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Helena Bonham Carter—Jewish mother?

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Carter as Esther Reuben

"I had not 'done' Jewish before," Helena Bonham Carter said breezily of why she chose to play a Jewish character in Paul Weiland's semi-autobiographical film, "[Sixty Six](#)."

"So when Paul phoned up and said, 'Will you be my mother?' I said, 'Yes, of course' -- almost for sentimental reasons. My own mum was triumphant, because I'm quite Jewish on her side of the family. My mum's grandmother

was an Austrian Jew called Mitzi Fould-Springer."

"People think of me as so quintessentially English," she added, with a laugh, by phone from the set of "Terminator Salvation" in New Mexico. "But actually I look just like my mum -- [dark-eyed] and very Jewish."

The 42-year-old actress first made a name for herself playing ethereal upper-class heroines in E.M. Forster adaptations, such as "A Room With a View," which typecast her as a corset queen -- something her family found "hilarious," she said. While her paternal great-grandfather was H.H. Asquith, the British prime minister during World War I (and who earned an aristocratic title as a result), her maternal line hails from Jewish Vienna.

Mitzi Fould-Springer left Europe in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, a French treason trial prompted by anti-Semitism, the actress said.

Bonham Carter's grandmother, Helene (a.k.a "Bubbles"), stood by her husband, Spanish diplomat Eduardo Propper de Callejon, as he illegally issued documents to help thousands of Jews flee Vichy France over three frantic days in 1940. "My mother, who was 5 at the time, said he at one point was stamping documents with both hands," Bonham Carter said. "She thought it was the most important thing he ever did in his life."

Yad Vashem honored Propper de Callejon -- who was half-Jewish -- as Righteous Among the Nations in March, as the actress was reprising her role as the mad witch Bellatrix Lestrange on the set of the new "Harry Potter" film.

"My Granny for some reason had made a private pact that if everyone survived the war, she'd convert to Catholicism -- I have no idea why because it makes no logical sense," Bonham Carter said.

But the family wasn't religious, and Bonham Carter grew up in the Jewish neighborhood of Golders Green, not far from Weiland's childhood home.

"My school was 50 or 60 percent Jewish," she said. "And I found Jewish assembly was so much more fun than the Christian one."

"Sixty Six" allowed Bonham Carter to connect to this part of her roots; another draw was "the chance to play a woman who was quite dominant in her family," she said. "That is a universal pattern, but also a very Jewish one, and was definitely the case in my family."

When the actress was 13, her father, a former merchant banker, was paralyzed and partially blinded after an operation to remove a benign brain tumor. Bonham Carter's mother, Elena, a psychotherapist, "had to take over the household -- it was a real test of courage and strength and endurance." The teenage Helena responded to the trauma by securing herself an agent and immersing herself in the fantasy world of acting, which was an escape but "also allowed me to be self-sufficient," she said.

These days, Bonham Carter is best known for starring in the films of her domestic partner, Tim Burton (most recently as Mrs. Lovett, the cannibalistic pie-maker in "Sweeney Todd"). She said she named their 8-month-old daughter, Nell, after "all the Helens in the family."

She plans to introduce Nell and her brother, Billy Ray, 4, to all aspects of their heritage. "I feel quite atavistic in the sense that I want them to know where they come from," she said.

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