

MITZVOS MAKE THE WORLD GO ROUND
FROM 610 TO 613

Sarah Heller Lebor

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This book is dedicated in memory of my husband
Rabbi Shaya Lebor Z”L

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A Word from the Editor

I have to admit that I first approached the editing of “Bubby's Book” with a certain level of trepidation. While flattered that David Lebor turned to me to do the job as both a friend and professional translator and editor, I was somewhat concerned that his mother might not be as thrilled. When I saw how much she invested in writing and rewriting the stories so many times, it was obvious that Sarah Lebor was quite the perfectionist, so I wondered how she would take to some outsider coming in and essentially deciding for her which stories and versions were the best ones to be included in the long-awaited book.

But any such trepidations or concern rapidly dissipated as soon as we spoke on the phone. Mrs. Lebor was quite excited that things were finally coming together for publication of her stories, and she agreed that it was time to cut to the chase and finish her book, since, as she said with a giggle, “I'm not getting any younger, you know!” Meanwhile, among her dozens of files, rewrites and revisions of almost every story, there were some three different versions of a “sample” book that had been compiled over the years; so at our first meeting we agreed that they would form the basis of the final book. Still, much editing had to be done,

including clarifications of certain facts, incomplete or unclear endings, comparing and combining the different texts, etc. But once she gave the okay I was able to work freely, so at our second meeting I was able to bring her the first completed draft for publication, and happily inform her that “Bubby's book” was closer than ever to becoming a reality.

I can only imagine how excited and thrilled she must be to see the final product in print, and to be able to personally present the book to her extended family and friends. May she enjoy many more years of good health and happiness with all her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. May the entire family not only enjoy the fascinating stories of this book, but also study them and learn about the rich history and legacy of a very special woman named Sarah Lebor; whose faith in G-d, love of life and unabashed pride and joy in her family are an inspiration to one and all, present company included! It was an honor and privilege to become better acquainted with her, and to help her dream come true with the publication of this volume.

Gershon Harris

Preface

“Sarah, you ought to write a book.” I must have heard that phrase hundreds of times from everyone in the family. To put all my stories down on paper and publish them as a book! The truth is, the more people encouraged me, the more I thought about it, and the more I liked the idea.

Still, I sometimes found myself wondering, why me? Why shouldn't my siblings write such a book, or maybe make a joint effort? Yet I knew the answer to my own question. The fact is, being the oldest sibling, I heard the stories more often than they did. Each time my mother repeated her stories, we had to sit still and not interrupt while she spoke. But the truth is that it was always fascinating to hear Mama tell us about her childhood and life in Jerusalem. She would also read aloud the letters that arrived regularly from her father, and later from her mother and sister, after Zaide past away.

In August 1923, my mother and I arrived in New York, where my father had come earlier to prepare the way. We left the Land of Israel because of famine, and like so many others, with great trepidation, began totally new lives in a strange new land. So my brother and sisters and I grew up in New York, in a far away

time when there were more horse-drawn wagons than cars on every street. Those were the days that brimmed with the stories of my childhood.

When my husband and I returned to Jerusalem after 57 years in America, I heard many more stories from my dear “*Tanta*” (Aunt) Chana, my mother's sister. She was the youngest of 13 children (my mother was the oldest), but only 4 survived. The family lived in the Old City of Jerusalem, where I was also born. Tanta Chana would always tell how she remembered the day I was born. She was only five years old, sitting outside the door of the house. Pouring rain fell on her bare head, mixing with her tears. Inside, the midwife and her mother were delivering a screaming mother's second child – me! Ultimately, Tanta Chana ended up outliving all of her siblings, and when my husband and I moved to Jerusalem, we didn't live far from my Tanta and her husband. So every Shabbos after lunch – rain or shine – I walked to Meah Shearim to visit and hear all her stories. I also heard tales from many cousins whom I met there for the first time.

The stories floated around in my head like restless spirits, until the appropriate time came to write them down. We had retired and settled in Israel. At first, the family wanted to see what I was writing. They and their children were impatient to hear the “whole” story, not

just bits and pieces. I am sorry it took so long, and now we have great-grandchildren to think about, some of whom may not even read English! Perhaps some of my more capable grandchildren will translate these stories into Hebrew for the others, hopefully working faster than I did!

I wrote down most of these stories in the space of approximately one year. Yet nothing seemed good enough, so I wrote and rewrote them dozens of times. Sometimes I was so preoccupied I couldn't stop, not even to go to bed, with often only an aching back forcing me to retire for the night. I loved my stories so much, I didn't want to let go. The endings were especially hard. As my mother of blessed memory would have said: "The finishing touches are the worst."

Still, after this flying start, I suffered from writers block that lasted ten years, corresponding with the illness and death of my dear husband Shaya, who was my helpmate in everything. In short, my progress followed him.

But Shaya was not pleased that instead of sitting and working on my stories on the computer, I chose to be near him in case he should need anything. I knew he wouldn't call me unless it was absolutely necessary, since that's the sort of person he was. At the same time,

however, I wasn't going to let him suffer just because he would not call me unless it was truly urgent.

In the nine years following his death, though I had the time to continue organizing my stories and always thought I could go on, when I would sit down to write, nothing came. Instead of my family history, I ended up becoming an expert in computer-screen Solitaire!

There were other major impediments as well, like my surgery for a hip replacement, having broken my hip when walking through a revolving door at a hospital, of all places. As we all know, at my age these things happen, but when they do, it can take a long time before they heal.

And then, close to ten years later – and much to my own pleasant surprise, thank G-d, I suddenly snapped out of my rut, and found myself back in the saddle. I began feeling better, and that feeling translated itself into my writing once again. No less important of course, was the realization that time was quickly passing by, so it would be now or never that I would finish what I had started.

At around the same time, several interesting courses were being offered at “*Beit HaAm*”, a cultural and community center located right in the center of Jerusalem, including a creative writing course in

English. The course was given by Professor Howard Harrison from the United States.

When I handed in my first story, Prof. Harrison expressed his delight. I thought that he was just flattering me as a student, like I used to do when I was a teacher. I will never forget how he threw his arms up and exclaimed, “what a wonderful beginning!” Those words are still music to my ears!

Professor Harrison was my first and best inspiration, and the things he taught me have stayed with me throughout all of my writing. To this day I have fond and fresh memories of his methods and knowledge. Also very impressive was his always being well prepared for any subject students would raise.

But the entire summer, added to the time between the conclusion of one course and the beginning of the next one in the fall, seemed too long to wait to practice and develop my writing skills. So I and several other budding writers formed our own group to keep up the momentum. We had some very talented people, and we wrote and critiqued each other. Thank G-d, we did very well. Among the most talented members of our group was Hannah Koevary, a professional editor in her own right. She has remained a good friend, and I have benefited a great deal from her helpful comments,

kindness, and unstinting belief in my ability to finish this book.

And though it may have taken longer than originally planned, I proudly present the final result of a labor of love that has extended over many years of some of the most difficult and happy times in my life.

I thank Almighty G-d for having given me the strength and health to be able to write and complete this work. Everything is ultimately in his hands. Without His kindness and mercy, none of us could even hope to reach the first step in anything, never mind being able to see the final fruits of one's labor, like this book.

Yet while the *Ribbono Shel Olam* may be first and foremost; without the efforts, encouragement and inspiration of many people, I never would have finished the book. I would therefore like to express my gratitude to the following individuals and organizations who inspired, taught and urged me along the path of seeing the publication of this book.

As mentioned previously, a very special thanks to Professor Howard Harrison as my first and best inspiration, as well as a real source of confidence and encouragement in my writing abilities to this very day. Special thanks also to my good friend Hannah Koevary, whose professional abilities added so much

to our original writers group. I admire her personal devotion and encouragement throughout this project.

Another important organization in my writing life, which deserves special thanks, is the International Women's Writing Group (IWWG). I attended my first IWWG conference at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1996. At the time, I really wasn't settled after my husband Shaya's death, and I didn't feel I could afford the big expense of the trip. But one day, while cleaning Shaya's desk, I found two envelopes containing one-hundred dollar bills, more than enough money for me to pick up and go. I immediately understood that it was meant that I go to that first conference, and I have attended many subsequent conferences since.

These conferences gave me a tremendous lift in both my own self-confidence and enthusiasm for writing, and I always came home "electrified" and raring to go. I met so many wonderful people, like Hanalora Hahn, the founder of IWWG; June Gould, author of *The Writer in All of Us*; Jan Phillips, creator of *Marry Your Muse*; and other writers and authors. They were all very encouraging, but frank in their criticism and were always ready to share freely from their writing experience.

Another good friend and neighbor, Chaya Buckwald, upon hearing some of my stories, brought me similar books written by relatives and friends. She insisted that if they can do it, so can I. In many ways, she was the inspiration that really got me started.

A number of other people also inspired and encouraged me, among them Riva Sharon, writer, poet and photographer; and Vivian Auerbach.

A great thank you also goes to my editor, Gershon Harris whose assistance in bringing this work to publication was invaluable.

I must also express very special thanks and gratitude to my late and dear husband, Shaya Lebor, *ztz"l*, for so many wonderful years of happiness together. A true *tzadik, gadol bTorah*, inspiring congregational rabbi, soulmate and best friend, he has obviously been the inspiration for so many things in my life, including the determination to finish this book. I miss him terribly, but am somewhat comforted in the thought that he is looking down from his place on high and sharing in the joy of seeing the completion of this milestone. *Yehi zichro baruch.... Blessed be his memory.*

Last, but not least of course, thanks to my children and family who have encouraged me from day one to write down my stories and publish this book, and shared in much of the work. There is no doubt that

their moral support and enthusiasm inspired me all along the way, and I certainly kept thinking of them as I wrote and rewrote each story; because ultimately, this book is for them, so that children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren can know, remember and be inspired by the history and personal stories of their Bubby Sarah and her family!

A Word About the Title

Though it will become clear in the course of the stories, a quick explanation of the book's title is in order. The number "610" was the address of our house on Oceanview Avenue in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. But besides all the special and fond memories and rich family history of that house, I don't know if there was another home where doing *mitzvos* was such a constant priority and policy as in 610 Oceanview Avenue! To enumerate all of the wonderful deeds that my late parents did for others while we lived in that house would fill another book, even longer than this one. I am convinced that part of the reason that I have been privileged to publish this book is because of the endless stream of *mitzvos*, acts of loving-kindness and material and spiritual help that my parents performed and provided for so many others, every day of their lives. So from "610", the "613" commandments flowed without end, which is really what makes – and keeps – this world go round!

Chapter 1

The Poritz (Landowner)

Once upon a time there lived a "*Poritz*" (a wealthy landowner) in a small town in Hungary. He was pleased with his life because he had in his employ a Jew, who was an honest advisor and a very reliable and successful business manager. When this manager suggested that he not allow any married people to be evicted from their homes, as was sometimes the custom, he readily agreed to make that the law of his fiefdom. His Jewish manager always gave him good advice. Why not listen to his wisdom? Life continued peacefully and all were happy.

Then one day, the son of the business manager came to visit his father at work with an urgent message. The *Poritz's* daughter was looking out of her window and wondered who a certain tall, handsome and striking man could possibly be. She had never seen him in the vicinity, but she fell in love with him at first sight. However, she kept this secret deep in her heart. Upon inquiring about his identity, she was very pleased to learn that he was the manager's son. That would be no problem. Her father would give her anything her

heart desired. And desire she did. Word spread that the *Poritz's* daughter was in love.

One of the workers told the manager what was happening right under his nose. Upon hearing this news, the manager went into a panic, and immediately rushed home to consult with his wife. To keep their son safe and in the fold, they both agreed that there was only one solution: to have him married off as quickly as possible, though this would mean the end of all the wonderful "*shiduchim*" (potential marital matches) with which they had been presented for their son.

In their distress, they looked far and near, but did not find anyone available. Then someone suggested that if they could find no one else, there was always the servant girl employed by their neighbor. At first the idea was repulsive to them, and they simply laughed it off. Though Jewish, she was an uneducated girl with no culture, and not attractive. The manager's wife insisted to her husband that she had none of the qualities suitable for a man like their son. How could he even suggest such a wild idea? Didn't he realize that their son is learned, cultured, handsome and very desirable? But because time was passing very quickly, they decided to give the servant girl a try, at least as a temporary solution.

They quickly arranged for a marriage between the couple. The young servant girl was in ecstasy, the groom full of gloom.

It did not take too long for the *Poritz* and his retinue to come calling on his manager to make the arrangements for the marriage with the *Poritz's* daughter. When the manager was approached with the proposition regarding the *Poritz's* daughter's interest in his son, the manager quickly replied, "Oh! But this is not possible; our son is already married!"

The *Poritz's* daughter exclaimed in anger, "I never heard that! Let me see proof of the marriage." The manager immediately produced the marriage certificate. The *Poritz* and his daughter were shocked, but could only return home broken-hearted.

The groom and his family were delighted that they were able to get away with the ruse so easily. After things settled down, the groom's mother said, "It is now time to settle our business concerning this fictitious marriage." "Oh NO!" said her new daughter-in-law. "When you needed me to rescue you from the *Poritz* and the '*goyim*' (non-Jews), I was here and good enough to marry! Now you want to cast me off as a nothing. NO! I will never consent to a '*get*' (Jewish bill of divorce). I never dreamed that such a *shidduch* would come my way, but *Hashem* must have seen all my tears and heard all

my prayers, as well as the prayers of my father and mother. I now have such a wonderful husband – you will not take him away from me!”

The groom's family said there was only one solution. “We will go to the ‘*Rav*’ (Rabbi), and see what he decides.”

They arrived at the home of the *Rav* and explained the whole story. The *Rav* had to think for only a moment, and then gave his “*psak*” (ruling). “The young lady is right. This *shidduch* was made in heaven. Please go home. You will all be blessed with much happiness and “*nachas*” (pride). You will be blessed with “*shalom bayis*” (peace in the home) of the sweetest kind. You will be blessed with many children, most of them twins.”

And so it was, just as the *Rav* had decreed. The couple had 11 sets of twins! The family name was changed from Frankel to “*Teomim*” (twins). They were blessed with great happiness, and indeed, were blessed with *shalom bayis* of the sweetest kind.

Ever since I was a little girl, I heard this story repeated many times, reminding me of the wonderful “*yichus*” (pedegree) of our family. This was long before I even knew what the word *yichus* implied. It was not until my husband Shaya heard this marvelous story that this started to have meaning for me. It turns out that our

family is descended from Reb Baruch Tam Frankel-
Teomim, going back 12 generations.

Chapter 2

The Queen

Cousins and relatives living in Israel told me a wondrous tale about my “*Elter Bubby*” (great grandmother) Esther Malka, a very wise and gentle soul. She was a deeply religious person, her faith unwavering and complete.

All the people in the city of Tarkan, Hungary, came to her for advice and counsel. It didn't matter what the reason or the subject, she was always sought out for her judgment. It could be medicine, nutrition, health, politics, religion or matters that troubled the heart, the mind and the soul. Sometimes people were depressed and needed a sympathetic friend with whom to speak. All sought her help, and she in turn treated everyone with kindness and respect. Even the gentiles in the city looked up to her as a model of wisdom and dignity. They too would seek her assistance. She never refused anyone, and was never too busy to see anyone.

This specific story occurred at a time when the country was suffering from a severe drought, and in fact, had not seen rain for two years. Desperate people came and asked Esther Malka for her blessings and

opinion. Among these people were two young women, Erica and Amalia.

“What are we going to do? All the rivers and lakes are dry. Pesach is approaching and there is no fish to be had anywhere in this part of the country.”

Esther Malka replied, “If the Holy One, Blessed Be He, wants us to have fish, He will provide. Otherwise, perhaps He is telling us that we don't deserve fish for Yom Tov.

“Esther Malka! Esther Malka! Is... is it... is it true?” stuttered Erica.

“The fi... the fish.. the fish!” stammered Amalia.

“Is it really in your house?”

“Amalia! Amalia! Look! Look! Its true! Its really true! The fish is on the floor in front of the fireplace!”

“I can hardly believe it, though I saw it with my own eyes. It wasn't our imagination.”

Esther Malka was very curious and said, “What did you see that put you both in such a state? Sit down and tell me exactly what happened. I am as shocked as you are.”

“We were walking home from the market, and were distracted by something that blocked the sunlight”, Erica said.

“Yes, we were puzzled by the shadow, so we looked up to the sky to see why it had suddenly darkened. We wondered what was happening.”

“Esther Malka, can you imagine our surprise when we saw this huge bird flying in the sky with a tremendous fish clutched in its beak? Suddenly as the bird was passing your house, it lost its grip on the fish. The bird tried to recapture it, but could not. The fish fell faster than the bird could fly.”

“A miracle! The fish fell right down the chimney into your blessed house.”

“Esther Malka, you once told us that a fish is a sign of fertility, remember?”

“Its true. I certainly do remember that.”

“Oh my! It was quite a sight to see. I really thought I was dreaming, but it wasn't a dream. I even told Erica to pinch me. Right there, high in the sky, was this beautiful sight of a magnificent bird flying gracefully through the air with a fish in its mouth.

I just didn't want this vision to end. I felt that I was in the Garden of Eden and that finally there would be an end to our suffering and an end to this terrible period of our lives without water.

“Esther Malka, do you think that things will improve? Is this fish really a sign that our situation will finally change for the better?”

“I hope and pray that it will be the will of G-d to improve our situation,” replied Esther Malka. “Who knows what is in store for us?”

Amalia and Erica couldn't stop babbling and dreaming.

“Pray tell us the meaning of this miraculous phenomenon. What is the meaning and the reason behind this act of G-d?” Amalia asked.

“I don't know,” my *Elter Bubby* said, but everything that happens to us is for the good, “*LTova, LTova.*” said Esther Malka.

“Amalia, I ask you, is it any wonder that she was named Esther Malka? Do you know what Esther Malka means?”

“No.”

“It means Esther, The Queen.”

Chapter 3

Rescue at the Kotel

The breeze was bone-chilling that *Shabbos* morning, and the grey clouds were heavy with rain. A year had passed since the Armistice had been signed, and people were still offering prayers of thanks to *Hashem*. Still, thousands of people were still in transit, and many men were still coming home from “The War.” Meanwhile, a young woman stood close to the “*Kotel*” (the Western Wall) with her four little children. She was sobbing so bitterly that Yenta Chaya Frankel couldn't concentrate on her own *davening* and prayers. Wherever she turned in the narrow space, she heard the heart rending wails and cries of the young woman echoing off the *Kotel*.

The children were also crying pitifully, wiping their tears on their sleeves, and clutching their mother's skirt. Yenta Chaya saw the woman huddled with her children, and tried to help warm them with her shawl. The boys were wearing white shirts; their black “*payos*” (side locks) blowing in the wind, their faces pale and frightened. The little girls had long blond hair braided down their backs. Their pretty blue dresses matched their sad blue eyes. None of them was wearing a sweater, and they were shivering from cold and fright.

Yenta Chaya could never ignore anyone's cries, especially little children. The desperation of the woman and the children penetrated her heart. She kissed her "*siddur*" (prayer book), closing it as she approached the woman, and asked:

"What is it my child? Tell me what is troubling you. Perhaps I can help."

The woman's body shook.

"No one but the '*Ribboyno shel Oylam*' (The Master of the World) can help me!" the young mother sobbed.

"Well, maybe He sent me to help you. Tell me, is someone sick?"

"No! If someone is sick, you can hope for a '*refuah*' (cure), but this is beyond anyone's help. It's too late!" the sobbing woman said.

"But how can I help you if you will not tell me what it is?" Yenta Chaya asked.

"Sha! Sha!" the other women praying at the *Kotel* angrily whispered. "Look! Can you believe that? Yenta Chaya is talking to that woman in the middle of her '*davening Shmoneh Esrei*' (praying the Silent Devotion).

Yenta Chaya said to the woman, "Come with me to my house, I live nearby, and you can tell me what's so terrible that no one can help."

