

MY LIFE (in summary form)

When I was at City College I heard a story about a professor who required his students to show him their note books at the end of the semester. One student apologized for not having his notebook, explaining that he summarized each class's lectures, and then summarized the summaries, and finally distilled all the summary notes into one word, but unfortunately he forgot the word. The professor angrily exclaimed, "bullshit." Whereupon the student excitedly responded, "that's it!"

As I write my memoirs, I am now going to deviate, and instead of summarizing still another aspect (episode) of my life, I am going to attempt to summarize the summaries and distill them, if not into one word, at least into several pages, something like my resume, but including non-job and education aspects. In our delightful adult education class "Telling Your Story" Irving Schwartz starts each semester with the advice to new members, not to approach their writings with: "I was born in...My parents were...I went to school in...I went to work in...I married...I had children...I moved to...My interests are...etc. Instead, take an episode and describe it. Then put all the episodes together. What Irving says not to do, is what I now intend to do. Sort of like an Executive Summary.

I was born in the Bronx, NY at Hunt's Point Hospital on December 18, 1927. The hospital was on Kelly Street, just a few blocks from where my parents lived, at 566 Beck Street. My mother, Celia Goldstein Schlitt, was 39, which is quite old for a woman to have her first child. Some time later, she told me that it was a difficult delivery, requiring a "forceps." I had no idea what my mother meant. She showed me a slight indentation on the side of my forehead. I assumed the forceps is applied to the head and with a little force the baby is brought forth.

My mother had been "a cloak finisher," before marrying my father, Louis Schlitt, in 1916. Her story in summary form: Celia Goldstein was born in Vaslui Romania on November 3, 1888. She was one of three children: a brother, Meilich, and a sister Surah Leah. I have no idea what her father did to provide for his family, but they were poor, and since Jews had to pay to send children to school, girls didn't go to school. Instead, my mother was apprenticed to a tailor when she was six. She learned to sew, but never learned to read or write—not Romanian, not Yiddish, which of course was her first language.

At 16, she left Vaslui with a group called "feesgayers" (feet-gowers), underwritten by the French-Jewish charity, Alliance Israelite, and walked across Europe to a port where they boarded boats for the new world. My mother found her way to Toronto where she had the address of Dora Aaron, the sister of Hersh Leib, the husband of my mother's sister. She found work as an alteration tailor at Eaton's department store. When asked to work on Saturday, she refused, left Toronto, made her way to Pittsburgh and from there to New York. My mother found an apartment with "landsleit" the Nerensteins, worked in the sweatshops, took part in the 1910 cloakmakers strike, became active in Local 9 of the

ILGWU, was elected shop chairlady, learned to read Yiddish, and fell in love with the Yiddish theatre and the Yiddish writers and poets of the time.

In 1914, my mother sent money to her sister so that she and her husband and their family could come to America. They made it as far as France, World War I broke out, and they settled in Paris. How my parents met, I do not know. In 1916 they married, left the lower East Side for Harlem, then moved to the Bronx. My father was a buyer and seller of odd lot men's clothing. He came from Kishinev, also as a teenager, leaving a large family behind. (One of his brothers went to Palestine before World War I, returned after the war and persuaded several brothers and sisters and his parents to return to Palestine with him. He was one of the founders of the Kibbutz Ayelet Hashachar.

With the 1929 depression, my father was unable to make a living, my mother had been out of the shop since they were married, and could not have gotten work anyway. My father died of a heart attack on June 30, 1931, leaving my mother penniless. A few years later, we moved to a smaller apartment a few blocks away on Fox Street. My mother was unable to find work, we were on relief, and I started school. By the late '30s, my mother found work with a WPA sewing project, and with America's entry into World War II, she was able to get back into the shop, first a shop in which she had previously worked, in the Bronx, then downtown, which meant the rush hour subways, which was much harder for her.

I was mostly oblivious to all the hardship. Embarrassed by the fact that I did not have a father, where everyone else did, I tried to keep it my secret. I could not keep the fact that we were poor a secret. I liked school: both PS 62, and JHS 52, where I met the friends who I remained close to for the rest of my life: Sol Rauch, Bob Epstein, Phil Bernstein and Mel Schulman. As I write this, Sol and Mel are gone, and Phil most likely has Alzheimer's. We all went on to Stuyvesant HS (except Sol) and to CCNY. Sid Stern and Alex Roth followed six months later.

