

FAMOUS JEWS

When I was a kid in the '30s, one of my favorite activities, along with my friends on Fox Street, was identifying famous Jews. At that time, we were not aware that Hollywood was created by Jews. We knew the big names associated with the movies, but never suspected that the Warner Brothers were Jewish, that Fox or Twentieth Century Fox was Jewish, that Goldwyn and Mayer of MGM were Jewish. If we did, we would have had even more bragging rights.

What we did know was that a lot of actors and actresses were Jewish, and that they had changed their names: John Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, Paul Muni, Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Sylvia Sydney, and later Hedy Lamar, and Danny Kaye, and Lauren Bacall. Of course the Marx Brothers, the Ritz Brothers and the Three Stooges were Jewish. Lots of comedians were Jewish, but at the time I didn't know that George Burns was Jewish. I knew that Fred Allen was not Jewish, but was pleased that he had Mrs. Nussbaum in Allen's Alley, though I was not sure if Minerva Pious was Jewish. What kind of a name is Minerva Pious?

We had only a few sports figures to point to at the time. Hank Greenberg was the greatest, followed by Harry (the Horse) Danning, and Sid Luckman and boxers like Barney Ross, and Max Bear had a Jewish star on his trunks.

There were a few gangsters which we were able to identify: Murder Inc. with ? and Meyer Lansky.

Politicians included Meyer London and Herbert Lehman. Early on, we learned that Mayor Fiorello La Guardia was half-Jewish and spoke Yiddish.

Union leaders—David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman and Alex Rose.

There were a lot of businessmen and bankers who were Jewish, but none of us wanted to claim them. I suspect we were actually ashamed of them. Those who we had heard of like Jacob Schiff were OK.

As kids, we didn't pay much attention to literature. If asked to name a Jewish writer, it would have never occurred to us to say Sholem Aleichem. Writers were Shakespeare, and Dickens, and Tolstoy, and Dumas, and Melville and Mark Twain. We read Barbour and Heyliger and Pease—stories about prep schools and adventure.

We knew very little about music. We were just beginning to become familiar with popular music, and the big bands. The two names that stood out were Benny Goodman and Al Jolson. We had yet to be introduced to jazz or classical music. We knew that there were Jews who played the piano and the violin in concert halls, and heard names like Heifetz and Rubenstein, but they didn't come trippingly off our tongues. We did know that there was a song writer named Irving Berlin who was Jewish, but that was it.