The young woman continued to wail and wouldn't move. But when she realized her children were holding



The Kotel

Yenta Chayas hand and walking away with her, she followed. They slowly walked through an alley, came to a nearby courtyard and sat down under an olive tree. Yenta Chaya took a clean handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped the eyes and noses of each child. As she touched their hands, she realized how cold they were. She took off her cape and mused to herself, look how *Hashem* in his infinite wisdom manages things. Thursday night I was tired, but something made me finish crocheting this short cape. Now the children can wear it. My long shawl would have been dragged on the ground, too big for them to handle. She gave

the biggest child a bag of “*papitas*” (salted roasted sunflower seeds) and said:

“I want you to take turns wearing my new blue cape. First the girls can share it to warm up, while the boys eat the *papitas*, then the boys will warm up while the girls eat the *papitas*. Won't that be nice?” She gently wrapped up the shivering girls and patted their cheeks.

“I'm going back!” the woman said.

The woman looked haggard, and her children were almost all the same size, and very close in age: five or six years old at the most. They might have been two sets of twins. Yenta Chaya touched her gently on the shoulder and said: “You will not go anywhere until you tell me why you are crying so bitterly. There is help. There are special prayers for the sick, for the depressed. Prayer, especially *Tehilim*, can help anyone.”

“There is no prayer for me; I will never see my husband again. I will be an ‘*aguna*’ (a woman whose husbands whereabouts are unknown, and therefore cannot be given a divorce). My children will grow up without a father! They will be orphans!”

“What do you mean?”

Yenta Chaya tried her best to calm the hysterical woman, and slowly she began her tale of woe.

“*Bseder*, I'll tell you. Not that I think you or anyone else can help me. Its a long story.... About four years

ago, before Arch Duke Ferdinand was killed and the war broke out, my husband deserted the Polish army. We had no money. My mother sold her diamond earrings to pay for our fare to run away to Jerusalem. It was a long and difficult journey, especially with the little children. We were frightened every minute of the way. We had to make many wagon and train changes before we got on the boat headed for Jaffa. When we finally arrived in Jerusalem, we kissed the ground. We settled in with a family who rented us a room and let us use their dishes and utensils. They also helped us to eventually get a place of our own, and we were happy.

This morning, as we opened the door to go to the “*Koysel*” (Kotel – The Western Wall in Jerusalem), suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, two policemen grabbed my husband, Chaim, and two more men followed with drawn guns. They pushed him to the ground, then told him to stand up, and tied his hands roughly behind his back. They kicked his “*siddur*” (prayer book) to the side. My little boy ran to pick it up and was frightened by the mean look on the policeman's face. He picked it up anyway and the children kissed their fathers *siddur*.

Chaim was screaming, “I didn't do anything! Why are you taking me away? For what reason are you treating me this way?”

“Shut up, you miserable deserter! You are nothing but a traitor.”

“It was then that my husband's eyes met mine. We both knew why he was being dragged away. With his beautiful *“tallis”* (prayer shawl), he was shoved into prison to be locked up with the thieves, drunks and drug dealers. It was true; he had deserted the Polish Army. But we felt safe in Jerusalem. Who could possibly hurt him here? Someone betrayed him. I can't really expect you to understand how I feel.”

“Of course, I understand how you feel,” Yenta Chaya said, as she remembered her own experience. “It was 15 years ago, but I still feel the fright I felt when my Avraham ran away from the Hungarian Army. He said that it was impossible for him to remain a Jew in the Army”. How could this woman know that when I was her age, I arranged an escape from Hungary under similar circumstances? Perhaps one day, when we have time, I'll be able to tell her about it.

The young woman continued, “In the Army, he was afraid that he would be killed by those *‘Polakin’* (Poles). They didn't give him a moments peace.”

Yenta Chaya nodded and took the shivering woman into her arms until she was able to control her shaking. Deep in thought, Yenta Chaya sat down and covered her eyes with her hands as if she was *“bentsching licht”*

(lighting the Shabbat candles). Suddenly, she jumped up and said: "I know just what we must do. Enough talking! Its time for action. We must do something before it's too late."

"What can we do? It's *Shabbos!*"

"Oh! Don't be a silly goose! We must act now! Don't you know that '*Pidyon Shvuim*' (ransoming a prisoner) takes precedence over *Shabbos*? It is a '*Mitzvah Raba.*' The redemption of a captive is a religious duty of great importance. It says so in the '*Gemara*' (the Babylonian Talmud) *tractate 'Baba Basra*'. You and the children wait at the *Koysel* and pray as hard as you know how. I will be back, '*bli neder*' (without swearing to it), and with the help of the Almighty, I hope with good news."

Yenta Chaya knew that the only one who could help was Reb Leib Schachter, who worked in the Russian Compound. He was the wholesale distributor for medicines in the whole area, and was acquainted with all the officers at Jaffa port and all the dispatchers on the trains into and out of Jerusalem, as well as all the other delivery people, both Arabs and Jews.

In great haste, Yenta Chaya left the Jaffa Gate and walked across the valley to Reb Leib who lived in Yemin Moshe, in The Moshe Montefiore Houses. He was in *shul*. Without hesitation, she quietly opened

the door to the men's section, spotted Reb Leib, and motioned for him to come to the door.

“Oy! Reb Leib, there is a prisoner in the *Kishle* (the ancient police compound inside the Jaffa Gate); he was arrested this morning. He deserted from the Polish Army. He is to be deported to Poland today. He has a wife and four “*pitzkalach*” (small children). You know the penalty for desertion is hanging. What can be done for him?” Reb Leib had to think for a moment. “The only solution is to bribe the guards at the *Kishle* before he is sent away. It could cost at least three hundred pounds Sterling, or even more. It must be done at once.”

“Who can help with a huge sum like that, on *Shabbos* yet, and at such short notice?” Yenta Chaya asked.

“Only The ‘*Rav Harashi*’ (Chief Rabbi), Rav Kook.” Reb Leib answered.

Without a moments hesitation, Yenta Chaya hurried to the *shul*, (on what is today Harav Kook Street). They were in the middle of the Torah reading, but that didn't stop her. She headed straight for Rav Kook, tugged at the “*tzitzis*” (fringes) of his *tallis*, and whispered “*Pekuach Nefesh*’ (a human life is at stake).”

The men were astounded to suddenly see a tall young woman in their midst in the middle of the Torah reading. Some were stunned into silence, while

others cried out, “*Oy Gevalt!*” The whole *shul* was in an uproar. Here was a woman dressed in the garb of the most pious of the “*Alte Shtut*” (the Old City), disturbing the men in *shul* on *Shabbos*! She wore a dark blue dress with long sleeves. The high neckline had a dainty hand crocheted collar, a black “*tichel*” (head scarf), and black stockings. The *tichel* clung close to her shaven head. They tried to shoo her out, but she ignored them all.

Rav Kook knew Yenta Chaya. Without interruption, he lifted his eyes to question her. Even though she was familiar to some of the men, something like this had never happened. She repeated, “*Pekuach Nefesh.*”

Since he couldn't speak to her because they were in the midst of the Torah reading, he raised both hands over his head motioning the men to be quiet, and for her to continue. There was dead silence in the *shul* as she whispered to Rav Kook.

“A man is being held in the *Kishle*. He deserted the Polish Army. He is to be deported within hours. If we don't ransom him at once, his wife and four little children will never see him again.”

In sign language, he pointed heavenward, to his study upstairs. He gave her the key. He displayed three fingers indicating the third drawer, of the table. There she would find money.

She asked, "How much may I take?"

He waved his hand indicating she could take it all.

She went upstairs to his apartment, and opened the drawer with the money. She wrapped her left hand in her handkerchief, took off the scarf she was wearing around her neck and wrapped her right hand in it. She scooped out the money. She did this in order to take the money with a "*shinui*" (in a different way than usual) in order to enable her to touch money on *Shabbos*.

As fast as she could run, she took the money in the scarf to Reb Leib Shachter, who was waiting for her in one of the courtyards behind the *Kishle*. Reb Leib arranged for the one Arab guide who had been retained by the British because of his familiarity with many languages, to receive the "*bakshish*" (the bribe), which was a big bottle of "*slivovitz*" (plum brandy) for the Polish escorts. But then Reb Leib said, "There is one more formality before we can have a release. An affidavit has to be signed."

"What kind of an affidavit?" Yenta Chaya wanted to know.

"A paper stating that he has a relative willing to take responsibility for him."

Reb Leib had a document ready to be signed, stating that Chaim was Yenta Chaya's son. Without another thought, Yenta Chaya started to sign the paper as best

she could with her left hand, again using a *shinui*. “No! You must sign this properly; otherwise the document will be in question.” Reb Leib instructed.

“Nu, so I'll sign!”

“I knew you would.”

By the time Chaim was released, he, his wife and children were hidden separately until after *Shabbos*. They were given new identities and disguises. Chaim's beard was changed so that it was pointed and closer to his face; his *payos* were curled and put in front of his ears instead of hanging loosely. His long black garb was exchanged for a colorful Yemenite outfit, a blue and white striped long coat, and a striking turban fit for a “*Sephardi Chacham*” (traditional term for Sephardic Rabbi or Sage).

His wife was dressed in an old beautiful purple dress, with colorful embroidery on the top. For the first time in her life, she wore long pants under her dress, Oriental style. An elaborate head covering was fashioned into a turban for her head.

The girls and boys were hidden separately with friendly families until the final arrangements could be made. It was not safe for them to stay together. The little girls cried when their hair was cut short. The boys were dressed as little girls with their curly *payos* poking out of head scarves. They were told this was

a game they were playing in order to meet with their father. They liked the different clothes and the bag of homemade goodies and supplies they would need for the mysterious journey being planned. Each child was given a special treat: The oldest boy was given a book; his brother was given a string tied in a circle. He had spent the whole afternoon playing with the other children in the family, who taught him how to change the shapes and forms of the string with their fingers. The girls were given a homemade rag doll, and clothing to dress her. They were to share their treasures once they were all united.

When they came to the place where they were supposed to meet their father they were frightened of the stranger standing in the corner of the darkened room. They refused to go near him, until they heard him croon a favorite lullaby they all loved. Then they ran to him all at once.

After all was ready, they were escorted out of the city on their way to Trieste, and from there to choose their next destination.

Yenta Chaya never left their side.

Their only regret was they could never go back to their home in Jerusalem.

Seventy-five years after the incident, I visited Tanta Chana, who was the one who originally told me the

story. Two of her granddaughters also came to see her while I was there. Sura told us how she had an assignment to relate a family story about a grandparent. She told her class the above story, and we all began reminiscing.

Both granddaughters started adding new details. Sura said, “Did you know that the Bubba signed on *Shabbos*?”

“Of course I knew, but did you know that she stopped her *davening* in the middle of *Shmoneh Esray*?”

Bracha said in shock, “and you wrote that our Bubba visited Harav Kook?”

“Of course not,” she screamed, “They would have thrown me out of ‘*Bnos Yerusahlayim*’ (Literally, “Daughters of Jerusalem” – the name of their school) for that offense!”

Chapter 4

From Munkatch to Jerusalem

Chanukah, 1904.

A sliver of a moon and the bright stars lit the way. Avraham Frankel, who had travelled all night long on horseback, stopped and dismounted. He took off the boots and uniform and tied them to the horse that he had “borrowed” from the cavalry division of the Hungarian Army. He carefully tied the horse to a tree near the road and changed clothes, but he had no shoes. He fervently prayed that another soldier or an honest person would find the Army property and return it. He was a scrupulously honest man, and wouldn't think of stealing anything that didn't belong to him. He used the packaging, the paper and string that had contained his change of clothing to wrap his cold feet.

The ice storm that raged during the night left what looked like a smooth coat of glass on the trees. It was magically beautiful, a crystal forest, but brutally cold. The road was slippery and difficult. The nine holly bushes in front of the copse of white birch trees and the lone pine tree helped him get his bearings. The field was familiar. He remembered *Tu BShvat*, when he and his wife, Yenta Chaya, planted a pine tree in

honor of her birthday. They had covered the ground with mulch and burlap to protect it from the frost. He marveled at its growth. Avraham shivered more from fright than the sub-zero temperature as he trudged along the road on his way home to Munkatch.

It was almost midnight when he approached the house. He heard the cry of the baby and saw someone pull the curtain aside. He waved. When he pulled at the door, it was locked. Tears rolled down his cheeks before he could wipe them away, and they almost froze. He whispered when he heard rustling behind the door: "Yenta Chaya! Open the door. Its me, Avraham." Instead of the warm welcome he expected when the door opened, his wife stood directly in front of him with a broom raised ready to strike.

Shocked and amazed to see her husband standing at the door, Yenta Chaya quickly lowered the broom and exclaimed, "Through the window, it looked like you, but I couldn't believe it! I heard a voice but I wasn't sure. I was scared. How did you get away?" she asked.

After staring at his pale face she looked down and saw that his feet were frozen and bruised. He was hungry and in pain. Yenta Chaya ran to the well to fetch water for him to drink and wash. Rummaging in a cupboard, she found a little round tin with healing salve for his feet. She applied the ointment gently and

lovingly. The cold water felt warm to his freezing feet. She boiled a kettle for tea, added some schnapps and took hot bricks from the oven to put into his bed. She prepared a light supper of hot soup and home made bread and butter.

Still, they knew he could not remain at home. They stayed up all night talking and making plans. In the morning, when he went to *daven*, his neighbor, Mayer, said: "Avraham! *Shalom Aleichem!* In the army only one week and they let you come home?"

"Who said they let me?" replied Avraham.

"No! Don't tell us that you just left. When are you going back?"

"I'm not! I can't!"

"You are '*meshuga*' (crazy)! Do you think you can desert the Army? They'll kill you! And all the rest of us!" His neighbor Yussel yelled.

"Avraham! How could you do such a thing to us?" Mayer added.

"Have you any idea what will happen when they find you here? Well have another pogrom!" Yussel screamed.

"Its impossible to remain a Jew in the army. Breakfast – '*chazar*' (pork) sausages. Lunch – *chazar* sandwiches. Supper – pea soup with a *chazar* bone. I fasted a whole week. No food, no Shabbos, nothing! Did I have a

choice? Die of starvation or get caught and hanged! The *'goyim'* (gentiles) were anti-Semitic and ready to kill me. The only civil words they said to me were: "Hey Jew! Aren't you going to eat that food?"

"Take my portion," I'd grumble, pushing my plate towards them.

"Only then did I get a grateful smile. Those sitting near me were happy. They ate my portion and laughed at the crazy, starving Jew. They protected me from the other bullies; *Shabbos*, they saved me from a fate worse than death by covering up for me when I didn't do the tasks assigned me. Probably they just wanted to be sure of getting the extra portion," Avraham said.

"I understand," said Berel, "but to desert! That's so dangerous! For you, and all of us!"

"The only thing I am hearing is that none of you understands – even after all these years of learning together."

When the neighbors left the "*minyan*" (prayer quorum), his cousin Shmeely and his friend Moshe hid Avraham in a dark corner closet in back of the "*mikvah*" (ritual bath). They brought him food every night, and spread a rumor that he had run away. Cautiously, they started collecting money to help him escape before he was found. They approached only close friends and relatives whom they knew could be trusted. Soon a



Bubby Yenta Chaya - Sarah Heller Lebor's grandmother

large amount of money was collected. People gave willingly and eagerly, mostly because they wanted to be rid of him quickly. The truth is, that except for his wife, no one was happy to have him back.

The next morning, there was a loud knock at the door. Yenta Chaya was frightened. This wasn't the familiar knock of her neighbors or relatives. She approached the door and asked: "Who is there?"

"Military Police! Open the door at once!" was the command.

She picked up the youngest daughter, Bracha who was cranky and sick with a fever, then opened the door. Two high ranking officers and two military police stood before her, entered the house and started to shout questions.

“Where is he?”

“That's what I'd like to know,” she answered sadly.

“We'll find him! You know the punishment for desertion.”

She pinched the baby who started to wail.

“When you find him, before you take him to the barracks, do me a favor and let me have him for a while. Look what he did to me! Left me without any food or money for the children. The miserable scoundrel! When I'm finished with him, there won't be much for you to punish, believe me.”

“We still need to look around the house if you don't mind.”

They searched the house thoroughly, but to their surprise, found no trace of him and left.

While her husband was in hiding, Yenta Chaya went to the big black metal trunk standing in the corner of their bedroom. From the bottom, she took out a bundle of letters and papers from America. They were tied together with an old shoelace. She put them into a small new case. This was the solution to their escape.

Avraham and Yenta Chaya had three children under the age of five. They would soon have to part. Tearfully they kissed and hugged the children.

“Why is *Totty* (Father) crying?” Bracha asked her big sister Chava Shaindel.

“I don't know. Maybe the boo boos on his feet are still bleeding and hurt,” she replied.

“We should kiss it better, like he does for us,” Bracha said. “And then maybe he'll stop crying.”

Avraham and Yenta Chaya cuddled each child in their arms, and said: “Be good children and mind Bubby and Zaidy, and the Mima Fraidel. Totty and Mama will soon have to go away for a while. Mama will be back as soon as she can. Remember, listen to Bubby and Zaidy and the Mima.”

Avraham moaned. He understood the gravity of the situation he had caused. He realized that if he left Hungary, he might never see his loving father and mother again, nor his beautiful sister and her children.

He looked into his mother's eyes as he sadly kissed her good-bye.

“If this is G-ds will what can we say? Go in peace, my son, and may G-d protect you from all evil.”

They left the children in the care of Yenta Chaya's parents, Esther Malka and Ephraim Greene, and Yenta

Chaya's sister Fraidy Cohen, an *aguna*, and her children, who lived in the town of Oyhel, Hungary.

“*Vey iz mir!* How are we ever going to be able to live through this without the children?” Avraham cried.

“We have a choice?” Yenta Chaya retorted.

A week later they fled. Under cover of darkness, and scared to death of the enemies within the community, they left without knowing when Yenta Chaya would be able to return for the children.

“How are we going to carry out your plans without being caught?” Avraham wailed.

“Don't worry my beloved! I know in my heart that the '*Reboyno Shel Oylam*' (Master of the Universe) will not forsake us. He will help us find a way to escape. I feel it in my bones that His help is on the way.”

“But, how?” he cried.

“If G-d wills it, even a broom can shoot! Don't lose faith, I beg of you.”

Yenta Chaya had made her plans carefully. She was a beautiful tall young woman with graceful posture, flawless skin, a dimple in her right cheek when she smiled, big black sparkling eyes and long eyelashes. Her style of dress was plain and modest. Now it was time for a change. She was an expert seamstress and it hurt her to spend so much money for new and ready-made clothes; but time was of the essence. In the next

city, she shopped for an elegant Parisian outfit. She ordered a highly styled gray wool suit trimmed with black velvet. She bought a black silk blouse, a black plumed hat, black leather boots with pearl buttons up the side, a black woolen cape, a fur muff to hide her callused hands and ragged fingernails, a string of beads and a small bottle of perfume.

Yenta Chaya reserved two tickets for seats in the first class carriage on the weekly train to Budapest. They sat in different parts of the compartment, Avraham near the window, and she near the door. They pretended not to know each other. The elegant lady sat in her Parisian outfit as if it was her usual mode of dress. It was elegant and admired by the passengers passing through the corridor. The pleasant aroma of her perfume made her smile, despite her fright and nervousness.

This was it – they were now in flight. After all the planning, the action had begun, and they were really running away. They were both frightened. The sweat glistened on Avraham's face and he was fidgeting in his seat, biting his cuticles and fingernails. Before anyone entered their compartment, Yenta Chaya asked him to try and act calmly.

“How can I? I am so frightened. And I can't even open a *'sefer'* (book) to comfort me.”

“Don't you think I'm scared too? Just silently say *Tehilim* as I'm doing, but don't move your lips.”

“No you don't look frightened, scared or anything but beautiful, ladylike and calm. If I hadn't watched you dress and hear your sweet voice myself, I would never believe its really you. You look so different and unlike yourself.”