Initially, I was going to be a high school social studies teacher, but then I started thinking about working for a union, and in 1950, the ILGWU began its yearlong Training Institute. I applied, was accepted, and was on a trajectory that shaped the rest of my life. At the same time, I was dating, friends were getting married, I was caught up in a social, cultural, political world.

When I was organizing in Cleveland, as part of the Training Institute's field program, I received word that my mother died. It was March 12, 1951. I was stunned, in a state of shock. I returned home and with the help of my cousin Louis, arranged for the funeral. In my mother's will, she requested that her body be given to a medical school and then cremated. I called medical schools. None wanted it. After the funeral, we went ahead with the cremation. I divided the ashes in two, and placed half on my father's grave. The other half remained in my desk drawer, until 1975, when I went to Israel for the first time. Visiting Israel was my mother's dream. I took the ashes, and wherever I went, I sprinkled my mother's ashes: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ayelet Hashachar, Galilee, Beersheva, Ashkelon.

In April 1951, alone in the apartment that I had shared with my mother since I was five, I paid a visit to Sylvia Feig who lived a few blocks away. I was attracted to her when we first met, but I considered her Phil's girl friend. Now that Phil was married, I guessed it was all right for me to ask her out. We started dating. I was winding up at the Training Institute. I was also completing a Master's in Education at CCNY. I was also going to be eligible for the draft, now that I could no longer get an education deferment. Come the summer of 1951, Sylvia went off the Camp Wel Met as a counselor, and I decided to try to keep out of the army by getting a job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. I taught academic subject in their apprenticeship program. At the end of July, I visited Sylvia and learned that they needed a counselor for the last month. Since my Navy Yard job was not keeping me out of the Army, I quit, and became a counselor to be with Sylvia.

When we returned to New York, I applied to the PhD. Program in Labor Economics at NYU, and was accepted, (which kept me out of the Army. I then went to the ILGWU and asked for a job as an organizer in New York, and was also accepted. I then asked Sylvia to marry me. And she accepted me.

On December 22, 1951, Sylvia and I were married in the study of Rabbi Israel Miller in the Bronx. We found him in the Yellow Pages. Our friends and a few young relatives joined us to make a Minyan, and after the knot was tied, we went to my apartment, (which had become our apartment), to celebrate. We also dropped in on Sylvia's folks who had made a small party to celebrate the occasion. The next two and a half years were very hectic. Sylvia and I were both working, but I was also carrying 12 credits at NYU, which kept me out of the army. By the spring of 1954, I realized I couldn't continue. I had gotten a few incompletes, and realized I was not doing justice to my work, my school and my marriage. I withdrew from NYU and notified my draft board. I was drafted on June 1, 1954.

My army experience was actually pleasant. The Korean conflict was over, and though I was among the oldest recruits, I managed to keep up with them during my eight weeks of basic training at Fort Dix, NJ. The army really didn't know what to do with me. I was finally assigned to Fort Rucker in Alabama as an Information and Education NCO, but my real duties were as the mail clerk. I found an apartment off post, bought a car, and Sylvia came down to join me. However in less than two months I was reassigned to Camp Gordon, Georgia as a statistical clerk in the Southeastern Signal School. We packed our belonging in the newly purchased used car, and drove very carefully to Augusta. (I had failed the Alabama driving test.) We found an apartment, and spent the next 18 months living comfortably in our cozy apartment in Myrtle Court, surrounded by other army families. Sylvia found a job on post as a clerk with a Colonel in the Military Police, and on October 12, 1955, our daughter Carol was born. I liked my job, Sylvia liked her job, and we both loved our new baby. She was beautiful, had red hair and a wonderful disposition. Though I liked our setup, I preferred civilian life, and managed to get an early release, by reenrolling at NYU for the spring semester.

Back to New York and our Fox Street apartment. And the same routine which I had left. I went to work for Local 99 of the ILGWU, and was attending class, but after the first semester, I left. I also left Local 99 after six months, and while looking for work with another union, I was offered, and accepted a job with the Jewish Labor Committee. The following year we found a beautiful apartment in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. From 1956 to 1962, I worked for the JLC in what I have been calling the happiest years of my work life. I learned a lot; I did a lot; I made good friends; I had a feeling of accomplishment. And from 1957 to the end of 1964, we lived at 960 Sterling Place and also made good friends and did a lot, and had two more wonderful children: Lewis, born on June 7, 1958, and Martha, born July 27, 1962.

