

## Cousin Robert

For years, during the '80s and '90s, while watching television, I would see the name Robert Schlitt among the writing credits. The programs ranged from sitcoms to Westerns to mysteries. It was a kick to see the name "Schlitt" on the screen. The thought occurred to me that we might be related, but I didn't pursue it.

About five years ago, my daughter Martha, was at her desk at the San Francisco Art Institute, when she received a phone call from a parent of an Art Institute student. Hearing her name, he asked. "Are you related to Robert Schlitt, the TV writer?" "I don't believe so," she answered. "It is an unusual name, and I wouldn't be surprised if you are related," he continued. He explained that he is a friend of Robert Schlitt and gave Martha Robert's phone number. Martha called me, told me about the conversation, and passed the phone number on to me.

One evening, some weeks later, I called the number. Robert Schlitt answered. I explained to him that I am Jacob Schlitt and told him how I got his number. (I suspect it is hard to get the phone numbers of Hollywood types—whether they are actors, directors or writers.) I got straight to the point: Are we related? I proceeded to tell him everything I knew about my father and his family, which wasn't very much.

My father was born in Kishinev, Bessarabia; left his parents and a bunch of brothers and sisters when he came to America in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; brought over his nephew and his nephew's wife in the early '20; part of the Schlitt family went to Palestine after World War I, and part to Moscow in the '30s; my mother thought there was a cousin in Brooklyn, but she lost touch with my father's family after he died in 1931.

Robert told me he knew even less about his family. He knew that his father came from some place in Russia. I pressed him if it was Kishinev, but he didn't know. He did grow up in Brooklyn (aha!), But he didn't know of any other family named Schlitt—not in Queens (where Henry, Dora and their two children lived through the '30s, 40's, and '50s). and not in the Bronx.

We had a pleasant conversation, sharing our life stories up to that time. We had both been in the Army in the '50s, but he had been overseas. He had graduated from Columbia after he got out of the Army. I had graduated from CCNY before getting drafted. He told me about his work, and I told him about mine. He told me about his marriages and divorces, and I told him about mine. We talked about our children, and ended by saying that we will keep in touch.

The following year, Fran and I planned a trip "out West" to San Antonio, Palm Springs, Los Angeles and San Francisco. While I was working out the details, I came across Robert Schlitt's phone number, I felt it was "bashert"—fated—and called him. To my surprise, he was delighted to hear from me. I explained that we were going to be in LA in a couple of weeks and wondered if we could get together. He said he looked forward to

meeting me, and that I should call him the day before I planned to arrive in LA, and we would have lunch.

I had rented a car in Palm Springs, we drove to LA, checked into our hotel and began planning to see the sights. I then called Robert, told him where we were, and he said that he would be at our hotel at 12 noon the next day. I was looking forward to meeting him. Fran slept late that morning, was not feeling well, and chose not to meet Robert. I did some sightseeing, returned to the hotel, and awaited Robert. The call came from the desk. A Mr. Robert Schlitt is downstairs. I rushed down to meet a tall, handsome, prematurely gray man who could be a relative. We looked each other over, didn't know if we should embrace or just shake hands, embraced awkwardly, and left the lobby. He commented that this was the first time that he ever had the occasion to asked for "Schlitt." I had parked my rental car outside the hotel, but Robert, who was driving a Jaguar, insisted that he drive. It was, after all, his city, and he wanted to take me to his favorite "deli" in Hollywood. Off we went. He certainly knew his way around the Freeways. However, his favorite deli was closed, and we decided to return to a Chinese restaurant across the street from my hotel.

The conversation was relaxed. I filled him in on the family in Israel, under the assumption that we are cousins. He was fascinated. He provided me with more information about his life, his work, and his wives and children. I told him more about my children, and that we were going next to San Francisco to see my daughter and her family. It seems as if he was semi-retired, and content. We lingered over the tea. We didn't get any fortune cookies. It was a long and pleasant lunch. We said goodbye and Robert headed back to Hollywood. I headed back to my hotel across the street. I noticed that my rental car had been ticketed. I had been parked in front of the hotel where parking was limited to pick-ups and drop-offs.

When we returned home, I "googled" Robert and read that he was born in Brooklyn in 1933, that his parents were Carl and Dorothy, and that he came to Hollywood in 1965 and wrote the first episodes of "The Monkees." He also wrote for NYPD-Blue, Adam-12, Lou Grant, Hawaii Five-O, Matlock, Mod Squad, Perry Mason and a lot more. I wanted to call him to tell him how much I enjoyed our meeting, but I thought I might be intruding.

Last month, someone told me that they had read that a TV writer named Robert Schlitt had died, and wondered if we were related. I said we were cousins.

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