“Well, my dear husband, you don't look your usual self either, with all the different clothes we borrowed and collected for you, not to mention your new haircut with a very modern trimmed beard and no *payos*. Your brothers will think you did it just to please them and be like them. Don't think we could ever get away with this, if I put on my *Shabbos* dress and the usual ‘*shmatta*’ (rag) on my head that everyone recognizes. That's exactly what we are trying to do: change our appearance enough so that no one will recognize us. Otherwise, the show is over and you will go back to the Army you deserted.”

“G-d forbid! Don't even let those words out of your lips. Don't tempt Satan!”

“Sha! Sha! Remember we don't even know each other. I think someone is coming towards our compartment. Your food is in a little box on the shelf over your head. Eat when you feel like it.”

“If I can.”

Yenta Chaya thought to herself... "Oy, I am so tired and weary. I wish the train would start moving so that I could relax and go to sleep... So much pressure. I can't believe we got this far and are actually pulling this whole thing off. I wish the hour would pass and we would be on our way... Relax? Ha! How can one be relaxed with all the arrangements and all the preparations? And what mother could relax if she had to leave three precious little children behind and run away to save her husband's life? I might look relaxed... I might act like an iron lady, but deep down in my heart and soul, I too am scared that we might be caught... And if we are, then it won't be just Avraham: I would be an accessory to the crime. They can put me in jail as well as Avraham. Even if I were to plead for my children, they would be right in saying: "You should have thought about the children before you started to break the laws of the land, and to think you could outsmart the Hungarian Army."

She sat on the other side near the door. She knew no one would recognize her. She didn't want to tempt fate by sitting close to her husband. Full of anxiety, they prayed for the time to pass quickly. Every additional moment the train stood in the station increased the danger.

In the distance, Yenta Chaya's sharp eyes caught sight of two familiar figures from Munkatch approaching with a posse coming to apprehend her husband.

The conductor didn't recognize Yenta Chaya. She remembered him, though, a Jew who once lived in the neighboring village and had married a beautiful blond *shiksa* and completely assimilated. That was the reason she purchased seats in his car. She approached him and said: "You see those lousy Jews, those miserable *Chasidim*? They are coming for us because we are no longer religious. I am running away with my lover. I don't know what will happen to us. I am so afraid of them. Please help us."

The conductor stood on the lower step and looked up at her. He observed her elegant mode of dress and smelled the sweet aroma of the perfume; she was different from the usual passengers. As she looked down at him, she gave him a stern look and said, "If you don't start this train at once, our lives will be in danger, and I don't know what will happen to you. Please! I beg of you: have mercy!" He looked at her again, and even though it was too early to leave, he quickly pulled the chain for the train to be on its way. She had chosen the seats wisely.

When they had left the station and crossed the town border, Yenta Chaya came and sat next to her

husband. Avraham, concerned for the two fellow Jews leading the posse, said, “Do you know what will happen to those two men? They brought the police here on a wild goose chase? They will be made to pay for this.”

“Oy! Avraham, You are a *Tzadik*. That's why I love you and admire your *Midos* – your character. You can only see good in people. Will you ever learn? Do you think that G-d wants us to have pity on informers, on *moisrim*? They are traitors. They are doing it because of the big reward they expected to collect. No other reason. And they go around masquerading as law abiding religious Jews. I spit on them and their false beliefs. Have no fear, we won't be punished for what were doing. But I wouldn't want to get the punishment that awaits them!”

With great fear and trepidation in their hearts, they made their way to the port city of Trieste. At the American Embassy, visas had been arranged.

Amazed at his wifes resourcefulness, he asked “How did you arrange this, *mein leib*, my love?”

Yenta Chaya explained with a slight embarrassed look on her face: “A long time ago, your brother Shmeely, in New York, sent papers for us to come to America. He said most of the family was in New York. He wrote that there were great financial opportunities there. Your three brothers are operating a successful

laundry business. They wanted to unite the rest of the family. He enclosed two paid steamship tickets for us.

But when I saw that *Duvidle* had become David, president of the company, *Shmeely* had become Sam and *Chaim* became Charlie, I knew it was not for us. I hid the papers and the voucher for two paid steamship tickets. I wouldn't consider such a thing."

"Now I have forced a change in the situation." Avraham said quietly.

"Yes, things change," Yenta answered.

"Also, when I went to arrange for my outfit, I sent a telegram to your brother Shmeely. I wasn't sure that I would get a reply. I was afraid to sign my name, I had to send it with hidden meanings, hoping he would understand. He did, and that's why the money, reservations and other legal documents were ready and waiting for us."

The waiting time seemed like an eternity for the next boat which sailed for New York, even though it was only some two weeks away. In any case, they certainly did not enjoy the weeks of freedom.

They arrived in New York and were welcomed with great joy by Avraham's three brothers and two sisters. A job was waiting for Avraham as a *mashgiach* – kashruth supervisor in a "*schlact hoise*" (a kosher slaughter house). Though the salary wasn't good, it was

a job, and Avraham was grateful. They stayed with his sister Sarah, or Zallie, as she was affectionately called, because she was religiously observant. His sister Esther also lived nearby and visited often, but her children were not observant and felt that their brother Avraham and his wife Yenta Chaya would not be comfortable if they lived there.

Yenta Chaya had too much energy to be able to sit still. Two mornings after she arrived, she walked out of the house to look around the neighborhood. She came to a storefront factory that was manufacturing fancy dresses for little girls.

A woman approached her and asked, “Can I help you?”

“Yes, I would like to see the boss.”

“What is it you want?”

“I would like a job,” Yenta Chaya answered in Hungarian accented Yiddish.

The woman went to her husband, ridiculed Yenta Chayas plain dress, ugly shoes and thick black stockings, the *shmatta* on her head and her accent, and whispered to him in German: “Can you imagine the chutzpa, she wants a job making our beautiful dresses. Who does she think she is?”

The husband answered “Maybe she knows how to sew. You know how pressured we are to have orders ready in time for Pesach.”

“Don't be such a fool. Just look at her. Does she look like she would be able to produce quality merchandise like ours? She has no concept of style. We could be ruined.”

Without another word, Yenta Chaya lifted up her skirt, undid her stocking and took out a ten dollar bill. In their “*Heuch Deutsch*” (High German) dialect and accent, she said: “I don't think this dress costs more. Take the money as security. Let me have the dress and the necessary material, tell me what to do. If you Aren't satisfied with my work, you keep the money and the dress.”

The wife still hesitated, but the husband felt that he had nothing to lose. He gave Yenta Chaya the necessary material. She sat down and produced the exact dress, but with two major exceptions: the workmanship was superb, and the job was finished in record time. Yenta Chaya had a job! The family was happy, and arranged for them to move into their own apartment, with Yenta Chaya observing and supervising every single detail.

But one day, Yenta Chaya suddenly blurted out: “This kind of life is not for us.”

“Why not?” Sam wanted to know. “You both have jobs, you will soon be able to go back and bring the children, and you will all have a good life here in the *goldene medina*. After all, this is the land of opportunity.”

Yenta Chayas answer was firm: “We have been here almost two months. I have seen what has happened to *Yiddishkeit* in the family. This is not for us! We cannot stay here. Avraham, you have two choices, you can stay here and give me a *get*, or we can go to live in Jerusalem. What is your choice?”

Avraham was shocked. “What kind of a question is that? Do you think that I can let you out of my life? You are my life,” Avraham replied. “I will work one more month, I can work day and night, plus the money we have, it should be enough. We will remain with Zallie, since she is the only one who will understand our decision. She is the only one who hasn't changed her religious beliefs and customs. But we can't leave now, before Pesach. The day after Pesach, I will go for the children. I have already made inquiries. We can travel together to Trieste, from there, I will travel to Oyhel, as planned.”

And so, just a day after Pesach, they both boarded the ship headed for Trieste, where they were to go their separate ways: she to get the children, and he to go alone to Jerusalem to await their arrival.

They settled themselves in at their appointed places, and heaved a sigh of relief.

Yenta Chaya mused to herself, "*Liber Got,*" Dear *G-d*, this has been such a harrowing and disappointing experience. I thought that our troubles would be over by coming to America. I see now that it was a big mistake. However, everything is "*L'tova l'tova*", for the best. If we hadn't made the trip, we might have always felt that we didn't do the right thing. Now I know it was a mistake.

I wouldn't like to say for sure, but I wonder if any of Avrahams brothers keep a kosher home? They certainly don't keep Shabbos, and they would like to see my Avraham, my "*Tzaddik*" (righteous one), be the same way. I am sure, however, that he wouldn't succumb to their influence, just as Esther or Zallie did not. Can you imagine how upset he would be if he couldn't share a *Shabbos* or a *Yom Tov* meal with them at their home? The best thing they could think of was, "Avraham you will stay with Zallie, because she is more observant than we are. I wonder about observant – what does it mean to them? Do they still remember what that is? They never even invited us to their homes for a cup of tea or coffee.

I am so tired, even though they think that I am made of iron. I dare not show any weakness to them,

or I will be finished. Avraham is so afraid of my going back to Oyhel to get the children. Do I have a choice? Of course not! I promised that I would return as soon as possible, and that's what I must do. I can't leave them one day more than necessary.

With G-ds help, when we are united again, my Avraham will have lost his fear and nervousness and will be able to be the head of the family again. I am glad I was able to take over for him. When we will live in Yerushalyaim, we will do everything together like we used to, Oy! *Rebboyno shel Oylem*, with YOUR help it should only be soon.”

Before they could even get themselves comfortable, they heard a commotion of someone walking around with a foghorn and bellowing loudly.

“ADOLF FRANKEL AVRAHAM FRANKEL! REPORT TO THE CAPTAIN OR THE BURSAR AT ONCE!! ADOLF FRANKEL AVRAHAM FRANKEL ADOLF FRANKEL! REPORT AT ONCE!”

“Why do they want me?”

“Why do you think? Zallie told me to be careful.”

Yenta Chaya knew immediately that this was her brother-in-law Sam trying to prevent them from sailing on the ship. He would stop at nothing to get them back. He loved his brother. It had been a constant battle from the day they had arrived in New York.

Yenta Chaya found a place in a corner of the bathrooms where they kept the cleaning supplies. She hid Avraham deep inside and rolled him up with a clean blanket. She told him not to come out of hiding until she herself came personally to get him.

It was several months later when they received a letter from Zallie confirming their fears that Sam had tried unsuccessfully to get Avraham and Yenta Chaya back. Sam cried, "I love them and I want them to be with us as a whole family. Why should we be seperated?"

Sam had signed an affidavit with the police that his brother Avraham, whose legal name was Adolph, had taken something very valuable without his permission, so he was wanted by the authorities.

Yenta Chaya said, "Why must my life be so fraught with anxiety, coming and going? First the escape from Munkatch and the train, and now the great escape leaving New York?"

Fortunately, Avraham was in complete agreement with her tactics, because he trusted her wisdom and knew she was right. Therefore, he cooperated with her fully. She was the boss for now! He was too tense and not able to think clearly. He still was traumatized by the fear of the Hungarian Army arresting him for desertion, a grave and frightening thought, not to mention the realization that he would probably never

see his father, mother and sister again. After a tension filled time, the ship finally moved out to sea. They were both disappointed that they were unable to wave from the ship, throw kisses and get a last glimpse of their family. But this is how it had to be. Yenta Chaya finally fetched her husband from his hiding place. He was lying down quietly, covered in a sweat of fright, but was relieved at being able to finally come out of his hiding place and he and Yenta Chaya were both able to relax and look out at the sea.

They arrived in Trieste, where they had to part once more. Yenta Chaya headed back to the home of her parents to get their children. Her sister-in-law, Fradel, with two children of her own, were caring for the children with her parents in Oyhel, Hungary. Avraham was headed to Jerusalem to wait for them. The family just had to be united, and indeed, their happiness knew no bounds when this finally occurred in the Old City of Jerusalem... To begin a new life, in a new country, a new life style, new food, new climate, new neighbors, new languages, new customs, new everything!

A long way from Munkatch... It was a long way from home... But now, in Jerusalem, they were truly home! Home At Last!

Chapter 5

Gallipoli

My mother's youngest sister. Tanta Chana, was a wonderful story teller in later life. With her eleven children married and on their own, she loved to share her memories of our family. She spoke a lot about her brother Moshe. In fact, she spoke so much about him, despite our never having met, I felt as if I knew him quite well. My mother would also speak about her only living brother, but Tanta Chana's stories were much longer and contained many details that hardly anyone else knew about. The stories truly intrigued me, and I felt very fortunate to hear this part of our family's history. They were precious to me because our immediate family lived in New York, separated from everyone else. Papa and many of his friends fled Jerusalem in the early 1920s due to famine, with my own brother dying of malnutrition. My father could just not tolerate the fact that no food was available for his family.

He left a very sad man. His pain could be seen on his face and the faces of Mama and my brother Ephraim, as they starved. Yet it was still not an easy decision to leave. For one thing, they did not have enough

money to buy tickets for all of them together. Papa would have to go first, leaving Mama, a young woman, pregnant, and alone with a sick child, as we waited for him to send her tickets for the rest of the family, like so many others did at that time. But even worse were the dire implications of leaving Jerusalem in terms of the family, because Papa's father told him that should he leave Jerusalem for New York, he would never have any contact with him again, would not write to him and nor would he accept or receive letters from him. He was certain that no matter how bad things were in *Eretz Yisrael*, leaving for the spiritual wasteland and decadent United States would be catastrophic. As he told Papa: "You are going to take your children to a '*goyisha*' (non-Jewish) land and you will raise '*goyisha kinder*' (children). I will not, and cannot, accept such action on your part."

Baruch Hashem, how wrong he was! It is four generations now, and we can still say that the entire family is 100% religious and that all of his offspring are, thank G-d, observant Jews! I can only imagine how difficult it was for Papa to choose between what was almost certain death for all of us if we stayed in Jerusalem, or being essentially disowned by his own father! On the other hand, of course, my paternal grandfathers fears and anger were understandable,

since so many Jews in their desperation to escape the real horrors of persecution, pogroms and starvation did indeed sacrifice their spiritual and religious lives for material comforts and freedom. Who can really judge? It is hard for anyone today to imagine what it is like to literally be without food, but that's how it was in *Eretz Yisrael* at the time, not to mention the constant struggle with Arab marauders, unsympathetic authorities and whatever else. A Jew had to be tough and determined to an extent most of us simply can't fathom. And hearing Tanta Chana's stories, we certainly were in awe at the resilience and bravery of our parents and grandparents, especially my Bubby, Yenta Chaya Frankel.

She was not afraid of anyone. Nothing fazed her. One morning she awoke to find that her son Moshe had not slept in his bed. Where was he? What happened to him? She was very distressed and left the house to look for him. She ran rapidly to all the possible places where he might be. Was he in *Shul*? Was he in the *Yeshiva*? Was he a victim of a fist fight with one of the unfriendly Arab inhabitants? When she arrived at the Yeshiva, her sharp eyes rested upon one of his friends, and my Bubby immediately felt that if anyone knew what happened to Moshe it would be *Chatzkil*, his "*chavrusa*" (study partner) and friend. She motioned

for him to come and speak to her. He really didn't want to leave his seat and be so conspicuous, but he knew better than to refuse her. At first he told her that he had no idea of Moshe's whereabouts, but it didn't take long for her to get the true story. Moshe had heard about the desperate need for soldiers to help in the Battle of Gallipoli during World War I, which was fought between the British and French allies against the Ottoman Turks. Since Gallipoli was not that far from Palestine, a Turkish victory could have presented a major threat to its inhabitants. Moshe felt an obligation to do whatever he could to help the situation, so he decided to join the allied forces.

It didn't take very long for Bubby to find out exactly where he was. He had been in the army long enough to be trained for battle. She was in shock, but kept her cool, soon discovering that Moshe was at the railroad station ready to depart for Gallipoli.

Seeing that the engine was already firing up to go, Bubby stood herself on the tracks right in front of the train and refused to move. She raised her arms to *Hashem* and she cried out hysterically, "*Got in Himmel*, please help me rescue my only son. You have always come to me and my familys aid when we were in danger. What can be worse for me? I gave birth to thirteen children, but only three have lived to this day; you

never did forsake me before, and I beg of you to have *'rachmunus'* (mercy) now, as you always had before!”

The furious captain strutted to Bubby and demanded that she move and let the soldiers proceed to their important, if grave, assignment, which was to help the allies in the struggle against the German-allied Turks.

She ignored his request: “I will not budge until you return my son. You have no right to have him in your command. What you are doing is illegal.”

“On what grounds do you make such a serious and terrible accusation?” he asked.

“How many reasons do you need?”

- He is underage
- He is a *'ben yachid'* (only son).
- He does not have our permission.”

The captain sent some of his soldiers to search for the young man, but they didn't find him.

“He is not on the train! Now you must leave!”

“I know that he is on that train. Your crew did not do a good enough search. I will not move until you release my son. I will stand here until you find him.”

The soldiers were sent to search again and this time found him, wrapped in a blanket hiding under a bench. They examined his identity card and were shocked to find that his mother was telling the truth: he was underage! He was quickly pushed off the train.

When he reached his mothers side, she took him by the ear and demanded to know why he was putting his life in danger as she dragged him home. Was he insane to walk into such a death trap? Didn't he know what he was doing? What came over him...what was he thinking...?

But that was my *Bubby*. Even today, I stand in awe of her fearlessness, which no doubt inspired and influenced all of us when we faced our own difficult and desperate trials and tribulations in life.

Chapter 6

The Thief of Jerusalem

In the Holy City of Jerusalem there lived an old woman whose name was Yenta Chaya Frankel. She called Jerusalem her home, although she was not born there. She loved the city and felt privileged to be a part of it. Upon her arrival in the Holy Land, after Pesach, 1905, she, her husband Avraham and family moved to the Old City facing "*Har Habayit*" (the Temple Mount). But after the bloody riots of 1936, the Arabs got their wish, and the Frankels and so many others of their friends and neighbors were expelled from the Old City, and moved to the neighborhood of *Meah Shearim* in the "New" City. But no matter where Yenta Chaya lived, she knew every part of Jerusalem, old and new.

Immediately after the Six Day War in June of 1967, Yenta Chaya's daughter Chana Fisher, accompanied her two nieces, Rivka Rabinowitz, Sarah Gitel and Sarah Gitel's husband Shaya Lebor to the Old City from the United States in order to show them where their grandparents had lived before they were driven out. But as they came into the courtyard there was a sign which read:

PRIVATE PROPERTY – NO ENTRY!

Nonetheless, this did not stop Chana. Suddenly an Arab came out of the house. Chana immediately announced, "I wanted to show them the former home of Yenta Frankel."

"Aaah, Yonta Fronkel! I remember her! I remember when I was a little boy of five," he said, smiling, indicating how little he was then, "I was sitting in this very courtyard over there on the steps crying bitterly because I was hungry and I had pains in my stomach. I hadn't been given anything to eat that day or the day before. I still remember the pangs of that hunger, even though it was more than forty years ago. Yes, many years have passed since then, but I shall never forget when Yonta asked me: 'Ahmed, why are you crying?'"

'Yonta, I'm crying because I'm hungry and I have nothing to eat!' She told me to stop crying, took a clean rag from her pocket, dried my tears, wiped my runny nose, held my hand and took me into her house and gave me bread and jam. I shall never forget how delicious that tasted. She also gave me a glass of milk and hot water. It looked funny because there was skin on top of the milk. She called it *boyt*, and explained that the skin was the result of boiling the milk in order to preserve its freshness, and that it would taste good and was good for me. I didn't believe her, but I was so hungry that I drank it anyway. It was delicious! Please

don't go away. Come into my house and be my guests. She was a wise, wonderful lady and a good neighbor, and although she was tough, she knew when to be kind. Come into my house and be my guests.”

“We are late and must be getting on.”

“Wait! Don't go away. At least let me bring you something to drink. It's hot today and it's very important that you drink a lot. He ran into the house and came out with a tray of cold drinks.”

Upon leaving, Tanta Chana told the following story:

All these rooms surrounding this courtyard, near the “*Ungarisha*” (Hungarian) *shul*, were owned by the



Uncle Menachema ndT anta Chana (Sarah'sA unt)a ndt heir children

“*mughtar*” (village head), but occupied by Jews. Yenta Chaya was in charge of collecting the rent. The *mughtar* was pleased with his tenants.