In 1962, I went to work for the Amalgamated Laundry Workers as their education director, back in the "labor movement." The job included shop steward classes, editing the newspaper, working with the NYC AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, establishing a scholarship program for members' children, political action, and after work in the spring and early summer of 1963, volunteering to help organize the August 28 March on Washington. Toward the end of 1964, Jerry Wurf, newly elected president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, asked me if I would like to be AFSCME's education director. I talked it over with Sylvia, she said yes, and in December, we moved to Washington, DC.

We rented a house, then bought one in the Shepard Park section of DC. The kids went to the Shepard School, a big step up from PS 138 in Brooklyn. We became part of Neighbors Incorporated, the community organization working to keep the neighborhood integrated. The job was a challenge, and a few months after I started, Jerry hired someone (Elwood Taub) to be the Director of Education and Research, and I became Assistant Director. Elwood and I did not get on, and after a few more months, I started looking for another job. Being in DC, the place to look was the Federal Government, and the logical agency, based on my job history, was the newly formed Equal Employment Agency Commission. My efforts proved fruitless, but thanks to a friend who had a friend at the US Commission on Civil Rights, I submitted my application, was interviewed and was hired in the fall of 1965.

It was an exciting time to be in Washington, and to be involved in civil rights. We defined our role at the Commission as "making the bullets for the Indians." Ours was a fact-finding agency, and the Field Services Division, of which I was a part, undertook investigations and held hearings dealing with all aspects of civil rights, and "the denial of equal protection of the laws." I was initially assigned to be the Northeast field representative, then director of technical assistance, and next, director of the Mid-Atlantic field office.

During this period, I was involved in organizing a union at the Commission, leading an opposition caucus in District 14 of the American Federation of Government Employees, participating in Labor for Peace and opposing our involvement in Viet Nam, assisting, and raising money for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Poor People's Campaign, serving as Social Action Chairman of the DC Jewish Community

Relations Council, opposing Soviet anti-Semitism, helping the grape boycott, and raising money for the Jewish Daily Forward. I continued my membership in both the Jewish Labor Committee and the Workmen's Circle, and was involved in Jews for Urban Justice. It was a busy time as well as an exciting time.

However, by 1971, our marriage of 20 years was on shaky ground. In June, Lewis had his Bar Mitzvah, but by the fall, Sylvia made it clear that she wanted a divorce. We talked, but Sylvia had made up her mind. We found lawyers to draft a separation agreement, I found an apartment in downtown Washington, and in February 1972, the marriage ended. It was very painful. I blamed myself for not making our marriage work. It turned out not to be the end of the world. There were other women, and I saw my children regularly, and we took vacations together. I took pride in their accomplishments.

My job was a source of great satisfaction. The Commission was a respected agency. Its reports to the President and Congress were instrumental in shaping legislation. Our budget increased, and in 1979, new field offices were opened up, including one in Boston. I felt it was no longer essential that I be in Washington for my kids. Carol had graduated from Oberlin, Lewis had gone to Wesleyan, but left after two years, and Martha was winding up at Wilson High School and would be going to Barnard. I put in for the Boston regional office, and was finally selected. After 14 years, I left Washington.

Starting a new adventure: I set up the New England Regional Office, hired staff, got to know the members of the various State Advisory Committees, and the civil rights leadership in each of the six States. I found an apartment in the Back Bay, connected with a few old friends who lived in Boston and New England, and looked around for new friends, one of whom happened to be a young woman who had worked for the Jewish Labor Committee, named Fran Morrill. I joined the Greater Boston Jewish Community Relations Council, transferred my membership from the Washington to the Boston Workmen's Circle, and kept the JLC office going when it was between directors.

By 1980, everything was falling into place. The office was running smoothly, and Fran and I were seeing a great deal of each other. She introduced me to her friends and Martha's Vineyard. I introduced her to my friends. She already knew New York. In the spring of 1981, Fran shared with me an interesting piece of news: she was pregnant. After the shock, my reaction was one of joy and excitement. We would marry and start a life together. I loved her; I believe she loved me. What a wonderful state of affairs. A beautiful wedding took place on July 26, 1981, with all our friends and family, followed by a honeymoon in Maine. And then back to work.

