

MY CONNECTION TO SOPHIE'S GRANDSON ITAI

Having just returned from the Bar Mitzvah of Itai Squires-Kasten, I began thinking about my connection to Itai and his family. (It should be noted that Itai was fantastic. He led the davening, layned, haftorahed and drashed with aplomb.) During the Kiddush meal, people who are not members of the Synagogue often ask one another how they are connected to the family. Some are related to the father's family (the Squires), or the mother's family (the Kastens). Others who are not related--friends, parents of Itai's classmates, or Synagogue members--may also be curious.

When I am asked, and there is a lot of time to explain, I tell the following story:

First, I claim to know Itai's father's mother longer than anyone else present, even longer than Fitz, Itai's father's father. I grew up in the Bronx, on Fox Street, and Itai's father's mother, Sophie Widman, also grew up on Fox Street. She lived across the street from my ex-wife Sylvia, and they went to elementary school and junior high school together. I knew Sophie as a teenager, when we were in high school.

When most of the bright girls who graduated from JHS 60, in the '40s, went on to Hunter High School, the elite all-girls exam school, Sophie chose to go to Morris High School, the neighborhood co-ed high school, which was where the poor and minority kids went. (Ten years later, that is where Colin Powell went.) Sophie was making a political statement, even then. During high school, when most teen-agers had little interest in, or knowledge of politics, Sophie was already involved in radical politics.

We both went on to CCNY, Sophie a year after me. I majored in Economics, Sophie in Engineering. At the time, the Liberal Arts School did not accept women, but they were accepted into the Schools of Engineering, Education and Business. Sophie may have been an engineering major, but politics was her passion. She was active in every left wing activity on campus, and so was I. We held the same position—for Henry Wallace in 1948, and against Knickerbocker and Davis (two faculty members accused of anti-Semitism and racism) in 1949. During the student strike, Sophie had her picture on the front page of the NY Daily News kicking a cop.

Opposed to racism, Sophie lived her commitment by falling in love and marrying Fitz Squires. We each married in 1951, and in the late '50s we both found ourselves in Brooklyn, Sophie, Fitz and their three children in Far Rockaway, and Sylvia and I and our three children in Crown Heights. We left Fox Street behind us, visited each other from time to time, and managed not to talk politics. We continued to hold similar positions—civil rights, nuclear policy, and later Viet Nam.

The Schlitts moved to Washington; the Squires moved to Coop City in the Bronx. Donald visited us from time to time. David found Lyndon LaRouche. Peter, the youngest, played competitive chess. Eventually, Sophie and Fitz divorced. Sophie and the kids came to Lewis' Bar Mitzvah in 1971. In 1972, Sylvia and I divorced.

In 1979, I moved to Boston, met Fran, we married, David was born, and soon after that, Peter showed up at Harvard with a Bell Labs scholarship. We took him under our wing.

Coincidentally, Donald went to Yale Law School. Sophie referred to herself as the Ivy League Mother of the Year. But that is not the only coincidence. Don married Judy, practiced maritime law, moved to DC, and got a job with IRS, which is where Sylvia was working. Don and Judy bought a house around the corner from Sylvia, who took them both under her wing.

On a few occasions, when Sophie visited Peter, Fran, Sophie and I got together, and Fran and Sophie get to know each other. Peter became active in Harvard Hillel. Sophie became involved with the Reform Temple in Doylestown to which she moved for work. Tragically, Sophie died, much too young. Peter married Linda. We got to know the Kasten family. Both boys have two boys: Don and Judy have Scott and Drew; Peter and Linda have Si and Itai. Fran and I were honored to have had Si and Itai's Brisses at our house on Greenough Street. With their Bar Mitzvahs, we reconnected with Fitz. Fran and I went to Washington to attend Scott and Drew's Bar Mitzvahs, and Donald and his family came up to Cambridge to attend Si's and now Itai's Bar Mitzvah. Speaking of Bar Mitzvahs, Peter served as David's tutor for his Bar Mitzvah 16 years ago. The Squires-Kastens are no longer under our wing, but we "shep nachas" as their remarkable children learn and grow.

So when someone asks me how I am connected to Itai and his family, that is what I tell them (if there is time).

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