“Are you going to rent only to Jews?” the Arabs asked.

“Of course not! If my Arab brothers want to live here when there's a vacancy they can have it.”

He did try to rent to Arabs, but the Arabs weren't happy. They complained that the Jews didn't let them sleep. There were prayers going on all night long. At midnight there were prayers, wailing because of the destruction of the Temple, and men would stay up all night reciting Psalms out loud. The Arabs didn't stay.

About 65 Jewish families had lived there for as long as anyone could remember. Some old timers said it was more than 60 years.

The *mughtar* died, leaving five sons. The eldest was a lawyer, the middle two were dentists and the youngest two were doctors. The lawyer, who apparently had the controlling interest regarding the rental agreements, made no secret of his sentiments: He wanted to be rid of all the Jewish tenants, and immediately.

The Jews were distraught. Housing was scarce, and if 60-65 families had to find housing all at once, it would create a hardship for all of them. They went to the *Leliver Rebbi*, Reb Shimon Biderman, who

listened to their tale of woe and calmly directed them to go home and carry on their business as usual, because no one would be displaced. Many of the Jews remained skeptical, some had faith in the Rabbi's words, and others simply waited to see what would happen. The pious ones sat and prayed to G-d in their own way, either through *Tehilim* or other prayers of their choice.

The lawyer let it be known that the houses would soon be occupied by his Arab brothers, and all the Jews received notice that their housing was needed immediately. One Friday morning, as was his custom, the lawyer proceeded to the public baths for his weekly bath. He was a strikingly tall, handsome man, who commanded respect. He came out and stood on the top step and looked around. He was wearing a beautiful grey tailored suit. He lit a cigarette, exhaled a cloud of smoke and then threw the flaming match away. But just as the flame of the match died, so did he. A doctor was hastily summoned, and officially pronounced the lawyer dead at the scene.

When the Jews ran to tell Rav Biderman what had transpired, he said, "Nu...I told you that you wouldn't have to move." No one dared interfere with the Jews living in those buildings ever again!

The year was 1919. Times were bad. Yenta Frankel's daughter, Chava Shaindel and Avraham Chaim Nusan Heller married. A year later they had a little baby boy, Ephraim, named after Yenta's father Ephraim Greene. He was a beautiful baby, but fell ill because of malnutrition! Chava Shaindel was pregnant again, and her husband Avraham, at the age of 20, could not tolerate the fact that he wasn't able to provide for his young family. Times were bitter, there was simply no food to be had in the city of Jerusalem, and in 1920 many people died of malnutrition and even starvation.

The young couple Chava Shaindel and Avraham therefore decided on a very painful plan. They would do as many of their close friends had done in 1920 and 1921, which was to emigrate to the land of opportunity, the United States of America. First, Avraham would go, in order to earn enough money for a fare for his wife, son and unborn child to join him later. But his was far from easy.

Avraham's father, Yitzchak Dov, told him that if he dared to think of leaving Jerusalem, the city of his birth, to go to America, he would never write to him. And true to his word, Avraham's father never read his letters, nor allowed his name to be mentioned in his home ever again.

It was a very difficult decision! Nevertheless, Avraham was determined and did leave for America. True to his word, his father never communicated with him. He truly feared that his children would grow up to be *goyim* – like non-Jews, if they lived in America.

Yenta Chaya was not told anything; her children were too scared. She only found out 6 weeks later when one of her neighbors asked her, “Nu, what do you hear from your son-in-law, Avraham? How is he doing?” She was too busy earning her own livelihood to go visiting. If, on a *Shabbos*, she came to her daughter's house and Avraham wasn't in, she assumed that he was in the *Kollel* learning.

She marched into her daughter's house, slammed the door shut and demanded to know what was going on. It was then that Chava Shaindel started to cry and confessed to her why Avraham had sailed for New York without saying good-bye to her. They were too frightened to tell her.

Before Avraham had earned enough money for the *shifs cartel*, his wife's ticket, Chava Shaindel sent this letter:

Chanukah 1922

“*Tzu Mein Leiber tayerer mon, zul laiben un zein gezunt biz 120...* To my dear, loving husband, may he live and be well, till 120,

I received your welcome letter, and it was good to hear that you are well and have a good job with kind people who are pleased with your work. I am happy that you are renting a room with one of our friends, and feel at home.

I received the money that you sent, and was able to buy a little food, thank G-d. It is Chanukah, the candles are lit and shining brightly in all the houses, and people are rejoicing.

However, I am sitting here with a pen in my hand and I am unable to write what is in my heart, which is broken. I don't know how to tell you of the terrible tragedy that has befallen us. Maybe your father with all his wrath and anger was right. Maybe we shouldn't have decided to leave the Holy City of Jerusalem. Maybe hard luck would have escaped us.

I know it sounds like I'm babbling on like an old woman, though I haven't reached my twenty-third birthday. I feel old. My dear husband, how can I tell you that our little baby that you loved and hugged, will never feel your caresses again?

I find it so hard to put down on paper that our little baby, Ephraim, will never be able to put his arms around your neck and give you his sweet little cheek to be kissed. I can't put down on paper that he is no longer with us. Yes, he is in *Gan Eden*. As you know,

he had been suffering from malnutrition. His body lacked minerals. He would scrape and eat the lime from the walls, and had to be watched constantly. The doctor said that if he ate the lime one more time, he would die. But he ate the lime because his little body craved it, and he died.

While I was sitting “*shiva*” (seven days of mourning) by myself, one of the neighbors said that G-d was short of little angels, and so He sent for him. The remark did not comfort me.

Oy! Avraham, I can't take the pain. At least if we were together, but to have to write this to you, and that we should both suffer alone, is just more than I can bear. The thought occurred to me not to tell you at all, but you know with so many people going to New York these times, it wasn't possible to keep this a secret.

As you can imagine, the receipt of the *shifs cartel* was received with a bittersweet feeling. Bitter, because I now have to make arrangements to cancel Ephraim's ticket, and leave him all alone on “*Har Hazeisim*” (The Mount of Olives); sweet, because we will soon be united and we will not have to bear this terrible tragedy separated from one another.

The family and neighbors have been wonderful to me, and for this I am grateful to G-d. Paulina, my

“*Sefardisha*” (Sephardic) neighbor and friend, never left my side. She was with me when Sarah Gitale was born. She was with me for a “*simcha*” (a joyous occasion or event), and now in my sorrow. May G-d bless her loyalty, warmth and understanding.

With best wishes for your good health, and in the hope that we will never have to undergo such tragedy again. I look forward to joining you soon, with the help of G-d.”

Your loving wife,
Chava Shaindel

On August 3rd, 1923. Chava Shaindel arrived in New York with her daughter Sarah Gitel, born to her while her husband was in America. An apartment on the third floor in the then fashionable section of Harlem at 14 West 112th Street was ready for mother and daughter when they arrived.

Chava Shaindel became pregnant soon after her arrival, and the family moved down to the first floor. One of the neighbors said. “One does not move down, one should always move up”.

Chava Shaindel's new friend and neighbor, Mrs. Gershon, replied: “Nonsense! From this house you will move into your own new house!”

So it was! Shortly thereafter, they made a down payment of \$500.00, partly borrowed, on a house in Brighton Beach, where some of their “*landsleit*” (people from their hometown) had settled.

For the next twenty years, they lived in the house they loved. The family grew to six children. It was a happy household, until tragedy struck.

After a long lingering illness, on the 27th of Sivan, 5701, June 22, 1941, Chava Shaindel became a widow and the children were orphaned. She struggled hard to support and raise the children, who were her pride and joy.

In the spring of 1950, Yenta Chaya wrote to her daughter telling her that one of her childhood friends by the name of Henya was widowed and had a daughter who was to be married. However, the marriage couldn't take place because they had no money, and nothing with which to set up housekeeping.

Chava Shaindel was troubled and really in no position to help, since she herself had been widowed at the age of forty, and life had been far from easy. She did her best to collect money and items to be sent to the bride. She spoke to friends and family and implored them to please help her raise money for the young bride-to-be. She called her married daughter Sarah Gitel and begged her to try and ask all her friends

to help raise the necessary funds so that the marriage could take place as soon as possible.

“Oh Ma, you should know by now that I'm not much good at raising money. When my daughter, Rivky Esther, comes home from school with raffle tickets, I don't even let her go out and try to sell them. I just buy the tickets myself. I'll give you a check. That's the best I can do.”

Chava Shaindel was not too pleased with that response and continued to implore Sarah Gitel to do better.

“I'll try but, please, Ma don't expect too much.”

About a week passed and there was a knock on Sarah Gitel's door. There stood Mrs. Stone and her daughter Ruthie, with a great big pile of the most beautiful linens and a very handsome sum of money.

“This is for the orphaned bride in Jerusalem.”

“Mrs. Stone, how did you know about the bride in Jerusalem?”

“My daughter was visiting you while your mother called. She didn't eavesdrop but she did hear your conversation. You are not too good at collecting, but I am. I too want to have a share in the *mitzvah* of helping to marry an orphaned bride in The Holy City of Jerusalem.”

The linens were most beautiful, even if some of them were not so new. The bride would never know, however, because they looked brand new. The amounts of things were so staggering, however, that it would be impossible to mail them to Jerusalem. So Chava Shaindel had to find an alternate way to send the big black trunk filled to the brim with sheets, pillowcases, big towels, little towels, dish towels, quilts, blankets, tablecloths and napkins. The hand embroidery on some of the pillowcases would surely make the poor girl a very happy bride.

Reb Chaim, her son-in-law, was going to visit his father in Jerusalem, and happily consented to take the trunk with him on the boat. He arrived in Jerusalem and then went to visit Yenta Chaya Frankel, his wife's grandmother, and deliver the trunk. With great joy he announced:

“This trunk of things is for the bride.”

“The bride, which bride? I'm busy collecting for three brides. Which one is this for?”

“I really don't know. However, if there is a question as to which bride this is for, write to your daughter and ask her”.

“Ha! Ha! Did you say that I should write to my daughter? Till I write to my daughter and until my daughter will answer me, the young bride will be an

old maid. I really don't know what to do. There's really so much in the trunk, it could suffice for more than three brides.”

“Whatever you do, it will be good!” Reb Chaim proclaimed.

Yenta Chaya divided the contents up for the three brides. Nevertheless, she wrote to her daughter immediately, and, wonder of wonders, she received an immediate reply.

“My dear Mama, May you live and be well till 120, I was happy to receive your most welcome letter. It was good to hear that everything arrived safely. I was pleased to hear that, Thank G-d, you are all well and busy doing *mitzvos*. Thank the Almighty, we are managing. We are all healthy, and the children are learning well, which is the most important thing.

With regard to the brides; if there are three brides, I am happy that there is enough for all of them, and if you divided the trunk load amongst them, let them use it in good health. However, you wrote to me about my old childhood friend, Henya, who is marrying off her daughter. But if you distributed the contents for the three brides then, it is fine with me. Love and be well. From your loving daughter who misses you,”

Love and kisses,
Chava Shaindel

Yenta Frankel was beside herself. She went into a panic. She was hysterical.

“*Oy Gevalt! Vey is mere!* What have I done? How will I ever be able to redeem myself? How will I ever be able to replace the items that I have stolen from Henya's daughter? *Oy Veh!* I'm a *'gonivta'* (a common thief). How will I be able to live with this sin on my head? What should I do? My daughter says that it's fine with her, but what will be with me? Reb Chaim said, it will be good, not to worry. But in my heart I know that I am a *'gonivta'* (thief). I will have to repay the rightful owner for all those beautiful things that were stolen from her by me. I cannot ask the other two brides to return the stolen merchandise. They were so ecstatic at the receipt of such a lovely dowry.

“I will have to make restitution, but how? Hashem will help me find a solution. I am sure He will give me the strength and the wisdom to do the right thing. A person cannot take from one *'tzedaka'* (charity) and give it to another. This was designated for Henya's daughter and it belongs to her and to her alone! They must understand! Am I the only one who realizes this? I cannot remain a thief!”

Yenta Frankel, who was always seen around the neighborhood helping other people, suddenly disappeared. Hardly anyone ever saw her. People

wondered what had happened to her. She was not available. Where could she be?

One day, her close friend, Mindel, met her early in the morning, but she could hardly believe that it was Yenta. She was rushing by “*shlepping*” (dragging along) a heavy shopping bag.

“Yenta! Yenta! Stop! I must speak to you. Where have you been? I've been looking for you and you are never home, not even on *Shabbos*. Where have you disappeared to? What has happened to you?”

“I really can't talk to you now.”

“Yenta, I am your best friend, you never kept any secrets from me. Please tell me what's troubling you. Perhaps I can help you.”

“No one can help me except the “*Ribboyno Shel Oylam*”.

“I see that you are in a great hurry and are impatient. However, now that I have found you, I will not let you go until you either tell me what is troubling you or you tell me when we can talk.”

“*Bseder*, I give you my word. With the help of G-d, I will come to your house at the earliest opportunity. I'm sorry that I cannot give you a time now. It is not in my hands. I will come to see you within a day or two and I'll tell you all about my problem”.

On the following *Shabbos*, Yenta came and told her understanding friend her tale of woe. Her friend immediately understood her dilemma.

“So, how are you going to be able to repay such a huge debt?” her friend Mindel wanted to know.

“Where do you think an old lady of 78 could get a job? I found an American Rabbi Chill, whose wife is ill. He can't take care of the house or his wife. That's why I am never home. I must be there early in the morning to bathe and dress her and make breakfast. I do the shopping, laundry, cooking, cleaning, wash the floor, cook and serve them their meals.

When the rabbi comes home from *Maariv* in the evening, she is ready for bed and then I can go home. If they knew that I was older than they are, I am certain they would look for someone younger; but they wouldn't find anyone more willing or more desperate for this job than I.

I pray fervently to Our Father in heaven every single day that He will sustain me and enable me to continue in this path until I have repaid the debt to Henyas daughter, until I have made full restitution so that I will no longer be the *Gonivta* of Jerusalem.”

He did, and Yenta was able to happily abandon her self-proclaimed title of the “*Gonivta of Jerusalem!*”

Chapter 7

The Stranger in the Boydem

My Bubby, Yenta Chaya, was on her way home after a long day at the Diskin Hospital. Her feet were aching from standing all day ironing the doctors and nurses uniforms. She worked quickly doing the work of several people, and needed more gas irons than the other workers to keep up her pace. She was tired, and couldn't wait to be at her kitchen table drinking a cup of hot tea. The long walk to her home in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City was fraught with tension. She was always worried that the British may find a way to disturb her daily routine. Some of the Arabs were good neighbors, but the strangers that did not live in the same area frightened her when she had to walk home alone in the dark.

Even though the wind was blowing in her face, her sharp eyes caught sight of a strange man trying to hide in a corner behind a large plant. At first the dark figure startled her, but then something about the man's presence made her more curious than scared. Why was he trying to conceal himself? And why did he come to their quiet neighborhood? And who was going to be

harmful as a result of his presence? Something about the man disturbed her terribly. She approached him.

“What are you doing here? What business do you have in this neighborhood? Are you looking for someone? Do you have someone to look for?” The stranger did not budge or say a word, so Yenta Chaya pressed further.

“Don't we have enough problems without uninvited strangers disturbing the peace? What is it you want? Where do you come from? What is your name?”

Yenta Chaya was a daring woman. She might have been frightened, but not enough to run away.

She walked towards the man. As she got closer she saw that he was properly dressed like Orthodox Jews of the area: a long black capota, a flat black hat, a beard and *payos*. She spoke with authority, and something in her voice showed him that she was concerned about his welfare.

He realized that she meant no harm and might be helpful, so he proceeded to ask her to please stay away, because if the army or police discovered his presence, his life would be in mortal danger. “I am Rabbi Yisrael Sassover. Please do not ask me any more questions.” Yenta Chaya still wanted to know if he had any family or acquaintances that live here.

“No I do not have family that reside here. I always admired the character of the area and the neighborhood. The residents care about each other, as if they were relatives. I still remember learning that in Europe, when I was in the Yeshiva. That was long before I studied law in Warsaw.”

“Yes, I agree with you about our wonderful neighbors..... You told me who you are, but I want to know what you are doing here: perhaps I can help you. I have to know why you are seeking a place to be safe. Our *'boydem'* (attic) is large, and contains only the boards of our Succah. *'BEzrat Hashem'* (with G-ds help) you will be safe and comfortable, as others were before you. Someone will bring you food and anything else you will need.”

And so it was: Every morning before going to shul, a reliable neighbor or relative made sure that the man had enough *seforim* with which to learn, as well as breakfast, water to drink, a blanket, a pail to take care of his needs, and anything that he might need to keep him comfortable.

Somebody was always sitting, praying or playing in front of the door, so if they noticed anyone who looked out of place or who seemed to be searching the area, they immediately started a disturbance. That was a signal for the mystery man in the *boydem* to start

pushing sand through a hole in the middle of the top doorway. This was a signal for Bubby or some other trusting person to come out and start yelling. This act was a way of distracting the searches being conducted for the mysterious man in the *boydem*. They knew who they were looking for, but no one knew his identity. Bubby knew his alias, but not his legal name. After he left the *boydem*, the people that assisted his stay wanted to know his identity and the reason “the man in the *boydem*” was hiding out and seeking refuge.

It took a long, long time for them to learn that the Mystery Man was to one day become the Prime Minister of Israel by the name of Menachem Begin!



Menachem Begin

Chapter 8

The "Shadchinteh"

The Matchmaker

“Yenta Chaya, *a gut morgan*, good morning! How are you feeling, after that nasty incident when Abu Salem tried to pinch you yesterday?” asked her neighbor Surah Heller.

“I suggest you ask Abu Salem how he is feeling with all my precious 50 grams of fresh black pepper in his eyes and all over his stupid face. Trust me; he will not start up with one of us again. Before he tried to run out of the room in all his pain and agony – as he tapped the table and the wall to get his bearings – you should have heard him begging me not to tell his uncle, our landlord and neighbor the *‘Mughtar’* (village head)! I think he would have killed him. We will all be safer now, with G-ds help.”

“Oy! *Baruch Hashem* – I am so relieved. Now that I know you are feeling good... And no one is here, we can talk.”

“Nu, so what's on your mind? You look so serious. Is everything going well with you? Is everyone in the family well?”

“Yes! Yes! *Baruch Hashem!* – “Your Chava Shaindel, so aptly named. Shaindel is as beautiful as her name; her heart and soul are more so. She is past 18 and I have a *shidduch* for her. Please forgive me, I still think of her as a child.”

“I can still see her tears as the children mocked her, sang and danced around her: Chava Shaindel, Chava Shaindel *‘mit a longa kladel’* (the long sleeves).”

“She is grown up now and we must think and talk *tachlis.*”

“Nu! So who is the *‘choson’* (the groom) you have in mind for me to be his *‘shviger’* (mother-in-law)?” Yenta Chaya retorted.

“Ah! – He is a wonderful young man; learns well. Before and after he helps his mother in her little store, he travels by donkey to the neighboring towns to procure olive oil and other merchandise for her. When he is around, his mother wouldn't dare *shlep* a sack or move a single can. When no one is looking, he even bakes the *challah* and does the *‘sponga’* (mopping the floor) for her. He is handsome and comes from a family with *yichus* almost as great as yours; he has *‘midos’* (character traits) almost as good as your Chava Shaindel.”

“*‘Takeh’* (really)? Nu, so tell me who is this *‘mitziyah’* (great find), that you admire so.”

“Uh... what can I tell you about him that you don't already know? I am – I uh – I am talking about my Avraham, my *'bchor'* (*first born*). What do you think?”

“What can I say? I don't have to hire a *“balash”* (a detective). He doesn't have to be investigated. I don't have to find out anything about him. We know our children. I will talk it over with my husband, and Avraham and Chava Shaindel to ask their opinions.”