What I didn't anticipate was the impact on the Commission of Ronald Reagan's election. The agency went blithely along, remembering that previous Administration changes did not affect us. Not this time. Reagan's people wanted to turn back the clock, especially with regard to Affirmative Action, and bilingual education, which the Commission supported. They brought in new Commissioners, a new Chairman and a new Staff

Director. They pressured the Regional Offices to put more conservative members on the Advisory Committees. They wanted studies which would “reevaluate” civil rights programs. The job became one of fighting a rear guard action, trying not to do what they wanted. In 1986, the Commission’s budget was cut in half, and seven of the 10 Commission regional offices were eliminated, including mine. I retired with a nice pension, and started looking for another job.

I was lucky. I found a beauty: I was appointed by Governor Dukakis as a Member of the Board of Review of the Department of Employment and Training. The Board was the appellate body with regard to unemployment insurance appeals. Board members serve six year terms, but I was filling out the remaining four years of a member who retired, and my effort to get reappointed fell on deaf ears. Dukakis was no longer Governor. In his place, a Republican, William Weld, was elected. It was a great job and I was sorry to have lost it, but I managed to stay on for another three and a half years at the Board as an Administrator. With more budget cuts, this too came to an end. More job hunting, and, at the age of 67, I came up with a job as Inspector with the Attorney General’s Fair Labor and Business Practices Division. You can get a pension and health benefits if you work for the State for 10 years, so I put in two and a half years with Fair Labor and retired.

At home, our son David was born on November 4, 1981, two days short of Fran’s 46th birthday. What a wonderful gift! We couldn’t have been happier. Of course, strangers seeing me with my son, assumed he was my grandson. He was bright, handsome, had a wonderful disposition. David went to the JCC pre-school, then to Solomon Schechter Day School. It wasn’t necessary for us to make a statement in support of integrated education. Brookline wasn’t Brooklyn or Washington DC. From Schechter, David went on to Brookline High School and then to Columbia. At 15 ½ he accompanied me to Romania and Kishinev. Since this is summarizing MY life, I won’t go into detail about David’s activities during high school, college and post college, nor will I mention his graduate work at the University of Michigan.

Having retired, I continued my activity with the JLC, the Workmen’s Circle and the JCRC. I took classes at Boston University as part of their Evergreen program, especially sculpting. I continued to write poems for all kinds of occasions, my friend Bob observing that it makes me an occasional poet. I continued planning reunions—a 50th Reunion for the members of the class of 1951 ILGWU Training Institute. (I had previously organized a 25th Reunion.) And I put together a three generation weekend of our Reading Out Loud group.

In April 2007, Fran was diagnosed with lung cancer, and this has dominated our lives. Surgery, radiation, chemo, loss of hair, and a year later, loss of hearing. Fatigue, sweating, problems walking, and something called “chemo brain” which accounts for the frequent forgetfulness. Fran lives from six month check-up to six month check-up.

I am in surprisingly good health for an old man. Some years ago, there was concern about my heart and I was prescribed a beta blocker. More recently, there was concern about my prostate and I was prescribed something called finasteride which is supposed to

shrink my prostate. I've had arthritis in my knees and had knee replacement in my right knee, the first time I had been in a hospital for any length of time. I now set off the alarm going through security at the airport. I was recently diagnosed with "severe neuropathy" which supposedly explains my problems walking.

Fran and I went to Spain and France for six weeks in April and May, 2010. Despite our limitations, we visited Madrid and Barcelona and then family in St. Genis near the Spanish border, drove through Provence, ending up in Berre les Alpes to see more family, and leaving from Nice. About my French family: they are the grandchildren and great grandchildren of my mother's sister who went from Vaslui to Paris with her husband and small children in 1914. My long lost cousins.

I always felt an absence of family. When I was little, there were the Goldsteins in the Bronx, and when I was 11, I discovered the Schlitts in Astoria, and when I was 45, I found the Schlitts in Israel. However, I was fortunate to have been able to make my own family. With Sylvia: Carol, Lewis, and Martha. And their spouses and children. With Fran: David. I have been blessed.

What also has become my family were the friends that formed "Reading Out Loud," when we were in college. This is the second decade of the 21st century. We started out as seven couples more than 60 years ago, and are now four couples, one of whom is confined to an assisted living facility, and two widows. We all will keep going as best we can. I will keep writing, keep attending meetings, keep being involved, keep reading.