

DISCOVERING RELATIVES

What do you do when you discover foreign relatives you never knew you had? You get excited. You visit them. Then you write to them. Then you gradually stop writing to them, and they stop writing to you. And you are back to where you began.

This has happened twice. In 1973, I learned that I had a lot of family in Israel. Seems that my father had a brother who went to Palestine several years after my father left for the United States. I don't know if my father corresponded with the family in Kishinev. I do know that he helped one of his brother's sons come to America in the early 20s. His name was Henry Schlitt. My mother called him Chaim, so that is what I called him. His wife Dora called him Yefim, which must be Russian for Henry.

Chaim corresponded with the family in Kishinev. In June 1926, they had a son named Gabriel. In December 1927, I was born, and in July 1932, Henry and Dora had another son, Robert. They lived in the same apartment house in which my parents lived. Apparently, there was a serious disagreement between the two families, (most likely between the two men) because Chaim and his family moved out and found an apartment in Astoria. There was no more contact between the two families. Growing up, I did not know that they existed. However, when you discover relatives you never knew existed, and they live in New York, you get very excited, and hang on to them. What follows are three stories. The first is about my American cousins, next, about my Israeli cousins, and finally, my French cousins.

The first discovery: Thank God for Bar Mitzvahs. I am convinced that it was only because Gabie was to have his Bar Mitzvah, that Chaim decided to "let bygones be bygones" and invite his aunt, my mother, and her son, his closest relatives, to this important event. As I said, up to the moment that the invitation arrived, I did not know they existed. I have relived that moment dozens of times, when I removed the invitation from our mailbox, when I saw the return address: Henry Schlitt 3611 31st Avenue, Astoria, NY, and when I rushed upstairs, and handed the envelope to my mother.

Who is Henry Schlitt? Are there really people around with the same last name as us? My mother opened the envelope. It contained a printed invitation that read, "Mr, and Mrs, Henry Schlitt request the honor of your presence at the Bar Mitzvah of their son Gabriel..." I kept asking my mother who they were. She said that Henry was the son of a brother of my father's. Nothing more. Why didn't I know about them? She did not answer. There was a reply card. We filled it out and returned it, indicating that we would attend.

I asked my mother if my father had any other brothers and sisters. She said he did, but we had lost touch with them. I believe it was then that she said that my father had a brother who went to Palestine and lived on a kibbutz, but he was killed when Arabs attacked the kibbutz. (More about that later.)

We went to the Bar Mitzvah. It was my first meeting with my cousins. My cousins! It was also my first visit to Queens. The synagogue was as impressive as mine. There was a large congregation. Gabie was very handsome, and did a first rate job on his Haftorah, and his speech. Henry and Dora were very proud, and my kid cousin Bobby was very cute. Chaim looked like the pictures of my father, round-faced and serious. It was also the first time my mother had seen them since they moved away, almost ten years before.