

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

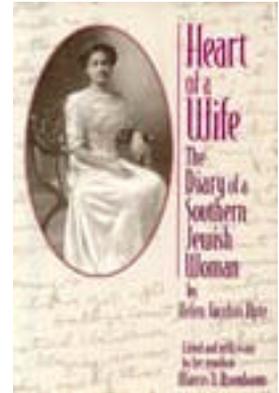
by Helen Jacobus Apte  
Marcus D. Rosenbaum, *ed.*

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### **About This Book**

*The Heart of A Wife: The Diary of A Southern Jewish Woman* was written as a personal account and not intended for public consumption. Discovered by her grandson, Marcus Rosenbaum, who edited the published version of the diary, Helen Jacobus Apte's dramatic and emotionally revealing account of her life as a Jewish wife and mother in Atlanta, Georgia, offers an extraordinarily rich resource for understanding the lives of Southern Jewish women during the first half of the twentieth century.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. One of the accompanying essays in the book posits the concept that Classical Reform Judaism may have saved Judaism in America in the late nineteenth century because it allowed its adherents to be Americans and Jews at the same time—without giving up anything. Do you agree or disagree? The Introduction claims that although much of the diary is not identifiably Jewish, in truth "everything in [the diary] is Jewish." Do you agree or disagree with that assessment? Why?
2. Why do you think Helen's attitude toward prayer changes over the course of her life? Did Helen think she had to believe in God to be Jewish? Do you?
3. Helen celebrates the "housekeeper task," calling the woman "the core of her home." She also takes pride as a "woman in Israel." Were these two roles compatible for her? Why? How does her view compare with yours?
4. Helen's heart swells with pride when the band strikes up "Dixie." By contrast, she positively hates St. Louis. What is it that attracts her to the South? What makes her dislike St. Louis so passionately? Do you find this understandable — or strange? Have you ever felt this attached to a place? If so, what made you feel this way, and how does that compare with the way Helen felt about the South?
5. How did health care change in America from the time Helen was born in 1886 to today? Is that what made life seem to be so much more difficult then, or was it something else? How about obstetric

care? What did Helen experience — or endure — in pregnancy and childbirth that differs from today? Despite these differences, Helen's attitudes toward doctors and her confidence in the science of medicine seem remarkably similar to ours today. Why do you think that's the case?

6. "Mother-love" is an important theme of Helen's diary, both in terms of her feelings for her own mother and her daughter. If 10 represents a perfect mother-daughter relationship, and 1 represents the worst such relationship, where on the scale would you put Helen's and Alice's relationship? Was Helen a good mother? How does she compare as a mother with her mother? Has the notion of "good mother" changed over time? If so, how?

7. If Helen had been born 50 or 60 years later, she most likely would have been a professional writer. How would this have changed her life — and the way she saw the world? What would her life have gained if she had been a professional writer? What would it have lost? Would she have been happier?

8. Is reading too much as bad as watching too much TV? (Don't answer too quickly; think about the way Helen romanticized life.)

9. When she starts the second book of her diary, Helen writes that she wants to create a record of the "momentous times" in which she lives. She says she will make this second book less personal, and certainly she does. But world events and personal events coincide in both books of her diary. As you think about each of these world events, compare and contrast the similar and different ways that each one affected Helen's life. (a) Halley's Comet. (b) World War I. (c) The 1918 influenza epidemic. (d) The Depression. (e) World War II. (f) The death of Franklin Roosevelt.

10. In all her writing about World War II, Helen never mentions the Holocaust. Why do you think that was so?

11. "Decidedly," Helen writes as she approaches her forty-fifth birthday, "I have reached middle age and am not a man-hater!" Indeed, far from it! What was it about Helen that made her so appealing to men? Why were men, as she put it, always "cooing over" her? Most important, did she or didn't she: Did Helen consummate any of her relationships with other men?

