

MORRIS AND ME

Over the years, I have met a lot of people in connection with my work. And as Mel Brooks observed, “the famous and the infamous.” (I used to say “the great and the near great.”) There were labor leaders, civil rights leaders, Jewish community leaders, political leaders. And as I write my memoirs, I will be writing about many of them. I think it’s called name-dropping.

Now: my relationship with Morris Abram. I became aware of him in 1963 when he was named president of the American Jewish Committee. Abram was a prominent lawyer with a prominent law firm: Paul Weiss Rifkind Wharton and Garrison. Having worked at the JLC, and having participated in the annual meetings of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, where lay leaders play an important role, I was familiar with the type: usually a rich and successful businessman or lawyer, looking for “kavod,” They are generally committed to the organization but want more prominence: another title—president, chairman, executive board member. It is often mutually beneficial. The Jewish organization gets a big name, and the big name gets another big title. A win-win situation. If the organization is lucky, the big name may also have a big brain and may really provide ideas and leadership, in addition to money and prestige.

So that is the way I sized up Morris: a successful lawyer looking for kavod. He served as president of AJ Committee for five years, and was ready to move on. He practiced law as well. These guys can do two or three things at the same time, and for Morris, that included dabbling in State, national and international politics. The next I heard about Morris was in 1968; he had been named president of Brandeis University. Not bad. Except that the timing was bad. The black students were demonstrating, and Morris couldn’t handle it. He left two years later, and went back to Paul Weiss. Though I have yet to meet him, I felt I knew him pretty well.

The ‘70s whizzed by for me, and in 1979, I moved to Boston to be the director of the New England Regional Office of the US Civil Rights Commission. In 1981, Fran (a Brandeis graduate) and I marry, and Martha is attending Barnard. Which brings us to 1982.

It took Ronald Reagan almost two years before he undertook to turn back the clock at the Civil Rights Commission. He got rid of several liberal Commissioners and the Staff Director. Fortunately, he couldn’t fire regional directors and other staff with Civil Service protection. Our new leaders were to be Clarence Pendleton as Chairman, Morris Abram as Vice Chairman, and Linda Chavez, staff director. Soon after they were appointed, a meeting was arranged between the Commissioners and the senior staff, so that we could get to know one another. It started with a cocktail party. The tension, coldness, and enmity, were palpable. Liberal staff, resentful; conservative Commissioners, distrustful.

I decided to use the occasion to make a friend of Morris. In preparation for the meeting, I found a copy of his autobiography, “The Day is Short” (which was being remaindered),

and read it through. I was astounded to learn that his father came from the same town in Romania as my mother, Vaslui. That makes us “landsleit.” In addition, he had a son at Columbia, and my daughter was at Barnard. That makes us parents of children going to practically the same school. On top of that, he had been the president of Brandeis, and Fran was a graduate of Brandeis. And finally, he had been president of AJ Committee, and I had been on the staff of the Jewish Labor Committee. Fantastic! What a series of coincidences! Unfortunately, it was not enough to overcome his hostility to someone he philosophically, politically and ideologically opposed. When I finally cornered him, and explained to him how we were practically brothers, he couldn’t have cared less. I didn’t get a rise out of him. And over the next four years, our relationship did not improve. The resentment was mutual, even though we both were involved in fighting for Soviet Jewry. Morris was named Chairman of the National Conference of Soviet Jewry in 1983, and I walked picket lines and demonstrated as a member of the Jewish community. In 1986, my office was eliminated, and our relationship came to an end. Until 10 years later.

In 1996, I was beginning to make plans for a trip to Vaslui and Kishinev to visit my mother’s and father’s birthplaces. I remembered that Morris Abram’s father was from Vaslui, and he had written in his autobiography about visiting the city and his father’s family in 1964. I decided to write to him. But where? I called Paul Weiss and learned that since 1993, he has been the Chairman of United Nations Watch in Geneva. In November, 1996, I wrote to Morris in Geneva, telling him of my plans, reminding him of our “relationship” and asking him for guidance. Six days later, I received his reply: “I was so glad to have your letter of November 6 and to know of your upcoming trip to Vaslui. I regret that most of my family has left Romania for Israel but I shall inquire as to whether there is any left in and around Vaslui and let you know. Meanwhile let’s keep in touch.”

Wow! This was a very different Morris Abram than the one I knew 10 years before. And true to his word, on November 28, he wrote: “It seems I do have relatives in Vaslui as per the letter from my Romanian relatives now in Israel, Dr. Jack Feldstein...I am enclosing Feldstein’s letter to me so that you can follow-up.” Dr. Feldstein wrote to Morris that “...Edith (our daughter) and Morel Barad (her husband) ...will be to airport by Bucharest...with a placard with the name Mr. Schlitt...and Otto will be in Vaslui.” Thanks to Morris, our trip to Romania was transformed. We had people in Bucharest and Vaslui, and Dr. Feldstein and his wife, in Haifa, arranged to visit their daughter at the same time David and I were visiting Bucharest.

Everything was falling into place. In July 1997, I wrote to Morris describing our itinerary, and thanking him again. We arrived in Bucharest on August 21, were met by Morris’ cousins, enjoyed getting to know them, and loved our time together, speaking English, Yiddish, Romanian and Hebrew. When I returned, I wrote to Morris, described our visit and sent him photographs of his family. His handwritten reply dated September 29: “It was really thoughtful of you and delightful to me to have yours of the 18th with news of your visit with my relatives and the photos...We shall try to spend time at Cape Cod, so let’s stay in touch.” I responded, mentioning that it was in Yiddish that I communicated with Otto and with Jack Feldstein, and he answered in December, “How I

wish I knew Yiddish. My father repressed it, married as he was to the granddaughter of one of the first Reformed Rabbis... I shall not be at the Cape before spring, but we would be delighted to have you and Fran visit us when we can meet there.”

Unfortunately, we didn’t get together. Morris died two years later, at the age of 82. Though I wasn’t in his class, I am sorry that our time together at the Civil Rights Commission was so confrontational, both of us, so self-righteous. We managed to put it behind us 10 years later.

August 21, 2010