

I Knew Your Father

As I get older, I am becoming convinced that this is indeed a small world. I have lived a full life, I have met a lot of people, and over the years, I keep running into the children of several of them. That is partly because I hang around with a younger crowd. I love coincidences, but sometimes I can hardly believe it. We have all had the experience of meeting someone, and it turns out that we knew people in common. But to know this person's father...that is heavy.

First example: Fran and I had joined the Newton Center Minyan about 1990. It was made up of knowledgeable Jews, mostly drawn from the Brandeis University faculty, who wanted to come together for Saturday and holiday services, but did not want to be part of a traditional synagogue. I was a bit older than most of the other members. Everyone was welcoming and friendly. We would schmooze after services at Kiddush. On first meeting, there is usually an exchange of biographies.

One such exchange took place with Ed Kaplan, a Minyan member who taught French at Brandeis. When I told him I had worked for the Jewish Labor Committee and the US Civil Rights Commission, he asked me if I had known his father, Kivie Kaplan. I was dumbstruck. How about that! Ed Kaplan was Kivie Kaplan's son. Sure I knew his father. In the '60s, everybody involved in civil rights knew his father.

Kivie Kaplan had been the president of the NAACP from the mid '60s until his death in 1975, continuing a tradition which resulted in some of the more radical blacks to label the NAACP an organization with a black body and a white head. He had been a member since the '30s. Kivie was a businessman-philanthropist, who was an active member and a contributor to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations as well as the NAACP. I knew him when he attended meetings of the Jewish umbrella group, the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC), and he used to hand out cards that read "Keep Smiling." He was everybody's friend, and an early fighter against racism. Ed was delighted, and impressed. Few of his contemporaries knew his father, or his father's remarkable history.

A second example: At about the same time period, I was also a member of the Boston JLC. Though we are a secular organization, we decided to have a monthly lunch-hour Torah study class. Looking around for a person to lead the group, we found David Starr, a young rabbi who was studying for his PhD at Columbia. He was smart, pro-labor, and a terrific teacher.

Before one of our sessions, David and I were schmoozing, and I must have mentioned that I had worked as Education Director for the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board. I don't know if it was I who asked David if Emil Starr, who had been the National union's Education Director, was related to him, or if David asked me if I knew his father, Emil Starr, but there it was again. I knew David Starr's father! He had come from academia to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and had previously written a book about Reuther and Meany and America's foreign policy. We didn't have much contact—he was the union's National Education Director and I worked for a small joint board—but we had met several times, and I certainly knew him.

A third example: Fran and I were invited to drop in on Shirley Handler, a neighbor, to meet her family as they were winding up celebrating her birthday. There was a houseful of sons and daughters-in-law, daughters and sons in law, and lots of grandchildren. As usual at such affairs,

we were schmoozing, and when I mentioned that I had once worked for a Jewish agency, one of Shirley's sons-in-law perked up. "Did you happen know my father? His name is Al Chernin." I was again dumbstruck. Of course I knew his father! Al had taken over as the head of the NCRAC a few years before I left the JLC, and I had worked fairly closely with him. Turns out the son knew the NCRAC staff, and we reminisced about Arnie Aaronson, Red Spiegler etc. I think it was when Al was the Director that the organization admitted it was Jewish by changing its name to the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC.)

A fourth example: Somewhat different, but it does fit into the "I knew your father" category. My friend Bob and I were attending our 60th CCNY graduation reunion. I guess there may have been close to 4,000 graduates in our 1949 graduating class. Less than 30 showed up. We struck up a conversation with one of our classmates, Rhoda Sorkin Lansky. We really didn't remember her from any of our classes, but I vaguely remembered her name. She had become a teacher, like Bob, and had moved up in the school hierarchy. We schmoozed for a few minutes when it dawned on me that, not only did I know her father, but that I had worked for her father. So that is what I told her, and she was dumbstruck.

Isidore Sorkin was the manager of Local 38 of the ILGWU, the union for which I had gone to work as an organizer in the fall of 1951. Not only was he my boss, he had also been the manager of Local 9 when my mother was looking for work during the depression. He wasn't able to get my mother a job in the 30s, but by some twist of fate, he hired me in 1951. And just as with Al Chernin's son, Rhoda and I started running through the names of the local's staff—Laura Wolf, Ann Cagliari etc.

And for something somewhat different: I have been attending the Annual Luncheon Meetings of the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council for a long time. They are festive affairs with hundreds of people in attendance, and are held in a downtown hotel. When we enter, our names are checked off, and we are given name-tags. The JCRC President and Executive Director present reports on the Council's activities, the Council's Officers and Board are elected, and the meeting concludes with an address by a prominent person. At this particular Annual Meeting, the speaker was Jeffrey Swartz, President of the Timberland Company, which had an outstanding reputation for being socially concerned, and promoting community service and the environment.