She wrapped her outstretched arms around her best friend and neighbor and whispered in her ear. “Sha! Sha! In the meantime, for my part; Mazal Tov! But we must wait till we ask – you know – you understand- If the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, Blessed Be He, wants, it will be so!”

“Yes, I know! Yes, I understand I would be truly blessed to have her for a daughter-in-law.”

And so it was. They decided it was a good *“shidduch”* (match).

A short time later the young couple was married.

The marriage took place on a Friday, which was a common practice so that the families could combine the celebration of a wedding together with observing *Shabbos*. In that way, they didn't incur further expenses when making a wedding.

Both families were happy to be joined together; especially the bride with her treasured mother-in-law.

Unfortunately, their happiness did not last for long. Chava Shaindel loved her mother-in-law dearly and was broken-hearted when, at the age of 37, she died while en route to the hospital to give birth to twins. The horse was unable to proceed because of the icy road, the blinding howling wind and a fierce snow storm. None of them survived.

Chava Shaindel said, “no one ever had a more loving mother-in-law than I did. I knew her all my life, and always loved and cherished her.

Every Friday night, when Chava Shaindel “*bentshed licht*” (lit candles), she would lovingly gaze at the face of her dearly departed mother-in-laws portrait that hung in the dining room.

She never stopped praising her and her “*gemilas chasadim*” (generosity). When her children performed a *mitzvah*, she never failed to mention, “Just like the Bubby, may her memory be blessed.”

Chapter 9

How it all Began

It was a hot, muggy day on August 3, 1923 when Mama and I arrived on the *Mauritania* in New York City. Our journey had actually begun in Jerusalem, the city where I was born, and where I spent the first year and nine months of my life.

My mother and her friends always liked to recall my first act and first words in the New Land. As soon as I entered the apartment that Papa had arranged for us at 12 West 112th Street, in then fashionable Harlem, I dragged a chair to Mama and said, “*Mamaleh! Zetz gib titty.*” Mama’s friends who had come to welcome us in our new apartment were hysterical with laughter. They never forgave me those embarrassing words. Even when I was a grown woman, one or two of those friends would welcome me with those words that they never let me forget.

These same friends of Mama’s also thought it hilarious when Chanukkah time came, and Mama asked them, “Where can I buy one of those nice big red ‘*beigalach*’ (round things) in the window for my Sarah Gitel?” Mama had not seen Christmas wreaths before, and had no idea about their meaning!

Soon after we arrived, Mama became pregnant. Upon learning of her pregnancy, her new neighbor – who would ultimately become her life long friend – Mrs. Sarah Gershon, recommended that Mama visit Dr. Drozen, who had delivered her children. Mama didn't speak English because until now she didn't have to, since all of the people in her immediate surroundings spoke Yiddish, her mother tongue. But the doctor knew very little Yiddish. After Mama's visit to the doctor, in the latter part of her pregnancy, she asked Mrs. Gershon, “What does *‘tin’* (thin) mean?”

“*Tin* means skinny. You are too skinny” she replied, misunderstanding Mamas pronunciation of her new language.

“Aha!” I didn't know what the doctor was talking about.”

Mama then went on to tell Mrs. Gershon about the reasons behind the description of her. She told her about the terrible conditions in Jerusalem how there was hardly any food before she left.

“Here there is plenty of food and money, so soon, I guess, I won't be *tin*,” Mama said with great satisfaction in her voice.

Mrs. Gershon was shocked.

“What do you mean there was no food?”

“No food,” Mama replied, “my poor baby Ephraim died because I had no food to feed him. That's the reason Avraham left Jerusalem. Before he went, he got me half a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese – a luxury! But after that was gone, I didn't know where I would get the next bite of food for the baby.”

Mama continued to tell Mrs. Gershon her story about why she left the city she loved. Papa came to America to work and make enough money to send Mama tickets.

Mama explained to Mrs. Gershon, “My mother didn't even know that Avraham left for America. Avrahams father was furious that he left against his wishes and because of that, I got no help from them.”

Mrs. Gershon sat and listened to Mama telling her about a most difficult time in her life.

“Oy! It breaks my heart to hear a story like that. How did you survive all that time alone? So young, pregnant and with a sick baby?”

“*Got is a Gutta Got*” Mama replied, always seeing the positive side of life, even in the darkest of times. “He arranged for me to have neighbors that were *mamash* angels. They had so little for themselves. They too were hungry, but whatever meagre foodstuffs they were able to obtain, they shared with us. I said to myself, I

too will share with others, and always remember their kindness.”

Soon Papa was able to send money, but it was too late. There was no food to buy.

“So now that you have money, why don't you eat better?” Mrs. Gershon asked.

It seems that Mama could not bring herself to eat well. Something much stronger was preventing her from eating.

“It's hard for me. I always think of the baby and I can't swallow the food. Besides, being pregnant is not helping.”

Mrs. Gershon tried to help Mama with her kind words and reason.

“Mrs. Heller, I understand. But you must eat if you want to have a healthy baby.”

Besides her feelings of remorse and guilt, Mama had a hard time getting used to the new and strange food in America.

“I know you are right,” she said to her friend. She liked to remind Mrs. Gershon about the first time she took her to the open market on Park Avenue and 125th Street under the elevated trains.

“I thought it was the end of the world. I was so scared by the thundering noise over my head; I didn't know what it was. I couldn't hear a thing anyone said. I

thought it was an earthquake. After the noise stopped, you explained the noise, and I stood there transfixed and fascinated. First by the trains – I couldn't understand how a train could ride on top of your head! Remember how I ran under the fruit stand with my hands over my head, and you pulled hard to shlep me out?”

It was hard for Mama to take in all the abundance and richness of what she saw. “All those lovely peaches and plums, beautiful apples, red and green ones, brown pears, green pears, big oranges, little oranges of all kinds, different melons and gorgeous berries. “I didn't know G-d created so many beautiful things,” she would say.

Mama was so bewildered that she hardly bought anything, and came home with the money she was supposed to spend. It also pained her to know that there was so much in America, when there was so little in the city she left behind.

“I didn't think that I should spend any money. If all the people in Jerusalem were hungry, why should I buy so much?”

Mrs. Gershon, who had lived in America about five years, still couldn't understand Mama.

“Why? Didn't they have any fruit in Palestine?”

“You just don't understand. There simply wasn't any food. There was a famine!” Mama said.

Mrs. Gershon could now see what Mama was talking about.

“That must have been terrible. It reminds me of Odessa, Russia when we had no bread. But now you must think of the baby.”

Mrs. Gershon tried to convince Mama but it was not an easy job.

“I just can't get myself to buy. Besides I told you the vegetables I do buy here taste different to me. The other day, I bought an eggplant. I sliced and salted it and let it sit in the sun to extract the bitterness. I fried and then cooked it in tomato sauce and spices.

Avraham and our *lantzman*, Shimon, our boarder, said it was absolutely delicious. Me? I couldn't swallow it. But the doctor keeps saying 'tin, tin, tin' – babies, babies, babies. So I'll try harder.”

“I am telling you,” Mrs. Gershon said, “you better eat or I am going to tell Mr. Heller that you don't eat all day. He asked me to watch you and to help you. Last Shabbos I saw you take an orange in your hand, but instead of eating it, you put it on the table and ran into the kitchen like a *'meshuganer'* (crazy person). What was wrong?”

Mama told Mrs. Gershon another story similar to the others, explaining why she couldn't eat.



Chava Sheindal and Avraham Nassan - Sarah's parents

“On the way home from work as ‘*Shochtim*’ (Ritual slaughterers), Avraham and Shimon bought some oranges. Shimon was a friend and boarder who had also come to the *Goldene medina* to earn enough money for his family to emigrate from Jerusalem. When we had the visitors, I was about to eat an orange, but then I thought of the last time I had an orange in Jerusalem. One of my kind neighbors received two oranges from a grove. She brought me half of an orange for the baby. It was before Ephraim died, and he just couldn't swallow it. He sucked a little of the juice and turned his head away in pain and misery. These thoughts never leave me.”

Mrs. Summer, the photographer's wife, lived nearby. She and her husband liked to visit often. Mrs. Summer loved Mama, and to hear about her family and mutual friends in Jerusalem. She missed everything except the hunger. She and her husband were childless. One day she came to visit very annoyed, and said to Mama, “Oy! Chava Shaindel, ‘*du bist a zeir greener*’ (You are such a newcomer)! Look how you are wearing your corset, you are sticking out all over.”

Mama chuckled and blessed her friend by saying.

“I pray to *Hashem* that next year, you should wear your corset like mine.”

The big day, May 7th, 1924, arrived. Mama went to the hospital to have her baby. After Mama had recovered from the ether, Dr. Drozen came into the room, sat down next to Mamas bed and asked, “How many children do you have at home?”

“I have one little girl, Sarah Gitala,” Mama answered.

The doctor raised one finger on his left hand and two on his right hand and said, “One little girl and two little girls are three little girls.”

Mama was confused, “No! Dr. Drozen, one little girl and one little girl are two little girls.”

Very patiently, Dr. Drozen illustrated his words several times, “No, Mrs. Heller, one litle girl and two little girls are **three** little girls.”

Although Mama by now knew some English, she did not understand what the doctor was telling her. In desperation, Dr. Drozen walked away and came back with a woman who translated, “*Mazal Tov, Ir hut a tzvilling tzvay maydalach*. You have given birth to twins, two girls.”

To everyones shock, Mama went into hysterics, “I don't want them! My dear mother-in-law, died giving birth to twins. I am going to die if I have twins. Leave me alone. Go away. Don't tell me such things!”

Dr. Drozen gave Mama something to calm her down, sat down near her bed again and replied, “My dear Mrs. Heller, you gave birth to two beautiful girls. Thank G-d you didn't die and the twins didn't die, you are all fine. Everything is going to be O.K.”

That did not help.

“No! No! I don't want them.” Mama screamed.

“Well, I'll tell you what. Dr. Drozen continued. “My dear wife and I have been married a long time, but have not been blessed with children. Your first baby had to be delivered with instruments, her forehead was squeezed, I don't think it will ever go away. I will give you \$500 for her.”

Finally, Mama began to understand that “tin” did not mean “thin”, it meant “twin”. The memory of the deaths of her mother-in-law and her twins was so fresh in her mind, it drove her to hysteria when she realized that she had given birth to twins of her own.

Mama shrieked, “Do you think I am crazy? I may not understand much English. But I am not a *meshuganer*. *Farkoifen vell ich nisht!* I will not sell my babies!”

When Papa came to see Mama, instead of being elated at the arrival of twins, which Jerusalemites consider a special blessing, Papa was frightened and angry. He became very emotional thinking of his dead mother and the dead twins who were trapped in horse

driven wagon by a terrible snow storm and could not reach the hospital. They couldn't be saved. The tears silently rolled down his cheeks.

In shock, he blurted out, “What did you do to me? I left you in Jerusalem with my son, my ‘*bechor*’ (the first born), and now you give me three daughters?”

Mama wailed, dug her head into the pillow and couldn't stop sobbing. But when Papa took one look at his twin daughters, his heart melted and he fell in love with them. In awe and with the tears still rolling down his face, he lifted his eyes to heaven and said, “*Baruch Hashem* that you and the ‘*zibling*’ (*children*) are alive. When I heard ‘*zibling*’ I thought of my dear mother, and I was so frightened. They are beautiful, even the one with the ‘*shteren*’ – the squeezed forehead. I beg you for ‘*Mechila*’ (forgiveness)!”

Nine months later, all the “*landsleit*” (people from the same hometown in the old country) were celebrating again, because another set of twin girls were born: Mrs. Summer gave birth to twin girls, just as Mama had blessed her!

Chapter 10

Papa's Tree

The number of the house where we grew up was 610. I have so many memories of that house, both happy and sad. The truth is, because of all our trials and tribulations, it should have been a house of sadness, but no! It was also a house full of fun and laughter...

Take Florio, the ice man, for instance. After his horse died, he bought a new green ice truck. But for us kids, nothing could replace his horse, Ravioli. Ravioli wore a straw hat with flowers, decorated with red ribbons and bells. Florio thought that it made Ravioli more loveable. Ravioli would stand there, patiently waiting for Florio's return. He stamped his feet and wagged his tail trying to keep the flies off his back. We fed him lumps of sugar and apples which we had stolen from the house. Ravioli would say "thank you" by looking at us gratefully and lovingly, and we would say, "you're welcome" by petting his cold, wet nose.

We all loved Ravioli and were heartbroken when he died, but no one was more despondent than Florio. I had never seen a man cry before, but just mention Ravioli and Florio would burst into tears. I think he loved his horse more than his own family, or maybe he

felt that Ravioli was part of his family. I missed Ravioli, but certainly not the mess he left on the cobblestones in front of the house!

I was once on the truck picking up the pieces of ice that had fallen on the floor, when Papa came down the steps. I didn't know whom I should fear more, Papa or Florio, because neither one allowed us on the truck, though sometimes Florio pretended he didn't see us jump off the truck when he came back. Maybe it was because we used to give him messages as to who wanted ice that day, or whether they wanted a 10 or 15 cent piece. But if he was in a bad mood, we were smart enough to stay far away from him, and just let the ice melt.

He would carry the ice with his tongs if he didn't have to go too far, or climb too many steps. At other times he would put a folded burlap sack on his shoulder and carry it that way. Either way, it was hard work. Climbing up and down all those steps carrying the heavy blocks of ice could put him in a bad mood.

During the summer, he would have Florio Jr., or Anthony, his nephew, help him, and then he would be in a great mood and sing.

“*O Solo Mio*”, he would sing at the top of his beautiful voice. At such times he would crack the ice blocks to make sure that he had chunks of ice for all the

eagerly awaiting children. And if he had an odd piece and the desire, he would carve cute little animals out of the ice. He would ask: “*Whosa gonna get today, ah?*”

It was really fun to watch how he chipped the ice so expertly. He could have been a sculptor, he was so skilled. We stood and marveled at his talent.

One day, Papa came looking for Florio, but it was not ice he had on his mind that day. The conversation went something like this:

“Hello! Florio, how are you and the family?”

“Oh, *cumu sta*. How are you today?”

“I am fine. I see you finally have your new truck, Florio. Good luck! Or as we say, *mazal tov!*”

“*Ha! Ha! Mista Heller, you tinka wid all deeza years I dunno what izza maza tof? Tanka you for alla help ana gooda adavica. Mr. Fabricani, the manager at the Ford Company, he rilly mucha bedda for me, he unnerstanding my language bedda den Mr. OMalley. I canna talka to him. It waza gooda idea. I musta again say tank you. You wanna a bigga peeca ice today?*”

“No, Florio, I didn't come to talk to you about ice - that's for the Missus. My neighbor, Mr. Feiglin, from 618, and I, want to plant trees in our front gardens. We want you to send over Angelo from the nursery with two nice poplar trees.”

“Oh! Of course, Mista Heller, I senda Angelo my gumba with the finest trees he cana finda for you. You justa leava ta me, you see.”

“O.K. Florio, Thank you.”

“*Mista Heller, you godda a minit? I godda aks you sometin is a bodderin me for longa, longa time now.*”

“Sure Florio, what's bothering you?”

“*You know that nica lady liva upstairs inna front room, da lidley one? Well evvy time I cumma to put the ica inna ica box, she tell me 'nu shit, the ica in da ica box.' Why she talka like dat huh? She looka so nice anna resepeable and she talka lika dat. Issa ambarrasin me, I no unnerstand.*”

Papa laughed so hard he could hardly explain that in Yiddish, *shit* means to put or to pour.

The tree saplings arrived and true to his word, Florio made sure the trees were of the highest quality. The two friends and *landsleit* were delighted. Angelo planted both trees the very same day, and wished us good luck and good health.

The trees grew and grew. The two friends used to look at their trees proudly, and with almost giddy pleasure Papa and Mr. Feiglin would measure to see whose tree was taller and more beautiful. What could be more fun than to listen to the two of them comparing notes?

“Avraham! What did you say? You really think that your tree is taller and bigger than ours? I think you need an eye examination. A blind man can see that ours is so much better in every way.”

“Isaac! That's only wishful thinking on your part. Take another look. Take a really good look, without prejudice, and your eyes will tell you that either you are dreaming or just imagining what you wish to be true. Our tree is definitely much bigger than yours. If only we had a ladder high enough and a way to measure from up there, you would have to agree that we are right this time.”

“I must admit that my tree was sometimes smaller than yours, but look at it now! Go ahead, see for yourself.”

It was so much fun to listen to them boast and brag, like two little children. However, Papa had more of a backup team to help encourage him. We would join in, like a cheerleading squad, while Mr. Feiglin only had Brownie to bark his approval, since his children were older and either away at college or working.

One Thursday afternoon, while Mama was baking sugar cookies, Mrs. Feiglin came to visit. While the two men were on a first name basis, the two women were not.

“Mrs. Heller, just what is going on with those two men? Now they're arranging to plant trees. Did they ask us? Don't we live here too?”

“Who has time to worry about trees?”

“I would just like to be asked, that's all.”

“What's the difference? Just enjoy it.”

“And another thing, I don't know what you think, but I don't think what happened yesterday was funny at all.” “Why? What happened yesterday?”

“You don't know what your husband gave my Isaac? He had everybody laughing at him.”

“No, I don't know.”

“Well, late in the afternoon they were outside talking to each other about the extension of the kitchen that they're both doing for our benefit, not that either one of them asked our opinion. They just went ahead and it will be done, whether we like it or not.”

“What has that got to do with yesterday that upset you?”

“Oh! As I said, they were talking, when suddenly Mr. Heller took out a little brown bag and said to Isaac, “I was in the candy store today and I know that you just love Brazil nuts, so I bought you some of these chocolate covered things.” Isaac was so happy that someone thought of him in such a nice way. He took one big bite and immediately started coughing and his

eyes started tearing. He could hardly breathe! He ran into the house and I just didn't know what happened to him. Till I was able to revive him and bring him back to normal, don't ask!"

"Why? What was wrong? The nuts were no good?"
"Nuts? They were not nuts! The only thing 'nuts' here is your husband. He gave my Isaac chocolate covered garlic! Is this the way for a grown man to behave?"

"You have a *tayna*, a complaint, about my husband, go talk to him. What do I have to do with it?"

"What, you think I didn't approach him? He just laughed at me, and he asked me hadn't I ever hear of April Fools Day? I don't think it was so funny. To make fun of my Isaac, and in front of everybody?"

But this incident didn't affect the friendship of the two men. They still liked each other and each others company. Typically, in the late afternoon, on a summer's day, the two men could be found outside their houses planning to do something to improve their properties. Justifiably, they were very proud of the acquisition of their houses. Inevitably, they would both end up by adding the same improvements and additions to their pride and joy, the piece of real estate they had acquired in their new land. They were always making changes or finding a better way to do things, and sharing information with each other.

* * *

In the spring of 1937, Papa had a serious heart attack and was very ill. One of his most frequent and devoted visitors was his old friend, The Reverend Rufus Washington, who was both the janitor of our *shul* and the minister of the Negro Baptist Church of Coney Island. Papa spent many happy hours talking with The Reverend, especially towards the end of his life, when he was confined to the house.

They intellectually stimulated one another. They would talk about all sorts of religious subjects and have long discussions on the Bible. But when Papa's other friends would come over, they would speak in Yiddish or Arabic so the Reverend wouldn't understand, They would actually question Papa's sanity for sitting and spending so much time with the "*shvartze*" (black person). One time Papa got very angry at one of his friends' nasty insinuations and words, and after the Reverend had left, a huge argument ensued between them:

"Hershel, I don't ever want to hear you talk like that about my friend, The Reverend. I'll have you know that he knows the Bible better than you do; and you and I both know that you are no slouch when it comes to knowing *Tanach!*"

“Avraham, now you're talking pure nonsense!”

“Oh! I am, am I? Well I'll tell you what, how about we have a contest between you and the Reverend? You want to know something, I would bet \$5 on him but I wouldn't bet a nickel on you to win the contest.”

