

The Brothers Gershwin and Their Family

George Gershwin was born Yakov Gershvin in Brooklyn, NY in 1898 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Morris and Rose Gershvin. Morris Gershwin (Moishe Gershovitz) migrated to New York City from St. Petersburg, Russia in 1890, perhaps to avoid military service. Rose (Rosa Bruskin), also from St. Petersburg came to New York with her family in 1892. Family members believe they knew each other in St. Petersburg before their migration. They were married in 1895 and had 4 children by 1906: Israel (Ira), Yakov (George), Arthur and Frances.

The Gershwin's may have lived in as many as 28 different New York City locations in the first 21 years of their marriage, including Brooklyn, Harlem and the culturally diverse Lower East Side (Irish, Italian, Greek). With Rose as the household manager, Morris eventually became a successful businessman (bakeries and restaurants) able to provide a middle-class life for his family. The Gershwin family was an assimilated household. George and his siblings attended public school while the family spoke Russian, Yiddish and English in the home. They did not adhere rigidly to their Jewish faith, but picked and chose their obligations. Rose and Morris did not encourage their children to study music, but often enjoyed an Enrico Caruso recording and attended Yiddish theater. They did purchase a second-hand piano for Ira and eventually provided piano lessons for 11-year old George.

Ira (considered the scholar of the family) attended City College as an English major, but quit to work in the family business and was drawn to musical theater. George dropped out of high school, played piano in New York City clubs, and became a "song plugger" for Tin Pan Alley. George's musical education continued as he sought out mentors who would educate and train him in a wide variety of music styles. Perhaps most importantly, the brothers were attentive listeners and observers of the people and music of New York City. These sons of Russian-Jewish immigrants found their American voice. In the late 1910s, Ira and George began collaborating on songs. By the mid-1920s, they had become one of the most celebrated songwriting teams in American music. The Library of Congress Gershwin Prize, named for Ira and George Gershwin, "celebrates the work of an artist whose career reflects lifetime achievement in promoting song as a vehicle of musical expression and cultural understanding."

Based on:

Pollack, Howard. "Gershwin and His Family." *George Gershwin: His Life and Works*. Los Angeles: U of California, 2006. 3-21. Print.