Schmoozing takes place at the beginning and at the end of the meetings. When the meet ended, while I was schmoozing with a friend, a young woman, seeing my name tag, came over to me. "Pardon me," she interrupted. "Are you any relation to Carol Schlitt?" "Yes," I replied. "I am her father." The young woman smiled and explained, "She was my baby sitter." Her name was Debbie Cogen Swarz. This time, I was dumbstruck, but I quickly recovered, and began describing our connection. Not only did I know her father; I knew her grandfather!

Debbie was the daughter of Ed and Ruth Cogen who were my neighbors in the Shepard Park area of Washington. And yes, my daughter Carol, was Debbie's baby sitter. And when I lived in Shepard Park, Ed and I were friends. But when Ed and I first met, (and we were exchanging biographies) I asked him if he was related to Charlie Cogen whom I knew in New York when he had been president of the Teachers Guild. "Yes," he said. "He is my father." I then explained to Ed how I knew his father, who in addition to being the President of the Teachers Guild, and a long-time JLC member, went on to be President of the American Federation of Teachers.

When I asked Debbie what she was doing at the JCRC Annual Meeting, she explained to me that she is married to Jeffrey Swartz. They had met when they both were students at Brown. Despite her grandfather's commitment to public education, Debbie (and husband Jeffrey) are very involved in the Jewish day school movement. Small world—in lots of ways.

And for something very different—where I did not know his father. I have been active with the Workmen's Circle for many years. When I came to Boston from Washington DC in 1979, I continued my involvement, and served as president of the Boston Workmen's Circle in the early '90s. Since the late '90s, a new leadership group has come to the fore, including our current president, Mike Felsen. I was very impressed with the ability and commitment of this group, and felt very comfortable as the old leadership was being replaced by the new. Early on, I worked with Mike, who was an attorney with the regional office of the US Department of Labor, as we revised the organization's by-laws.

In 2003, Fran and I moved into the Brook House, a large Brookline condominium. I am not sure what the occasion was, but some time after we moved in, while schmoozing with Mike, I mentioned that we were living in the Brook House. He expressed great pleasure. Why should he be pleased that we were in the Brook House? Because his father lived there. Leopold Felsen was a Professor of Physics, and an authority on electromagnetics and acoustics. He was born in Germany and was able to get out in 1940 when he was 16. I looked forward to meeting him. If he was anything like his son, he would be a wonderful person to know and to spend time with. Unfortunately, we never met. He died some time after we moved in. I am sorry that I did not get to know his father.

And for something even more different—where I was not even involved. My daughter Martha graduated from Barnard and decided to stay in New York. She also decided to pursue a career in art. She found a job with an art gallery, and began taking classes at the Art Students League. While at the League, she met a young man. Nothing unusual about this. Young people meet each other in class, in the neighborhood, in the supermarket, at parties. Martha and the young man started dating. This went on for a few months.

One day the young man asked Martha if she would accompany him to a family wedding. Martha said yes, and the young man asked Martha to come to his parents' house in Long Island for the drive to the wedding. Martha arrived at the house, everyone piled into the car, and off they went. As they were driving up the Bruckner Expressway in the Bronx, passing my old neighborhood, Martha observed that her father used to live there. The young man's father turned to Martha and asked, "What is your last name?" Martha replied, "Schlitt." The father, surprised, asked her (much the way Debbie asked me) "Are you any relation to Jake Schlitt?" Martha replied, "He is my father." The young man's father, Eugene Alperin, was a classmate of mine from junior high school, and lived at the other end of my block on Fox Street.

And finally, surprising a new friend, by having known a great deal about his father. Soon after Fran and I married, Fran invited a social work friend and her husband to dinner. They were a very interesting couple. Evelyn was a social worker with a family agency, and John was a professor of physics at Boston University, and an authority on Albert Einstein. They were both from New York and they had both gone to CCNY. They were both very bright, very well read, and very left wing, and John had a great sense of humor. Within a month after that first dinner, they invited us for dinner. That evening, in the course of our getting to know each other better, I

asked John, whose last name was Stachel, if he was any relation to Jack Stachel. Instead of saying, "He was my father," he asked in a rather strange way, "How do you know the name Jack Stachel?" I said I was pretty familiar with left wing politics, with the leadership of the Communist Party in the '40s, and with the names of the CP leaders who were indicted under the Smith Act. With that, John admitted that Jack Stachel was his father.

John then described how hard it was for him from the time the FBI started cracking down on the Communist Party soon after the end of World War II. He had gone to a private high school, and was at CCNY when the 11 Communist Party leaders were indicted in 1948. I have a fairly good memory of the trial, which was held at the Foley Square Courthouse in New York. It was a long trial and most of us who were part of the non-Communist left saw it as a farce, and the sentencing of the defendants to five years, as a miscarriage of justice. They were charged with "advocating" the overthrow of the government by force and violence. They were not charged with "doing" anything. John chose to study physics because it was non-political.

A few years after we met, I had occasion to be in Chicago, and made a trip to the cemetery where the Haymarket martyrs were buried, in part because Jack Stachel was buried there as well. I never met him in life, but I put a stone on his grave, and said Kaddish for him, even though neither he nor his son were observant Jews. I mentioned it to John when we saw them again. He thanked me.

1-3-13