

An old photo, newly discovered



by Phyllis Chesler

It tumbled out of a file, a time-traveling photograph, a less than gentle reminder of the role I played in my family: Solitary, independent, neither allied with nor claimed by either parent. There I stand, about dead center, and utterly alone. My mother, far right, (and to my left) is surrounded by her two sons, my younger brothers; my father, far left, (and to my right) is also alone, physically distant from his wife

and from all three children.

I must have been about sixteen years old at the time. A first cousin and his mother, my most beloved maternal aunt, separate my father from me—but now this photograph begins to make another kind of sense. This aunt, a battered and then abandoned wife, was the only female relative who ever hugged and kissed me. Perhaps I chose to stand near her. On my left, stand my other maternal aunt's husband and my second maternal aunt.

This must have been a holiday or a family celebration because it seems to have taken place in a hall. The photographer was my second or third cousin, Shaya, who gave it to me about a decade ago. He photographed pro-Israel demonstrations and lectures and must have amassed about a million such photographs. Shaya lived in Williamsburg all his life; he absolutely refused to move out. It was his shtetl. His shul (synagogue) was there, as were his shul buddies. When I heard that he had died, I tried to obtain his photographs—I wanted to donate them somewhere—but his sons, whom I barely knew, had already thrown them out. One said: "I know you won't like this, but it's done." I called the sanitation department to find out where they might have dumped or buried these precious photographs, but it was too late, they were gone.

Who can understand Jewish families? Any families? Most families?