

## # 14 MY FATHER

My father's name was Louis Schlitt, spelled with two Ts. However, when I was going through some family papers, I found his "Certificate of Naturalization" dated August 1910, signed by him, in which he spelled his name with one T. The document gave his age as 26, his height as five feet five inches and his address as 183 Eldridge Street, Manhattan. All the other papers that I found with his name has Schlitt spelled with 2 T's. He was born in 1884, but I did not find his birth certificate or any other record of his birth date. On my parents' wedding certificate, his Jewish name is Aaron Eliezer. On his gravestone, his name is Eliezer ben Isaac.

He was born in Kishinev in Bessarabia. When he was born, it was part of Russia. After World War I, it became part of Romania. After World War II, Kishinev became the capital of the Soviet republic of Moldavia, and after the break-up of the Soviet Union, it became the capital of the independent state of Moldova. Kishinev became known throughout the world because of the 1903 pogrom. Kishinev is now known as Chisinau. I have begun a search in the US Archives and learned that my father came in 1901.

He died June 30, 1931. I was 3 1/2 years old. When my son David was approaching 3 1/2, I was concerned that a similar fate might befall him. It didn't. Sholem Aleichem has a chapter in his story *Motl the Cantor's Son*, called "It's Good to be an Orphan." People feel sorry for you and are kind. Perhaps people who knew that I didn't have a father felt sorry for me, but I certainly never felt that it was a good thing, nor do I remember any special kindness. On a few occasions, when I was in elementary school and was asked what my father did, I could not bring myself to say that he is dead, and I made up an occupation.

I have no memory of my father. Try as I might, I can not remember anything about him. We have pictures: the formal wedding picture from 1916, informal snapshots from the mid 1920's, and a studio picture of me as an infant on my father's knee. I have put together an image based on scraps of conversation with relatives, comments my mother made over the years, and most troubling, writings of my mother that I discovered after she died which indicated disappointment in their relationship.

My mother died in 1951, when I was 23, (and now really an orphan). We had never really talked about my father. I began asking my cousins to tell me their memory of him. (I knew he sold job lots of men's clothing to retailers.) They shared with me mostly platitudes and generalizations: He was a wonderful man, a very nice person, quiet, generous, a good provider, easy-going, friendly, he liked people, he smoked, he played cards. With regard to the last two traits: My mother gave me the impression that they were responsible for his death, and that she would not want me to smoke or gamble. When I asked my mother what caused my father's death, she said it was a heart attack. Years later, I found his death certificate. It indicated that he died in "The Tombs," police headquarters in downtown New York. I then asked the only person still living who might know about it, my cousin Dora Schlitt, and she told me the following story: It was the depression. My father had gone to a retailer, trying to make a sale. The owner's son

did not like my father and accused him of cheating them, and called the police. The accusation was such a shock to my father that he had a heart attack and died. It was an answer. Whether it was the answer, I don't know.

Dora was also the source of an answer to another troubling question: What caused the split between our families? My father was instrumental in bringing Dora and her husband Henry, who was my father's brother's son, to the United States after World War I. My father paid for their passage, got them an apartment and helped Henry get started. Henry was resourceful, learned how to drive, got a job in the cheese distribution business and became successful. According to Dora, some time in the late 1920's, my parents gave a party, and though Henry and Dora lived in the same apartment house as my parents, on Beck Street in the Bronx, they were not invited. Henry, angered by this slight, moved his family to Astoria and severed contact with my family. It was only when his son, Gabriel, was to have his Bar Mitzvah in 1938, seven years after my father died, that we reconnected.

I find it hard to picture my father as either a big party giver or as someone who would slight a family member. I believe my parents lived well in the period between the end of the war and the depression. Though my mother was a skilled garment worker, she stopped working after marriage. Wives were supposed to stay at home and take care of the house. The man was the breadwinner. It would reflect poorly on the husband if the wife worked. So after their marriage in 1916, my mother decorated the apartment, bought lovely furniture, china, silver, and art work. It must have made my father feel proud. My mother also went to night school. I have no information about my father's education.

Why weren't there any children until I came along 11 years after their marriage? My mother was a very romantic woman. I have found a number of love poems that she collected, as well as poems that she wrote. However, it appears that her expression of love was not returned. When I was born, my father was 43 and my mother was 39.

How did they meet? What did they have in common? Did they share similar interests? My mother loved the Yiddish theatre. Did my father go with her? Did my father maintain contact with his family in Kishinev, and with that part of the family that went to Palestine after World War I? Who were his friends and relatives in New York? My mother had been active in her union and was a socialist. She was in contact with her sister in Paris and her brother in Vaslui, Romania, and visited her sister in 1926. Why didn't my father go with her on that trip? What was my father's politics? Was he involved with the Kishinever landsman shaft? I learned from my cousin Dora that Henry had become an important figure in that society, but it was many years after my father's death.

My father was a member of the Farband—the Jewish National Workers Alliance, and it is in a Farband section of Montifiore Cemetery in St. Albans, Queens, that he is buried. And it was the life insurance policy that my father had with the Farband that caused so much heartache for my mother. After his death, at 46, my mother expected payment

from the policy, but she received nothing. Apparently, in need of money, my father had cashed in the policy. She did not know about it. She could not believe it could have happened. She had nothing. She was alone, a widow with a small child. Where was justice?

For years, she appealed to the Farband, and wrote letters to leaders in the Jewish community. She received a token payment which she felt was insulting. Growing up, I became the writer of these letters for my mother. My father was not someone with whom I played ball or went on walks or talked to, but someone whose insurance policy I would write letters about.

My mother described her life as “shver” hard, except for the fifteen years of her marriage—from 1916 to 1931, her life with my father. They were good years. Though I don’t remember my life with my father, they must have been pretty good years too.

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