

A MONUMENT FOR MY PARENTS

My father died June 30, 1931. I was 3½ years old. I have no memory of my father, no memory of his funeral, no memory of the monument marking his grave, and no idea if my mother ever visited his grave. What I did know was that my mother felt that she had been denied the money due her from the insurance policy he had with the Farband, The Jewish National Workers Alliance.

After my mother died in 1951, I found the papers related to my father's death—his death certificate, and the location of his grave in Montefiore Cemetery in St. Albans. He was #35431, buried in the "land of New York Branches, Cemetery Committee, Jewish National Workers Alliance, Grave 1, Block 52, Row 10R, Gate 476/N." I made my first trip to his grave on the anniversary of his death, 20 years later.

I was very moved to see the gravestone with my father's name LOUIS SCHLITT. Beneath his name was inscribed "Died June 30, 1931 Age 47 Years Husband and Father." And in Hebrew "Eliezer Son of Isaac 16 Tammuz May His Soul be Inscribed in the Book of Life." I was surprised at how small the monument was, but then I realized it was the depression and my mother didn't have very much money. I stood there for a long time. I said Kaddish and thought about what my life might have been like if he had lived. And I thought about my mother who had asked in her will that she be cremated. I then took some of my mother's ashes and scattered them on my father's grave, symbolically, rejoining them.

Over the next 14 years, I made it back to his grave whenever I could. And just as my mother may have gone to visit his grave without me, I went to visit my father's grave without anyone, not my wife, nor my children. In 1965, we left New York, but whenever we returned, I tried to get to the cemetery.

More years passed. However, in anticipation of my retirement in 1997, my thoughts returned to my parents, and to two ideas that I had been formulating: visiting their birthplaces, and replacing my father's gravestone with one that mentions my mother.

How do I place a gravestone marking my mother's grave when there is no grave? I first called the cemetery to find out if it is possible to replace a gravestone. I was told that it was, but I first had to get permission from the organization that owns the plot: The Jewish National Workers Alliance. I was afraid that they no longer existed, but someone answered the phone when I called. They were still around. I requested permission, and in September, 1997, I received a "Monument Permit" to replace the old monument with a new monument. I had taken the first step.

Checking the yellow pages for monument makers, I found Phil Madonick Monuments on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. I called him and explained what I wanted. He assured me that it is doable. He went to the gravesite and determined that "a larger monument would be more appropriate," one that would be five feet high on a one foot base. Mr. Madonick sent me a contract, which I signed and sent back. I mentioned that I would

like to memorialize my mother, but he made it clear that one could not say anything that suggests that someone is buried there when they are not.

I spent weeks thinking about how to word the inscription. I was replacing the monument, not because it was too small or because the old inscription was hard to read, but because I wanted my mother's name on the gravestone. Her ashes were there. I wanted her name there. And I wanted the inscription to describe her qualities, and her life. The words I came up with included: courageous, committed, selfless, unbowed, hard-working. I wanted to describe how hard her life had been, but there is just so much one can say. And I wanted to say it in Yiddish, my mother's language, "mamaloshn."

How do I get my mother's name on the stone? By following my father's name, in English and Hebrew, with my mother's name in large letters in English, preceded by the phrase "Beloved Husband of." Her name was followed, in Hebrew, with her name and the dates of her birth and death.

The inscription concluded in Yiddish: "Zayere Lebns Zeynen Gevayn Tsu Kurtz, Tsu Shver" "Arbeter Far Sholom un a Besere Velt." "Their Lives Were Too Short, Too hard" "Workers for Peace and a Better World" I believe my mother would have agreed.

4-21-13