

My Father's 83rd Yahrtseyt

My father died on June 30, 1931. That is a long time ago. Whenever I was asked about my father, I said that he died in 1931, that I was 3 ½, and that I don't have any memory of him. My mother told me very little. Somewhere along the way, I learned that he sold odd lots of men's clothing to retailers. A funny way to make a living. You go to manufacturers after the season, and buy left-over garments that the manufacturer was unable to sell, and you sell it to retailers.

My father looked like a dapper dresser, from the few pictures I have of him. I have no idea what brought my mother and father together: mutual friends, a matchmaker. I get a kick out of people who ask Fran and me how we met. I love to tell the story. When I do, and Fran is there, she sometimes looks annoyed. Is it because we might not have married if she had not become pregnant? That certainly is not why my mother and father married. I was born 11 years after.

I know my mother's birthday—November 3, 1888—and the day she died—March 12, 1951, but I don't know my father's birthday, though I could look it up. But I always knew the day he died. I suspect my mother wanted me to say Kaddish for him as soon as I learned how to say Kaddish. And to say Yizkor for him as well. Jewish tradition is something. It builds in rituals which cause people to be remembered. Do other religions have a concept similar to Yahrtseyt? I would guess so. America has Memorial Day where we remember the dead from the Civil War on.

And on this, the 83rd anniversary of my father's death, and since I did not say Kaddish, I am writing this. (I will say Kaddish before the evening is out, though it really won't count among purists, since it should be said in a minyan.) There is Yiddish joke where a man who has Yahrtseyt, goes to shul but there is no minyan. He goes outside to find a Jew (the 10th man) and he finds someone and explains he has yahrtseyt, and the man in a hurry replies, "Du host yahrtseyt. Ikh hub nisht a minut tseyt. Of course, the joke depends on one knowing the other meaning of yahrtseyt—"a year's time."

So since it is the anniversary of my father's death, I also try to think about him. Reading the words at Yizkor, I always feel uncomfortable because it says I am giving charity in his memory, and I don't. Also it talks about the good deeds he did, and I really don't know if he did any good deeds. And his aspirations for me, and what he taught me, and I have no idea if he had any aspirations for me, and I have no idea if he taught me anything.

My values, I received from my mother. I have been through my mother's papers and they revealed that there were times that my father had made her unhappy. One time he took off, and she had no idea where he went. My father did not write to her when she visited her sister in Paris in 1926. She did say to me that the years between 1916 and 1931 were the only happy years of her life, which I found very troubling. During that period, she was then a lady of leisure, went to night school, went to auctions and bought lovely things, went to the Yiddish theatre, and in 1927, she had a baby.

Among the few papers that my father left, were receipts and statements involving the selling of the odd lots of men's clothing, a few pictures, dues statements from the Farband (the Jewish National Workers' Alliance) and what really surprised me, a membership card in the neighborhood Republican Club. I have the impression that he was "one of the boys." He dropped by the clubhouse, had a drink, smoked, played cards. That did not make my mother happy, and I assume she believed that led to the heart attack at 47.

What my father did leave me was his family—other Schlitts. Initially, Chaim and Dora and Gabie and Bobby. Then family in Israel, and a sense of connectedness with Kishinev, and a remarkable group of people, his parents and some of his brothers and sisters who made aliyah, after World War I and settled all over pre-state Israel: Kibbutz Ayelet Hashachar, Haifa, Tel Aviv, etc. Also cousins who are now in Los Angeles.

Funny thing about family. It is very tenuous. If you don't work at it, if you don't maintain contact, if you don't use it, you lose it. I found my father's Israeli family, and I found my mother's French family, and I am afraid if I don't maintain contact, I may lose them. Something else I have to do. Or pass on to my children to do. How much can I do at 86? At least, right now, I can say Kaddish.

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