12. Would you invite Helen to your house for dinner? If not, why not? If so, who would the other guests be?

### **Critical Essay**

by Marcus D. Rosenbaum, Editor of *Heart of a Wife*

Warning: If your heritage is from the mass Jewish migration of the turn of the century, or if you or your parents grew up in New York (or even in one of the other large centers of Jewish population), you need to prepare yourself for my grandmother. Should you compare her with people in your family, she will seem, well, not just different, but so American for her time.

Actually, she was. And there are a couple of reasons why--where she lived, and how long her family had been in America.

In the 1870s, when my grandmother's parents came to America, there were 200,000 to 250,000 Jews in the United States. They made up only about one-half of 1 percent of the country's population.

About a quarter of American Jews lived in New York City and then, as now, New York had more of everything, including Jews. But back then Jews accounted for only about 3 percent of the city's population.

What a difference half a century can make! By the late 1920s, there were more than four times as many people in the United States as there had been in the 1870s, but there were more than sixteen times as many Jews: America's Jewish population had grown from a few hundred thousand to more than four million. Of course Jews were still a tiny minority in America as a whole, amounting to only 3 ½ percent of the population, but in New York, it was a radically different scene. One out of every four New Yorkers was Jewish, and instead of a quarter of the country's Jews living in the city, now nearly 45 percent did. New York was becoming a very Jewish city, and it clearly was the center of American Jewish life.

### ***Helen Apte's Atlanta***

It's no wonder, then, that when most Americans--and most American Jews-- think of Jews, they think of New York (and perhaps when they think of New York, they think of Jews!). But as much as Helen Jacobus Apte loved New York, it had nothing to do with Helen's sense of her own Jewishness. Helen's Jewishness stemmed from a totally different experience in a totally different place: Atlanta, Georgia. When Helen was growing up, Jews in Atlanta were a tiny minority--only about 2 percent of the population. Some Jewish immigrants were coming to Atlanta during childhood, but that had little impact on Helen's upbringing. For one thing, Helen, who was of German heritage, felt little in common with the Eastern European immigrants and seldom associated with them. Moreover, because many, many Gentiles were pouring into Atlanta, too, the relative proportion of Jews in the city remained constant.

So if Helen seems "too American," remember Helen's Atlanta. Tiny minorities always integrate into the dominant society faster than substantial minorities. It was true then, and it is true today. Compare, for instance, Mexican-Americans who live in Des Moines with Mexican-Americans who live in Los Angeles. In Des Moines you are much less likely to find Mexican-Americans who speak no English and live exclusively among their Mexican-American friends.

### ***The Process of Americanization***

But just as important as Helen's status as a minority--if not more so-- is the fact that Helen was a full second-generation American. Her mother, though not born in America, came here as a child, which made her in Helen's mind (and in her own mind, too, I am sure) significantly more an American than an immigrant. We all know that Americanization occurs over several generations. It is rare that immigrants become fully "Americanized." Often their children do, and nearly always their grandchildren do.

Thus, if your family was part of the great wave of Jewish immigration from 1880-1920, or if it was part of the Jewish immigration around World War II, you should not think of Helen in the same way that you think of your immigrant grandparents or parents. Instead, you should think of Helen's Americanization the way you think of your parent's or your own-- or, if you are an immigrant yourself, of your children's and grandchildren's. When my grandmother wrote in her diary in, say, 1924 at age 38, her family had been on these shores for more than fifty years (and part of her husband's family had been here for seventy-five). So if you want to understand her acculturation, take the date of your family's immigration and add fifty or seventy-five years. Look for someone in her 30s or 40s, and that's the person whose life you should compare with Helen's-- not yours, or your parents', or your grandparents'. That's the person whose Americanization should be your reference. Whatever your

background, I hope you enjoy getting to know my grandmother and learn something from her remarkable life.

## **Additional Resources**

### **On the Web:**

Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston  
(<http://www.cofc.edu/~jhc/>)