the letters provided valuable clues about the way in which his ideas, including his perceptions about the importance of the Marranos, developed. Of course, I couldn't pretend to be doing objective scholarship—among other things, I couldn't help contrasting my own memories of events with what my father had written—but, on the other hand, I had a unique view of how my father's private life and his scholarly interests connected. Surely it is significant that our family only began holding Passover seders shortly before Dad "discovered" the Marranos and began the research that made him a major figure in Jewish studies!

Doing "academic" research on my father—going through his correspondence to organize it for donation to the Clark Library—is also teaching me things I hadn't known about him. For example, his correspondence with his longtime friend Judah Goldin, for many years dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary, provides a very different perspective on his interest in Judaism than his letters to Zelda. Going through my father's papers also meant rethinking Zelda, especially when I found her replies to the letters my father had written to her. From them, I learned that there had been another side to my

grandmother's seemingly glamorous life during my childhood. When I was growing up, she was a published author but also a penniless one, reduced to begging for financial support from her son. She worried when he became fascinated with Judaism, fearing that her own father's Orthodox genes might be reasserting themselves. Putting the two sides of the correspondence together, I realized I was looking at the long and arduous process by which an adult child tried to come to terms with a difficult parent. It's certainly an experience I can relate to.

As I gather more of my father's and grandmother's papers, I am learning more about both of them. Will I become their biographer? Probably not: I have my own scholarly interests, which for the moment have come to center on a new subject far removed from my family past, namely, the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s. Will I nevertheless share some of what I have learned by combining family history with the methods of professional scholarship? I certainly hope so. I think my academic training allows me to make sense out of these family documents in a way that I wouldn't be able to do otherwise. Will the results matter to scholars of Jewish studies? I think they should. I don't think it's just family pride that makes me believe that the lives of Zelda Popkin and Richard Popkin illuminate some important issues in twentieth-century Jewish life. And will these be academic projects like the others I engage myself in? Obviously not! My grandmother and my father are too close to me; among other things, thinking about their own complicated ways of being Jewish necessarily makes me think about my own struggles with Jewish identity. Jewish history, family history, autobiography: in this case, they are all part of the same project.

. . . JEWISH HISTORY, FAMILY HISTORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY: IN THIS CASE, THEY ARE ALL PART OF THE SAME PROJECT.

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