Papas friend Hershel was deeply insulted by those harsh words, and subsequently did not visit for a long time, but the truth is that he wasn't alone in feeling jealous of Papas esteem for the Reverend, and the time he spent with him. A number of his friends couldn't understand the friendship at all. But it didn't matter to Papa: the Reverend was certainly his “soul mate” and good friend.

After his first heart attack, Papa spent the entire winter recovering in Florida before he came home. During a subsequent visit by the Reverend, Papa told him about an amazing, though very troubling experience he had while still in Miami.

“Reverend, I must tell you what happened on the bus in Florida. There were plenty of seats in the front of the bus for the white people, but I chose to sit in the back anyway. The bus driver came over to me and told me that I'm not allowed to sit in the back of the bus. He said the back was for “*niggers*” (a derogatory term for black people) only! I told him that I would sit wherever I pleased, and that I had even urinated in

the *nigger* toilet! Someone on the bus warned me in Yiddish not to start any trouble. However, I wouldn't change my seat. Do you know what the bus driver did?"

"No, my fren, I don't, but I sho am mighty glad to see yo all in front of my eyes. Praise the L-rd!"

"Well, he threw me off the bus and called me a damn Yankee, and said to go back to New York, where I belong, that they don't need trouble makers like me in Florida. I told him that one day things would change. He said that I was crazy. But you'll see one day, it will change."

* * *

What can I say of my surprise when one day I came home to find Papa, who was usually cheerful and happy, without his usual happy and smiling face. I was concerned, but things became clear very soon, when Papa called us all out to the backyard.

"Kinderlach, I have a surprise for you."

We looked at the backyard in dismayed disbelief. All of Papa's beautiful roses were gone, and not a blade of grass to be seen. And Papa's friend The Reverend was there, but this time the visit not a courtesy call, social visit or intellectual discussion. This was strictly business, with the Reverend paving the backyard that

had once been a beautiful rose garden, which Papa loved so much.

We all started talking at once. "Papa!"

"What are you doing?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"What did you do?"

"Why?"

"I wanted to create a nice place for you to play."

Papa replied to all our questions.

After the pavement was dry, Papa hung up a bushel basket that he had prepared. Papa got the basket from Tony the Fruit man. Apples were packed and shipped in these bushel baskets, which had many uses. Some people used to buy special oilcloth liners and use them as laundry baskets, as the handles on top made carrying them quite easy. Some used them as toy chests and others, like Papa was doing, used them for basketball. So Papa carefully cut out the bottom of the bushel basket, bought us a basketball and said: "Like they say at Ebbets Field, *PLAY BALL!*"

I don't remember what he paid for the basketball, but I do remember that The Reverend was paid \$3.00 for paving the backyard.

Why did Papa sacrifice his beautiful flower garden? Why did he put up with all the complaints of the tenants of the house?

I well remember the conversation that he had with Mrs. Vishinsky. “Mr. Heller, I must speak to you. This cannot go on! All the children from the whole neighborhood here in this backyard! Playing and screaming! They're giving me a headache!”

“Mrs. Vishinsky, I'm sorry, really I am. But where can my children play safely if not in my own backyard? I am sorry that they are giving you a headache. But the truth is, I must admit, I would rather they give you a headache in my backyard, than get a bigger headache with them playing in someone elses backyard, with my never knowing where they are, and what they are up to.”

Mrs. Vishinsky didn't exactly accept Papa's reasoning.

“I really don't know what *'meshugane'* (crazy) ideas have gotten into your head. We had the nicest little garden on the block; it was so beautiful, and while the children were in school, I would come down to feed Fluffy the cat, and sit for a while and smell the beautiful roses. When no one was looking I would pick a rose or two to take up to put on my kitchen table in a jelly jar or a *'jahrzeit glass'* (special candle for anniversary of someones death). It gave me pleasure; Its perfume would make the whole house smell good.

I had respect for your sense of beauty. Now look what you have destroyed. Its really a shame. *Feh!*”

It wasn't long before Mrs. Vishinsky moved out of the house, and 610 had a vacancy which Papa could ill afford. After all, this was during the depression, and it wasn't easy to rent rooms that became vacant.

“I guess this was *'bashert'* (meant to be),” Papa said, “Besides, she was a real pain in the neck; always complaining that there was never enough hot water; and in the winter she would bang on the pipes, which was her way of telling us that she wanted more steam heat. Good riddance! With the help of *Hashem* we will find another tenant. We won't go hungry because of her. And now that it can't bother her anymore, I have a radio for you kids, but please don't play it too loud.” Guess what? We did!

“When Papa rented the rooms again, he told the prospective tenants that if noisy children bothered them, they should not take the rooms. Luckily for us kids, the next tenants, the Singers, had a son named Solly, who soon joined us, so his mother never complained. She was glad that she knew where he was.

* * *

The years passed. We watched the trees carefully. Both trees grew very tall and majestic. They were both equally beautiful and the pride of the block. One day, we came home from the city and, as usual, when we got off the train, looked over the rooftops towards 610, and noticed that Papa's tree was taller and more massive than Feiglin's. What joy! What happiness that brought the whole clan. The growth of the trees had always been a fierce competition between the two friends. Each one, at one time or another, rightfully claimed that his tree was taller, fuller or more beautiful. At one time, Feiglin's tree was getting bigger than ours. We watered our tree every day. Then, as if in answer to our hopes and prayers and loving care, our tree leaped way ahead of the Feiglin's. We were all ecstatic and filled with hope. Papa was happy. He felt it was a good sign. Papa was feeling better and stronger, and our tree was getting bigger and stronger and so stately. Its vibrant beauty was the best medicine for his morale. Things would improve. It had happened before, and it was happening again. We were overjoyed. It had to be a harbinger of better health for Papa. We were happy, for a time...

Then Papa became very ill again, and so did the tree. Papa was failing, and likewise the tree. Sadly, we watched Papa lose his strength and vitality. Incredibly,

our tree also began to lose its majesty, beauty and splendor. Papa looked at his tree sadly. We wondered what his thoughts were. Some of us were too young to think about that, but then sometimes we didn't have to think or wonder. Papa would say: "Look at what's happening to our tree. That is what is happening to me."

We were too inarticulate and frightened to voice what we had in our hearts. But as adults, to this very day, we talk of Papa and the thoughts that he expressed about himself; and how he compared his health to the condition of the tree.

One day, I came home and looked at our tree. It had gotten so short, droopy and scrawny. What was happening to our tree that Papa had planted? He chose a poplar because poplar trees grew in and around the city he loved, the city he was born in, the city he longed for: *Jerusalem*.

Shortly after that, Papa became very sick again. After lingering in and out of hospitals and convalescent homes for four years, Papa died on the 27th of Sivan, 5701, June 22, 1941. I remember looking at our tree, and it too had died. It was as if the tree was part of him and could not live without him. More than half a century has passed, and I still remember that Sunday, the day of Papa's funeral.

Sadly we walked down the steps of 610. The sun was reflected in the glistening tears that streamed down the cheeks and beard of his good friend Yankela, leaning against the fence of the house next door as he nodded his head and sadly gazed up at Papa's tree. Due to the fact that one of his daughters had married an Italian, he had moved away and never returned to the neighborhood, until the day of Papa's funeral. He had moved far away and hadn't seen Papa or the tree for a long time.

He never saw them again.

Chapter 11

My Mother's Beautiful Floor

In 1925, Rabbi Uri Felshun, originally from Jerusalem, became a building contractor and built a house on Oceanview Avenue, in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. When the house was almost ready, he asked some friends of his who had expressed interest in purchasing the house to accompany him to the Arab section of Brooklyn on Atlantic Avenue. There they searched until they found an Arab craftsman able to design and install a floor according to their specific design, which would be like the tile floors so common to their beloved Jerusalem.

Rabbi Felshun had no difficulty in selling the house to one of his *'landsleit'*, for \$500 down, part of which he lent the buyer, and the rest with a mortgage.

He immediately proceeded to build the next house, and eventually built seven in all. All had the same tile floors, which two of the *'landsleit'* found irresistible, and therefore decided to buy two of the homes: my parents bought No. 610, and the Feiglins bought No. 618.

As soon as you entered the house, you saw the beautiful tiled floors; one in the vestibule, one in the front porch, and the biggest one in the kitchen. They were all the same, but the kitchen floor was the hardest to keep clean. Oh, they had a beautiful design, and the colors were bright and cheerful: yellows, oranges, reds and blacks on a background of off-white. Everyone who visited our house just loved the floors, though we children were of a very different opinion... We hated them! Why? There were two main reasons: First off, nothing breakable that fell onto the floor ever survived, and there was nothing worse than Mama's anguish every time something did break. Did she really believe that something wouldn't smash to smithereens when it fell onto such a hard surface? Secondly, how could you keep a clean floor with an off-white background and six young children running in and out, with all our friends in hot pursuit?!

All of my parents' friends and *'landsleit'* visited often, and they couldn't look at our floor without feeling nostalgic, because it reminded them of the tile floors they had left behind in the Arab built homes of the Old Cities of Jerusalem, Tzfat and Tiberius. Most of them were born in these cities, and their families had lived there for generations. My father and I were

born in the Old City of Jerusalem, and my mother arrived in Jerusalem at the tender age of five.

There would be both laughter and tears in the telling of tales and raising memories triggered by looking at those floors. Sometimes, a haunting melody would spring forth together with memories of times past “*In Alt Shtut*” (In the old town).

Much of the conversation was also in Arabic, so that none of the kids would know what they were talking about.

My mother washed the floor at least once a day. She would proudly look at her floor and say: “I know this is impractical, but I love it. I will never change it. It reminds me of ‘*der alte haym*’ (the old home). Sometimes I dream that I am not living in ‘*galus*’ (in exile), but that I am still in my beloved Jerusalem.”

She would remember her childhood and her family and friends – all that she left behind – and shed many a tear. At times I was jealous of my friends who had such nice linoleum on their floors, so if a glass or a dish dropped, wonder of wonders, you didn't have to throw it away because it didn't break! Some people had all the luck, but not us. I never understood our visitors and their love and tender feelings for a cold tile floor, especially since it caused us such heartache.

More than sixty years later, I moved to Jerusalem with my husband Shaya. In older stores and houses, in the hallways of public buildings, everywhere, I saw the floors of my youth. They were familiar to me. They were like my mother's beautiful floor. I remembered the tantalizing smell of cooking and baking. I remembered the rays of the morning sun shining through the starched white ruffled curtain billowing in the ocean breeze coming through the window over the green stove. I remembered the smiles on the faces of my mother's friends as they reminisced about old times, both good and bad, happy and sad, as they sat sipping a cup of coffee or tea in a room with a floor that looked exactly like the my mother's beautiful floor.

Chapter 12

Where's the Baby?

I was halfway out the door on the way to the grocery store, when Mama said, “Give the baby a bottle and change his diaper before you go.”

“Aw, do I have to? I'll be late for school again and the teacher will yell at me, and it's not even my fault this time.”

I loved taking care of my baby brother Moishe, but before I could go to school, I had to walk the long avenue block to Farbers Grocery store on Brighton Beach Avenue near 6th street. I quickly changed my little brother, stuck a bottle in his mouth and scooted out the door. If I ran, maybe I could make it back in time. It was a chilly morning, and I hadn't taken my sweater. The sea breeze felt cold against my bare legs. Out of breath, I arrived at the grocery store and made my purchase.

“A tisket, a tasket, a green and yellow basket,” I sang as I skipped home on Brighton 6th Street, formerly called East 6th Street. In my right hand, I swung a bag containing our breakfast, which was the Monday special: 6 small rolls for a nickel, a quarter pound of

cream cheese, and half a quarter lox; in my left hand I swung “for three cents soup greens” that Mama wanted.

I turned onto Oceanview Avenue and saw a large crowd of people. I weaved my way through the legs and skirts to see. There was utter chaos, and fire trucks parked in the middle of the block.

“Jiminy Crickets! I'm happy its not our house or Feiglins. They're in front of Pearlsteins house, or is it Sager? Who cares?” I said to myself, “she changed names and husbands all the time. Nobody on the block likes her, nobody on the block talks to her.” But when I got closer, I saw the black smoke billowing out of our front porch window. It was our house that was on fire! The first thing that came to my mind was, “Oh! Are we being punished because I had such bad thoughts? G-d, I'm sorry, please forgive me. I didn't mean it.” I was scared. I started to cry. I clutched the bag with the cream cheese to my chest, and squeezed the bag so hard that the cream cheese oozed out of the wrapper and all over the rolls and the middy blouse that I had to wear because of assembly that day. The ocean breeze was blowing smoke into my face and my eyes began to smart. “Where is everybody?” I yelled at the neighbors standing in the street. Mrs. Vishinsky grabbed hold of my shoulders and looked into my face. “Don't worry Sarahla, everyone is next door at Esther Rosenberg's.” I

ran next door, knocking over Esther's ugly rubber plant. My mother was sitting on Esther's favorite chair in the living room, surrounded by Esther and Mrs. Feiglin. Mama was in a dead faint. They were splashing water onto her face and trying to get her to drink some water at the same time. When Mama was having a baby she would get fainting spells and make funny sounds: a very loud hiccup that made her gasp for breath. It scared everyone. Papa was the only one who knew how to make the sounds stop. But, Papa was at work. The twins, Miriam and Chana, were sitting on the kitchen floor crying. I yelled at the top of my lungs to no one in particular, "Where's the baby?"

"The baby's in the bedroom." Esther answered. Relieved, I walked into the bedroom. It was empty. The baby was not there! "Where's the baby?" I screamed.

I ran out and tried to get through the front gate of our house. A big burly fireman with a funny black moustache yelled: "Hey girlie, whaddya want? Where do you think you're goin?"

"My baby brother Moishe's still in the house!"

"Aint nobody inna house! You can't go in! Everybody's next door. Beat it kid. Get outta here fast!"

But the baby wasn't next door and I knew he was still in our house, with black smoke pouring out of the front porch windows. I rushed around the corner

through Mrs. Yudelman's backyard, which connected with ours. Her daughter Natalie, who was born with her neck bent to the side, yelled at me:

“You know you kids aint allowed in our back yard. Get the hell outta here. Go on home!” I didn't listen to her. We had our own secret way of getting through Yudelman's backyard to ours. Stepping over her yellow and purple pansies and red roses, I tried to avoid the thorns. I had to go through the thick hedges to the secret hole. I made my way to the telephone pole, which was at the back of the lockers that Mama used to rent out for ten cents in the summer to the beach visitors. Our *Sukkah* was there, and I had to lift the roof to be able get in. I called some of the boys to help me pick it up, because it was much too heavy for me. I climbed up the pole, getting my skirt caught on one of the spikes, and a splinter in my hand from the rough wood. We picked up the flap of the roof and I jumped onto the bench in the *Sukkah*. When I opened the door to the back porch, I couldn't see anything. Everything was black. I fell to the floor. Good! I could see. I made my way to the kitchen on my knees. The tiled floor which was always unpleasantly cold, was now warm. I crept past the dining room and finally got to the front bedroom, and felt around in the crib hoping to find the baby. The baby was asleep in his crib,

but his breathing was scary. Was he getting the croup again or the whooping cough, I wondered? I took him out and dragged him along the floor. He didn't like it one bit. Finally, we both made it to the front door and the baby was crying, but the brass door was hot, and the door wouldn't budge. After what seemed like an eternity, I pulled up part of my skirt to be able to hold the handle, and was able to get the door open. Smoke billowed out. Mrs. Levitt, who lived on the corner, started yelling, while I just sat on the top step coughing and crying. The fat fireman with the funny moustache and black angry eyes raced up the stairs and grabbed the baby. He gently carried him down. Another fireman carried me down and placed me on the running board of the fire truck. I heard the siren of an ambulance, and as soon as it stopped, I wondered for whom it was called? The doctor and the nurse kept running from the baby to me, giving us oxygen and taking our heartbeat. They finally decided that we didn't need to go to the hospital. Suddenly Mama came rushing out of Miss Rosenberg's house. The baby was crying "Mommy! Mommy!" At first the doctor and the firemen would not let her near us, but Mama quickly took charge. She just pushed the firemen out of the way and tried to take the baby.

“I understand, but you can do all this while he is sitting on my lap. See, he isn't crying. Right now the baby needs his mother.” Her pretty and starched “Hoover” apron was all wet from the water that the women had sprayed on her. The twins looked at Moishe and me and said, “You look like *‘shvartzes’* (Black people)!”

During all the years that we were growing up, whenever Moishe and I would fight, I would yell, “Why did I save you from the fire? So that you could pull my hair, hit me, bite me and kick me? Is that why?”

* * *

He never answered me. I thought about it for a long time. Many years later the answer became obvious.

Why? So that I could be his secret partner in all the *chesed* he does. That's why.

Chapter 13

The Winter of '37

A howling wind from the ocean accompanied the falling white snow in December, 1937. We anxiously awaited the mailman to bring us a letter from Papa in Miami Beach, Florida. Yesterday there had been no mail, so we were disappointed and sad the whole day. We were all so worried about Papa. He was very sick, with a very weak heart. Dr. Hirshhorn would come to see Papa even if Mama did not call him. As long as he was in the neighborhood, he would stop by and say hello and make sure he was doing okay.

“Mama! Mama! A letter from Papa!”

We anxiously waited while Mama read:

“*Tzu mein leiba vayb uin tyer kinderlach amush*
(To my loving wife and dear children, you should live until 120),

“I am writing to tell you that thank G-d I am feeling fine. I am sitting here in the Florida sunshine, and my thoughts are never far from you. However, before I ask about all of you I know how anxious you are to hear about me. *Baruch Hashem*, all is well with me. I have good friends; Mierel and Shaya Kirschenbaum

and Pauline have been most helpful, better than any brother or sister could have been. The neighbors are looking after my good health and my needs.

“However, all I can think about as I sit and bask in this beautiful place is you, my dearest family. You my dear wife who sat in the hospital reciting your *Tehilim*, and when you heard that I was dying, could not let it happen.

“Your heartrending screams reached the ears of *Hashem* and He sent ‘*shlichim*’ (messengers) to answer your prayers. Dr. Frances Steinman, an intern and mother of four young children, heard your plea, Do not let my children be orphans! They still need their father! “She heard, and with *Hashem's* guiding hands, she performed a procedure she had learned recently in medical school, still considered only in its experimental stages. In the *shul*, with the *aron kodesh* open, your heartrending prayers and cries went heavenward straight to *Hashem*. The children were so frightened by your screams and prayers, all they could do was pray harder. The *shul* echoed with all the pleas, the *Tehilim*, all the ‘*tefillot*’ (prayers) and tears to beg G-d for a ‘*refuah*’ (cure), not to let me die. And here I have survived! He answered your pleas.

“Dr. Steinman heard your pleas and could not forget the recent lesson she had learned in the school

of medicine. She tried new methods to bring a stopped heart back to life, like reviving a drowned person pulled from the ocean. She tied my limbs with tourniquets, and had Joe, the orderly, apply artificial respiration. They worked for four hours until they had me breathing, and my heart beating again. She could have lost her license. But Dr. Steinman said she could not let your pleas go unanswered, if she might be able to save me. She has also remained a true friend. In any case, G-d was on our side. This intervention was the first of its kind, and instead of losing her license, Dr. Steinman was given credit for inventing the procedure, and it was also written up in a leading medical journal.

“After my rescue from death, Joe quit. He told me that he would never work in a hospital again. There had been so many others he had wheeled to the morgue who might have been saved. He became my friend and a “*baal tshuva*” (a formally non-practicing Jew who becomes observant) because of me. When Joe was about to cover my face with the sheet and bring me to the morgue, your cries and prayers began and didn't stop until you came back to the hospital and found me barely alive. They wanted to dress me in “*tachrichim*” (burial shrouds) and put me in the ground. In answer to your heart-rending prayers, I am now sitting in a beautiful white Palm Beach suit and

Panama hat in a beautiful garden in Miami Beach – a temporary *Gan Eden*, *'thavdil'* (excuse the comparison!). I am able to walk to *shul*, which is close by. I don't have the icy winter winds to take my breath away, just gentle breezes that enable me to breathe and walk easily. The enclosed picture will show you how I have improved with the help of *Hashem*. I will be able to come home recovered. I hope to be able to take care of you, to provide for you and our wonderful family.

“Now that I told you all about myself, please write and let me know how you are all getting along. How are the children behaving? How are you managing with the furnace? Who takes the clinkers and ashes out? It must be hard for you, my dear wife, but when was it easy for you? You are a real *'tzadeikis'* (righteous woman), no one ever hears you complain. I never praise and compliment you enough as you so richly deserve. It is all in my heart, and I now have time to think. Still, I can hardly write all that I feel.

“Give the children a kiss for me, and please have them write. I am very lonely without all of you. Each child should write on a different day of the week so that I can get mail every day, or more.

“Love from your loving husband and Papa

“Miami Beach, Florida”

Chapter 14

Some of Papa's Friends

Papas personality enabled him to have good relationships with all kinds of people, and in many walks of life. Two such people, Mr. Kirschenbaum and Rabbi Kohen – though they refused to even speak to one another – each still felt that he was Papa's best friend – Which was true. Both truly loved Papa as a brother. For his part, Papa tried so hard to make peace between his two friends, but it was a hopeless case, and he eventually gave up. He knew when he was licked.

In fact, both men continued to show their devotion to Papa even after his death. They never forgot about us, and always came by to see that everything was running smoothly, to ask Mama how she was managing with her heavy burden, and if she needed assistance in any way.

When Mama felt that managing the house was indeed getting to be too much for her, it was Mr. Kirschenbaum who wisely advised her *not* to sell the house. He asked her where she would find an apartment to rent with six children, and even wondered who would want to rent to a widowed mother of six? Instead, he suggested we rent the house out to others in order to

bring in some income. But Mama said that she didn't know a thing about payments and mortgages and the many details that went into managing a house. Mr. Kirschenbaum told her not to worry. He told her to just collect the rents, use what she needed, and give him the rest. He would handle all the payments of insurance, mortgage and anything else that needed to be taken care of. And so he did until we were old enough to take over. His other friend, as well – Rabbi Kohen – continued to visit regularly, just as if Papa were still alive. He still made the one and a half hour trip – each way – to visit at least once or twice a month. And when Mama had to undergo a mastectomy, Rabbi Kohen arranged for her to see one of the finest oncologists in the city to make sure that she was getting the best care available.

But as I said, Papa was always very upset that his two best friends would not speak to each other. The only two things that they did agree upon were their love and devotion to Papa, and their intense dislike of another of Papa's closest friends, The Reverend. Reverend Rufus Washington, as mentioned earlier, was the leader and pastor of the Negro Baptist Church of Coney Island, and also the janitor and handyman in our *shul*. Papa spent many happy hours with the Reverend discussing the “*Tanach*” (Hebrew/Jewish

Bible). He was naturally very knowledgeable about the “New Testament” – the Christian scriptures, but also unusually knowledgeable about the Hebrew Bible as well. And despite his other two friends' constant criticism and cajoling of Papa's truly close friendship with the Reverend, my father refused to take their side.

At times Papa was annoyed with his two friends, and at other times just considered their actions childlike. He would try to analyze their behavior and actions, but came to no conclusions. It especially bothered him to see them so hostile to one another, because there were many *landsleit* – fellow former *Yerushalmim* – in the neighborhood, and we held many get-togethers at our house. After a *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov* meal, some of these friends would come over and sit around the dining room table and sing many Eastern and Arabic melodies. I particular remember “*Chad Gadya*”, as they sang it in many languages.

Some of these people sang professionally, and had lovely enough voices to be cantors for the *Yomim Tovim* in order to augment their income. It was very pleasant and enjoyable to hear their jolly laughter and reminiscing of the good old days in *Eretz Yisrael*. Many of them grew up and learned together, and were happy in each others company. In fact, most of them didn't

have any blood relatives in America; their friends were their family.

Some had minor differences among themselves, but they all congregated at our house because we didn't rush through the meals and the *zmirot*. When they arrived, the fun would begin, with tales of the Old City of Jerusalem, followed by the singing, with either everyone trying to outdo the others or all singing together, in harmony. The partying would often go on past midnight.

As for the innocent Reverend, his life was certainly affected by the prejudice and jealousy of many of the men. And no matter how much Papa tried to convince him how much his friends would enjoy the great knowledge and wisdom that sprang forth from his lips, it was no use; The Reverend was a smart and wise man, and very aware of Papas friends feelings and attitudes.

Mr. Feiglin, our neighbor from two doors down the street, would also come over to see if anything needed fixing. He was very handy and very willing, and always available.

Papa had been a patient at Coney Island Hospital for many weeks and months at a time. Three of the attending physicians so enjoyed his company and personality, that they also remained his friends for

the rest of his life. One of the physicians, Dr. Sol Dombeck, was very interested in talking to Papa about the lungs and other parts of the body. He felt he could learn many finer details about anatomy from Papa's experience as a *shochet*. He would make the rounds during the night and find Papa awake, and talk to him until he fell asleep, bring him a cup of tea, hold Papa's hand to comfort him, and let him know that he was not alone.

Chapter 15

Teacher's Pet No More

Third grade P.S. 100, West 1st Street, Coney Island. It was lovely. The teacher, Miss Munsen, liked me. I was lucky: when we lined up “in size place”, I was fortunate to be assigned the first seat in the third row, right next to teacher's desk. I was given the distinct privileges of erasing the blackboards, banging out the erasers and delivering messages from Miss Munsen to her friends and to the principal, Dr. Becker, or to the assistant principal, Mr. Fleishman. It felt so good to be such an important person. I was happy to be the teacher's messenger and do her bidding.

Alas, my happiness was not to last. But it all happened so suddenly, I was mystified, and couldn't figure out the reason for the teacher's sudden dislike and contempt of me. One day I was sitting on top of the world, right next to Miss Munsen's desk, and then...

Miss Munsen had given cards to the class and requested that we fill in the following information: Name... Address... Telephone number... Mother's maiden name... Father's name... Father's occupation... I didn't have any trouble filling out the required information, until I came to father's occupation. I

couldn't spell "*shochet*" (ritual slaughterer), so I did the next best thing. I did know how to spell "killer", so that is exactly what I wrote: k-i-l-l-e-r. The first thing next morning Miss Munsen asked me: "Do you know what your father does at his job?"

"Yes I do."

"What exactly does your father do?"

"He kills."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am sure."

"With what?" asked my horrified teacher.

"With a sharp knife."

"Have you ever seen that knife?"

"Yes, I see it every night when he prepares it for job the next day. I even bring him the water and watch how he sharpens the blade so that he can cut quickly. Sometimes when he has a student he is teaching to use the knife properly, I watch, because what fascinates me the most is to see how he tests the sharpness of the blade by running it across his fingernail."

Miss Munsen told me to take all my books and belongings and, pointing to the last seat in the last row, said: "N-n-n-now, s-s-s-sit o-o-over th-th-th-there!"

She never uttered another word to me for the rest of the term, as if I no longer existed. I was perplexed at the teacher's change of affection for me. I felt abandoned;

I cried. I took the handkerchief that was pinned to the collar of my dress and tried to wipe the tears that were falling on my work. I couldn't stop the tears from messing up my newly acquired skill of writing with pen and ink. I tried to fix it with my hankie, but was only successful in blotching up the whole paper. Now Miss Munsen would hate me for not being neat.

I thought about it a lot. Then one day I saw pictures and headlines in the newspaper of gangster killings – by Murder, Inc. Of course. “Killing?” maybe that's what Miss Munsen thought my father was part of. This was quite possible for this did happen in the late 1920s when Murder, Inc. was in full swing and they had just thrown Bugsy Seigel out of the Half Moon Hotel on 29th Street in Coney Island.

Does anyone know what else it could have been?

Chapter 16

Next of Kin

One Pesach, Mama needed someone to clean the house just one day before the holiday. So she went down to the corner of Brighton 6th Street and Brighton Beach Avenue in Brooklyn, where people looking for work congregated and waited for someone to come and pick them for a day's work. Mama never had to go to that employment depot ever again.

She found someone named Mary, or Mayra as we usually called her, who came that day, but never left. She became a part of the household.

Mayra was a tall, stately black woman, with a great deal of charm. She had a big wide grin that would show her gleaming white teeth, with the one gold tooth at the side of her mouth; that is, if she was not in one of her shy moods, when she would cover her mouth and giggle, “*Hee hee hee.*”

She was hardworking, ironed beautifully and was “usually” reliable. She was the type who, when spoken to, would always answer very politely: “*Yes Maam,*” “*No Maam,*” “*Please Maam,*” “*Yesum.*”

At times she would look clean, neat and tidy, while at other times she looked dirty and sloppy. She had

very large feet and couldn't wear womens shoes, and would have to find a pair of men's Oxfords large enough for her feet.

In later years, she was no longer our steady cleaner, but still worked in the neighborhood, and would always stop by to see if Mama knew anyone who was in need of her services. People knew that she would stop by, so they would come and leave messages for her.

Late every Friday afternoon, she would show up at our kitchen door. and say: *“Mizz Heller, please Maam, Ise so hongry, aint had no bite of food nor drink ahl day long. Please Maam, giz me a sammich.”*

Mama would make her a sandwich or give her something else to eat, along with a cup of strong black coffee with three teaspoons of sugar, no milk.

“Thank you Maam, that were real good. Yo has no idea how hongry I been. Please Maam, ah helps yo a bit afore Shaabus come in, jes one hour.”

And so their relationship flourished. At twenty-five cents an hour, Mama could not employ her steadily. Who had the twenty five cents then? Mama sent her to the people who did have the money for her services. But they never fed her. She would stop by every Friday afternoon and work for an hour or so. She said that she did as much in that hour as she did in two or three hours at someone else's house. Mayra was the most

honest person who ever walked the face of the earth, and this was obvious to everyone who knew her. And anyone who didn't, very soon realized how special she was in her sincerity and honesty.

Unfortunately, however, Mayra had one major fault: She was an alcoholic. She did not drink all the time, but when she did, she would get very drunk, and then all Hell would break loose; she would come to the alleys and windows of all the people she knew, and start screaming at the top of her drunken voice: *“Ah works hard foh ma livin, I takes noffin fum nobody.”*

That was O.K...But if she really tied one on, then the fireworks would begin:

“I works hard foh mah livin. You kiss my black a.... You somina bi.....I takes nuffin from nobody.”

She would stay awhile, scream out all her frustrations, and then go her merry way. The riff-raff near Coney Island, or wherever her wanderings took her, could tell by how drunk she was that she probably had money on her person. She would therefore often be accosted, robbed, beaten and, more than once, hospitalized because of her injuries. Sometimes she was sent to Coney Island Hospital, and sometimes to Kings County in Brooklyn.

Many times she would end up in the locked ward of the psychiatric department. Sometimes they would

put her in the “drying out tank”, and she would be missing for weeks. And then Mayra would come back, looking well-fed, rested, clean and attractive, just as if she had returned from a nice vacation. Until the next time, that is.

* * *

One cold wintry day, with a fresh blanket of snow on the ground, the phone rang. The woman on the phone asked: “May I please speak to Mrs. Heller?”

“Who is calling please?” I asked.

“This is Kings County Hospital.”

“Mama,” I called, “its Kings County Hospital on the phone and they want to speak to you.”

“Oy! *Gott in Himmel*, what could it be?” Mama took the receiver, “Yes, this is Mrs. Heller speaking. Who is this?”

“Kings County Hospital, Miss Duffy, speaking.”

“Miss Duffy? What is it?”

“I am calling about Mary Hardy.”

“Aha, yes, what is the room number? What department did you say?

Surgery? *Oy vey!*”

Mama quickly made arrangements for supper, took off her apron, told us to look for her galoshes under the

big bed, bundled herself up in the warmest clothing she had, and took off.

“Mama, where are you going?” I wanted to know. It looks like its gonna snow again. Who's in the hospital?”

“Its Mary! I must go. Shes been badly hurt. Shes asking for me. She has no one.”

Mama left and came back several hours later, frozen stiff.

“How's Mary?”

“Don't ask!”

“Why shouldn't we ask? You've been gone so long we thought you were never coming back.”

“It took me forever to get there; I had to wait for the train, change trains, and then catch the trolley. And I had to wait for each change the longest time. It was bitterly cold and windy. By the time I got there, the visiting hours were over and they wouldn't let me in. But I didn't go all that way for nothing. I asked for Miss Duffy who called me on the phone and got me a special pass to visit Mary. Miss Duffy said that I could have the pass because I was listed as next of kin, and Mary's condition is listed as serious.”

“Mama, are you joking?”

“Mary is in the hospital with a bandaged head and 26 stitches, and you think I'm joking?”

“No Ma, I meant how can you be listed as next of kin? Is this supposed to be another “Imitation of Life” movie with Claudette Colbert and Aunt Delilah or something?”

“You know, Mary has no one. Who else should she put down as next of kin?”

“When is she coming out of the hospital?”

“It will be a while before she comes out of the hospital. She had head surgery and they want her there for observation.”

“So I guess we won't be seeing her for some time now, huh?”

“What do you mean we won't be seeing her for some time? I'm going to visit her again. I brought her some cookies and some oranges and apples, but she needs a pair of slippers and she has to have her snuff.”

“Ma! how could you? You're always telling us how tired you are and how much you have to do.”

“When she comes home from the hospital, she won't have a penny to her name. I told her that she can stay in the basement. Now that we have converted from coal to oil, she can use the coal bin, it has a window. I will have it whitewashed. She promised me she will not drink again.”

“And you believed her?” we all shouted at once. There was no changing Mama's mind.

“Listen, *‘kinderlach’* (children), *‘Shlomo Hamelech’* (King Solomon) wrote: Cast your bread upon the waters, and thou shall find it after many days. It wasn't so long ago that we read that in *‘Koheles’* (Ecclesiastes). Maybe you have forgotten how many Friday afternoons Mary came like an angel and rescued me to be ready for *Shabbos*? She didn't care if I had money or not. She is my good friend.

I am listed as her next of kin. The nurses can, *kooken off mir krimer hayt* – *can look at me like I'm crazy* if they like. I don't care. I pray for her good health and safety, for she has saved me many times. This is the least I can do. I will never forget her kindness to me. You can laugh if you like, but I am her next of kin.”

“Mama! Does that mean Mary is our next of kin too?”

That was Mama!

Chapter 17

I Want to Thank My Mother

I want to thank you, Mama for teaching my sisters, my brother and me *gemilas chesed*, loving kindness.

Your acts of kindness were not appreciated by me at the time. In fact, I hated them! They robbed me of your attention. I felt neglected, jealous and unloved. Others always came ahead of me.

Your kitchen was always full. The elderly, the lonely, the downtrodden; shabby and seedy characters were always taking up my space, sitting in my chair eating, drinking or talking. They always had a sympathetic ear to listen to their tales of woe, while I had no one to listen to me.

Never a moment of privacy when you could tell me that you loved me, that you really cared.

No! Not ever. The first and only time I came into my mother's kitchen when no one was there was after being married for 25 years. I said that I have to make a "*shehechyanu*" (special blessing on new things). I came into Mama's kitchen, and as usual, the aroma of *challah* baking greeted me at the door.

I said, “Mama, I am 45 years old, this is the first time in my life that you and I are alone; I have you all to myself. I am so happy.”

“*Narisha kind*” (foolish child) she said, I am not giving to them. They are giving to me. Do you realize what people pay for companionship, to care for the sick and the lonely? I may be sick but I am never lonely.”

I did not appreciate her wisdom. I mellowed without feeling or realizing it. I see that my sisters and brother, the grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great, great grandchildren, down to the fourth generation in many parts of the United States, England, Canada and Israel, many whom she never saw or knew, have her name, blood and genes. By living lives full of *gemilas chasadim*, their acts of loving kindness are boundless.

I thank Mama for her acts of *gemilas chesed*, which inspired my husband's “*hesped*” (eulogy), at her funeral:

“Believe it or not, Mama never had a bank account. She lived in New York for 52 years and never had a bank account. If she had a spare dollar or two, she would have one of her children hide it for her. Just before candle lighting for *Shabbos*, she would write her mother or sister living in Jerusalem and enclose some money. She never had a bank account.”

The other prominent rabbis who spoke at the funeral kept mentioning this amazing fact. “She never had

a bank account? *Reboyno Shel Oylom*, I wish I had a such a bank account. She took her bank account to *Gan Eden* and is collecting the highest rewards of any person I have ever known.”

Yes, I say, why didn't I know you then, as I know you now?

You were wise and I didn't know it. You understood life and its problems more fully than I realized, and I didn't know it. That's why everyone came to you for advice and comfort.

Yes, I understand you now so much more than before, when I was young and foolish and too stupid to appreciate your greatness, your wisdom and strength. “Psychology?” You asked, ‘*Seichelogy*’ (common sense) is what they really need!”

When I had a date, I was ashamed and embarrassed of all the bags and boxes of *shmattes* in the entrance hall; clothes and shoes for the poor, bundles for Jerusalem, food and drink for anyone who was hungry or thirsty. “Ashamed? Embarrassed? You should be proud,” Mama said. But I wasn't.

Yes, I know. You were right, but instead of being proud of you, I was embarrassed of all the misfits who found No. 610 Oceanview Avenue – how did they know your address? You weren't listed in the phone book; we didn't even have a phone.

Oh yes, I say. I wish I had your wisdom and understanding and the brains enough to appreciate you. Your love of people was legendary.

When we first made *aliya* a repairman came to the house and asked me where I had lived before. I told him that for 20 years, we lived in Woodmere, New York.

“And before that,” he asked?

“Brighton Beach.”

“Brighton Beach? Me too. What was your family name?”

“Heller,” I answered.

He jumped up from his bent over position raised his hands and screamed: “Your mother was Mrs. Heller, the ‘*vzadeikes*’ (righteous woman) of Brighton Beach? It is a ‘*zchus*’ (privilege) for me to work in her daughter's house.”

At Coney Island Hospital and Kings County Hospital you were listed as next of kin for Mary Hardy, the cleaning lady.

She worked for you even if you didn't have money; at least you fed her when others did not.

A few weeks ago, I met a young woman who knew my family in Brighton Beach. She told me that as a little girl of seven or eight, she felt honored to sit next to my mother in *shul*. Although she knew how to read, it was Mama who taught her how to “*daven*” (pray)



Bottom row from the right - Dovie, Haddasah, Leah, Shmuel,
2nd Row - Chava Sheindal, Sarah, Avi, David, Chaim Nosson,
Top Row - Shulamith, Chana, Miriam, Rifky, Shaya, Nechemia.

properly. That woman who lovingly remembered Mama is Rabbanit Miriam Brovender, who lives in Jerusalem.

Mama had friends of all ages and professions. One of the rabbis from Brighton Beach said that when Mama was no longer able to go so *shul*, he liked to stop off on his way home from *davening* to visit. First he would make *kiddush* and eat some of her delicious cakes or delicacies. But best of all, Mama always gave him *a gut vort* which he used for his *drasha* between *mincha and maariv*. By the time he arrived, Mama had already finished *davening*, reading the weekly “*parshat hashavuah*” (the weekly Torah portion), “*Tzena VRenah*” (a Yiddish commentary on the Torah), “*Pirkei Avot*” (Ethics of the Fathers), and more.

Who can forget the Spanish lady who lived two doors away in Feiglin's house? No one was able to speak to her because no one knew her language. But, Mama, you were kind to her and one day found out that you were able to converse with her in Ladino and Arabic, your common languages of communication. Remember how every Friday, before candle lighting one of us had to deliver *gefilte* fish, soup, chicken and a small home baked *challah*?

I said nothing, But I wish I had.

Chapter 18

May You Be Incribed for a Good Year

As I turned the corner into Oceanview Avenue and came close to home, I exchanged the salty Brighton Beach air for the truly tempting smells.

I opened the front door, entered the long dark hallway, and I knew right away it was late Thursday afternoon. The tantalizing aroma of Mama's baking greeted me before I even entered the kitchen. Mama was bending over the kitchen table braiding *challah* with eight strips of dough. After all the *challahs* were formed Mama always left enough dough for our Thursday night special: the *pletzel* – a sort of onion and seed cracker. It was the best part of Thursday night supper. No one touched the delicious food that was prepared until the family devoured every crumb of the big *pletzel*. Even our favorites, fried fish or eggplant in any shape or form, had to wait, except that we called the eggplant by its *Yerushalmi* name, “*bringena*.”

The shape of the *challah* depended on either Mama's mood or the calendar. The taste was the same, even though it seemed different with each *challah*.

For the *pletzel*, Mama would roll out the *challah* dough and flatten it in the biggest baking pan which was lined with an oiled brown paper bag. She would then sprinkle some oil, coarse salt and finely chopped onions on top, and carefully ease it into the oven.

For *Rosh Hashanah* the *challahs* were sweet and round with raisins, with the shape of a hand on top of the *challah*.

“Mama, why did you put a ‘*henti*’ (The bird was for *Shabbos Shira*, The Shabbos when the Song of the Sea is read); The *henti* is for all to be inscribed for a good year!”

For *Shavuos*, Mama made 10 “*bulkalach*” (buns), all in one oblong pan, two rows of five, to signify the 10 commandments.

For a regular *Shabbos* we had the pan filled with 12 *bulkalach*, signifying the 12 tribes.

One Thursday afternoon, while I was brushing the *challah* with egg and sprinkling “*sumsum*” (sesame seeds) on top, a new neighbor walked in. “Mrs. Heller, do I owe you a *Mazal Tov*? Are you preparing for a ‘*simcha*’ (a happy occasion)?”

“What makes you think that, Mrs. Rosenfeld?” Mama asked.

“It looks and smells like a bakery. All those cakes and you must have at least 20 *challahs*.”

“Well, one can't live just for oneself. We have to think of others. First of all, there's the Spanish Lady who lives in the basement in Feiglin's house.”

“What does she know about *Challah*? She isn't even Jewish.”

“Of course she's Jewish. She speaks Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and Arabic. She is a pious woman with no family. Her only child, a son, died a few years ago. That's why she always wears a black dress. I send her *Shabbos* meals and *challah* every week. And what about the lady upstairs with cancer, she doesn't need a *challah*? Or the woman around the corner who had a miscarriage, she shouldn't think that G-d forgot about her?”

Getting the recipe wasn't that easy. As a young married woman I had to adapt Mama's weights and measures to cookbook standards:

From a “*karga gluz*” to a “scant cup”, or about 7/8 of a cup.

From “*hipsha gluz*” to a heaping 1 1/8 cup

From “three cents yeast” to “one yeast cake” of 1/2 ounce of yeast.

Flour or warm water. From: “*vifil is farnemt*” to how much would be necessary to attain the right consistency.

The only uniform ingredient was the eggs, regardless of whether they were large or extra-large.

Now for Mamas Recipe:

5 lbs. of sifted flour (minimum amount so that one can make the *bracha* of “*Lhafrish Challah*” (to separate the challah).

1½ ounces of yeast, ½ cup of oil, 3 eggs, ¼ cup of sugar, 3 cups of warm water to start, ¼ cup of salt. Dissolve yeast, 1 tablespoon sugar and some of the flour in lukewarm water. Let stand in a warm place. If it starts to rise, the yeast is good – you can continue. Add oil, the remaining salt and sugar, and warm water. If yeast doesn't rise, get fresh yeast for the ingredients.

Put 2 or 3 cups of flour on a large board, and make a well. Add eggs and yeast, mix and knead. Add the rest of the flour to make a smooth dough (the dough may require additional flour). Knead between 5 – 15 minutes until elastic and smooth. Grease top of mound, cover with a clean cloth, and set in a warm place away from any draft until it doubles in size, at least an hour or two.

Divide dough according to size of *challah* desired. For a smaller *challah*, cut three equal sizes of dough roll until it looks like a long frankfurter and braid. Another thinner three rope braid may be put on top of the *challah*. Brush *challah* with beaten egg and 1 table spoon of water, ½ teaspoon of sugar. Set in warm place, let rise again to double its size as before baking.

Sesame, poppy or caraway seeds may be added after very lightly brushing again with egg before placing in oven. Bake at 400 degrees for 15 minutes then at 375 degrees for $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 hour. Challah should be golden brown and sound hollow when tapped lightly.

Kaylutch or *Kitka* for Purim.

Take most of the dough, divide into three parts, and make a long braid. Make a smaller braid with remaining dough.

For *Rosh Hashanah*, roll piece of dough about the size of small salami and twirl the dough round and round into a mound. Take a small ball of dough, roll out, with a sharp knife, shape into a hand. Place on top of *challah* after it has been brushed with egg mixture, brush hand with egg mixture.

MAY YOU BE INSCRIBED FOR A GOOD YEAR!

Chapter 19

The House Without a Key

None of us ever knew why the street was called “Oceanview Avenue”, because you didn't get any view of the ocean from that street. Still, that was the name. On the other hand, the street near the ocean that did have a view was called “Sea Breeze Avenue”. There must have been a mistake in the naming, because we got the breeze and they got the view!

As you turned the corner into Oceanview Avenue, you could see that the houses were nicer than the houses on Brighton 6th Street. There were seven houses all alike, and yet very different. The houses were brick and stucco: brick on the bottom and stucco on top. Every few years the stucco part had to be painted or treated in some way.

You entered through a gate flanked by a wooden bench on each side. One bench backed onto the front garden, the other onto the driveway leading to the garage. The driveway was known as the alley. The front of the house looked really pretty. On the sides of the steps, the ledges were graced with four very heavy stone flower boxes, sculpted on the sides with a lovely design. They were filled with a lush collection of red

and pink geraniums, ivy, purple and yellow pansies and purple and white petunias. These had to be replenished every spring. It was a lovely sight to see. In later years the flower boxes disappeared. I honestly don't know or remember what happened to them, but the ledges provided ample seating for the bunch of kids who hung out there.

We spent many happy hours playing all sorts of games on those ledges and steps, and the games we played cost very little or even no money at all. The most popular was stoop ball, that is, if we could get hold of a ball. It happened more than once that if five of us each had a penny, we would sacrifice our treat of the day – our penny candy – and all five chip in so we could go to the corner candy store and buy a Spaulding ball for a nickel. At the end of the game, we would choose to see who would be allowed to hold the ball for the next time. The object of the game was to throw the ball at the stoop steps. If you hit the edge of the step, it was ten points, if you caught the ball without a bounce it was another ten points. A bounce, or just hitting the step any place, was only five points. Depending how close to lunch or supper time determined whether we played for 100 points, 500 points or whatever.

However, we could only play stoop ball if we got there before the ladies did. They would stop off on

their way home from the beach or shopping, sit, rest, gossip and exchange news and recipes. You could also find out where the food bargains were to be had, and who had the nicest merchandise on Brighton Beach Avenue. If the benches were occupied, we would have to find another game, or another stoop; there were many and we were very inventive. There was also marbles, otherwise known as “*immies*”. But for that game, we needed a place with real mother earth to make the necessary indentations. “Jacks” and “potsy” were also very popular games.

Children and games are the same the world over. In Israel, instead of jacks, the children use little cubes, called “*chamesh avanim*” (five stones). In Mea Shearim the same thing is known as “*kugalach*”. “Potsy” is played in Israel as “*aretz*”. However, the activity that nothing could beat was playing “stickers”. This was the most fun because it was strictly FORBIDDEN – An absolute NO NO! That's exactly what made it so much fun. We would walk to the empty lots where the Belt Parkway now runs. Before the erection of this major parkway, there were vast fields of bushes that had “stickers” on the branches. The trick was to pick them, collect them, and shape them into a ball. You walked quietly behind someone and very nonchalantly removed a sticker from your ball, concealed somewhere in your

pocket or inside your coat, and you threw the sticker, preferably onto long hair. The stickers were very light, and if thrown properly (and not too many at the same person), they would not know about it until they got home. The upshot was an unexpected and uneven haircut. That part was not fun if it happened to you. It was only fun if you were doing the throwing, and did not get caught.

* * *

But back to the house: To get in, you walked up a flight of stone steps and reached a solid front door with a big brass handle. It opened onto a vestibule that contained one of the three ceramic tile floors in the house. There were two French windows on the right side. They looked very attractive, but were not much good against the cold and the wind, if the wind was coming from the ocean, only two blocks from the house. Usually you did not spend time waiting for the wind; if you were there late at night saying good-night to friends, the winds howled and blew, and you felt the cold. There was a long hall leading to the back of the house. On the left side, there were doors to each room. Some oil paintings hung on the walls. These were bought by my father from a painter, Mr. Present,

who did not have any other way of making a living. My father said that he had seen nicer paintings in his life but he also said that according to the Rambam, the best way to give charity was to help a man so that he could earn his own living. Mr. Present thought my father would like the picture with all the chickens running around in a country scene. Papa, who was a *shochet*, said that he had enough of chickens at work, and when he came home he wanted to see something more picturesque. I guess if he had liked the pictures more, they would not have hung in the hall, but rather in the dining room, his favorite room. He was especially proud of the picture of his mother, and the green and gold Rosenthal china dishes displayed in the china closet.

A staircase led from the hall to the upper floor, which was rented. At the end of the hall there were three doors; left, right and center. The right door led to the basement and was always blocked by a pile, box or bag of clothing that was on its way to Jerusalem, Palestine. When the clothes eventually did get to their destination, my Bubby wanted to know why most of the clothes were “so narrow”, since she understood that there was enough food to eat in the *goldene medina*, where the streets were said to be paved with gold. She just could not grasp that.

The door on the left led to the dining room. A knock on the door straight ahead of you brought the reply, “come in”. Once you were in the entry to the kitchen, the door leading off to the right was the bathroom. During the day the bathtub was usually full of soaking laundry. Many arguments ensued about that. My mother adamantly refused to let my father buy her a washing machine. She had this thing that, G-d forbid, if things went wrong, and she would have to support the family, she would have to take in laundry like our basement tenant, Mrs. Murphy, when Mr. Murphy went on a drinking binge. We didn't suffer because of his affliction; he was always most polite and a perfect gentleman to us. However, regarding his own family, the occasional black eye and black and blue marks on their bodies told a very different story.

The Murphy's moved into our basement apartment in order to be near their friends or relatives, the Sweeney's, who owned the house next door. We always had a very good relationship with both the Sweeney's and the Murphy's until one Easter, after they all attended Church on Ocean Parkway. When they came home they would not play with us, and instead, they claimed that we killed their G-d! We wondered, how could anyone kill G-d? We couldn't understand that one

at all. It was the first time we had ever encountered a feeling or remark of that kind.

Some people had wall to wall carpeting. We weren't so lucky. During hard times, we had wall to wall beds. During all summers and some of the winters, we gave up all our rooms and moved into the big back porch. There at night all you could see were beds: a big double bed, a pull out bed and a folding bed, which was called an "*ofshtel betel*".

It all depended which room was easier to rent that season. If necessary, we moved down to the basement for the summer. One thing was sure: whoever went to sleep first, went to sleep with a pillow; whoever went to sleep last, woke up with a pillow. But the summer tenants had to be supplied with pillows – our pillows!

It wasn't always that way. Originally, the back porch, as it was called, was the bedroom for the three younger children. It was also used as the playroom. It was completely surrounded by windows through which the sun always shone on sunny days, or through which the wind blew and howled on windy days. We had one clothesline going from the porch window to the telephone pole, and another going from the back door to the telephone pole. My mother was obsessed with clean laundry. The lines were always full of clothes coming out of the bathtub, or bundles of "wet wash"

that the laundry man Mr. Rosch picked up every Monday morning, and then returned a few days later to be hung out and ironed.

Once you opened the door to the kitchen, the aroma was wonderful. Something delicious was almost always cooking or baking, and the tantalizing smells lingered throughout the house, and even wafted onto the street. We would always try to guess what was cooking. Off the kitchen, you had doors on all four sides. On the right was the space for the big stove and the door leading to the large pantry.

Going towards the front of the house you came to the dining room. In the good old days, before Papa became ill and subsequently passed away, it had a very nice dining room set with a china closet on one wall with a window on each side, and a stained glass panel over the china closet connecting the two windows. The ceiling was paneled, and had four special light bulbs where the four corners of the paneling crossed. A picture of Papa's mother hung over the buffet. The parquet floor was beautiful, but not really appreciated as it deserved to be. We washed it with soap and water, that's how naive and ignorant we were.

As you walked past the dining room, behind two French doors, came the master bedroom. At the front of the house, which was the next room, we had the

front porch. It was enclosed by those lovely French windows that made it impossible for occupancy during the winter months. It had a ceramic tiled floor, like the one in the vestibule and the kitchen. We never had a living room. Thinking about the layout of the house now, I am sure that the original intent of the architect was that the lower floor be used as a living room, dining room, kitchen, front porch, and a back porch. I feel quite certain that the upstairs rooms were meant to be bedrooms, and the basement for a laundry room, and possibly maids quarters, since there were two huge wash tubs in the basement kitchen. However, no one on the block ever used the upstairs for bedrooms, not even the rich Levitt family on the corner. They built two bedrooms out onto the back garden.

There was a small room on one side of the kitchen. At one time it was my private domain, but that was in the earlier days, before the rest of the rooms had to be rented so that we could keep the house. But for many years it was mine, and it was great! I used to listen to all the company talking and whispering and baring their souls. Sometimes it would be only my mother and a friend. I learned many interesting things, like the time my mother's friend, Chana Ruchel, was very distraught because she was scheduled for surgery to remove a tumor. She was petrified; her sister-in-law

had recently undergone a similar operation and had not survived. She was convinced that she would share the same fate. My mother insisted that she get a second opinion before getting on the operating table. She did, and five months later the suspected “tumor” was born: He was the most delightful and talented of the family's six children named Yitzie.

Though the telephone was in my room, I didn't consider that any kind of imposition. Not that I had any say in the matter. All the tenants in the house would be called to my room, since it was the only phone in the house. There were many interesting things to hear, especially if the call was for Millie or Loretta. They were two young women tenants and were “good friends”. However, I knew more secrets about them than they knew about each other. Millie used to attract and meet more men, but Loretta was considerably younger, so when some of the guys would meet Loretta, Millie would sometimes lose a boyfriend. Millie had been going with Sammy for a while and then he took a shine to Loretta. He called once, I told him to hold the wire and yelled upstairs for Millie. The conversation was short. He called back a few minutes later trying to disguise his voice and asked for Loretta. He and Loretta had quite a long conversation and made very

complicated arrangements to meet. He couldn't come to the house to pick her up because Millie would see them, and neither one wanted that. Loretta said: "All's fair in love and war." What war? And wasn't Sammy supposed to be in love with Millie? Needless to say, some of the conversations were very interesting, so I would listen while pretending to be asleep. And if the conversation wasn't interesting, I didn't have to pretend at all!

Yankel was another one of our boarders. His wife and five children were still in Poland and unable to arrange passage, even though it had been a long time since Yankel had accumulated enough money for their journey. There were apparently many other difficulties.

"Listen Yankel," Papa said, "I have good news for you. You are lucky I was able to get the private telephone number of Samuel Gompers!" "Who is Samuel Gompers and what can he do for me, ha? How can he bring me mein Chana Ruchel and *de kinder* (the children) to America?" Yankel asked.

"If you don't know who Samuel Gompers is, I'll explain his position to you. Samuel Gompers is the spokesman for the trade Unionist for the Cigar Makers Union. That's a very strong union. He is a powerful and influential man. He also likes to do a favor. I was told that if anyone can help, it's him. Here's the

number, here's the phone, call. If you want, I'll call for you. If you think that you can't manage to make him understand you, I'll be glad to help you."

"Tenks, but I tink it vud be me bedder if I call him meinself."

"OK Good luck."

Yankel asked the operator for the number and this is what we heard.

"Hallo! Hallo! Dots you? Dots me. I must to talk mid you for feif minutes, please. Hallo!"

* * *

Will I ever forget that Sunday evening in October, 1938? I had just finished polishing our new Crosley radio with lemon oil. The times were tense. Anything could happen. It was a quiet Sunday evening. I turned on the radio and heard one of my favorite melodies being played, "Stardust", coming from the Meridian Room of the Park Plaza Hotel in downtown, New York. I was humming along with the band when the announcer said that the program was being interrupted. There were problems. New York and New Jersey were being invaded. I ran into the kitchen quite distraught and yelled, "Mama! Mama!! We have to get ready and

do something. The war is here! The war is here! The invasion of New York and New Jersey has started.”

“*Gay, bist meshuga?* (go, are you crazy?) My goodness, if I ever saw anyone who can think up more and crazier excuses to get out of your job.... Forget it, *Mamele*, go, and please ... The girls need their middy blouses for assembly tomorrow. Don't waste my time and stop with the jokes already.”

“No, Ma! I'm not kidding! This isn't a joke! The man on the radio just said that the enemy is coming. They are near Trenton, New Jersey. Ma, I am scared and frightened.”

“You're scared? Go ‘*Lain KriShma*’ (go say ‘Shema’)! What do the other stations say?”

“Nothing! They Aren't even talking about it.”

“What ‘*meshugane*’ (crazy) station are you listening to, ha?”

“CBS”

“CBS? Is that the only radio station playing?”

“No, but maybe the other ones don't know what's happening.”

“What do you mean the other stations don't know what's happening?”

“Maybe CBS got a scoop, that's why.”

“I said it's nothing and stop that nonsense. If it was really a war, all the stations would know about it.

With a war there are no scoops. What do you think, that only CBS knows what's going on in the world?"

"All the action is happening in Glover Fields, six state policemen and people were killed. They are coming nearer and nearer to New York. You never listen to anything I tell you." I cried.

"I told you, if it was really something, everybody would know; you can't keep a war secret."

At the end of the program I said: "Ma! Ma! It's only a program, its not real. Its a play called War of the Worlds by Orson Welles."

"Orson Wells, *Shmorsen Smels*, did you think that for one minute I thought it was real? It was just one of those '*mishagoyim*' (crazy people) who have nothing better to do with their time, just to go around scaring people or *fahrdrein a kup*' (turning their heads around), getting people to avoid their work. Let him find something more useful to do than to make people '*meshuga*' (crazy) for nothing. Better to read a book from the library. This you call entertainment? *Feh!*"

In the final years of my living in the house, it had become shabby and neglected. It was no longer the attractive and prettiest house on the block. Alas, Papa was no longer alive to take care of these things.

I lived in our home until Sunday night, January 10th, 1943, the night that we were married. After the

wedding, the dancing, singing and merriment, we stopped by the house to get my suitcase.

But we couldn't get into the house. The kitchen door was locked, and we didn't have a key. Come to think of it, *no one* had a key. There was no key! Someone brought us a message that we should push the dining room door open, because it was only blocked by a table. We did just that and suddenly heard a crash. We slowly opened the door and found that the glass bowl containing two turtles we had bought for my baby sister Esther Malka had landed on the floor. Only one turtle could be found. The other one ran away, and did not return for about six months. Esther Malka was hysterical. She refused to be left with one lonely turtle, and would not stop screaming. She insisted that we take the turtle home as a wedding present to our honeymoon apartment. We didn't have a bowl for the turtle, and the only way we could carry the turtle was in Shaya's top hat. That is how our friend, Eli Schwartz drove us to 75 Bruce Avenue in Yonkers. On the way Eli got a ticket because one of his back lights wasn't working. Eli showed him that he was driving a bride and groom home from their wedding, but even seeing the bride in her wedding finery and the groom in his tuxedo holding his top hat in his lap had no effect. No sympathy. A ticket and a \$3.00 fine. We arrived

at our little love nest on our wedding night with the turtle in the top hat.

That's how we started our married life: The two of us and one lonely turtle in the bathtub.

Still no privacy!

Chapter 20

The Spanish Lady

She was a sad and lonely sight. No one ever spoke to her. It wasn't because the neighbors weren't friendly. They just didn't have a means of communication. They all thought she was Italian.

She was dressed in a black shabby dress, wearing a small gold pin at her neck, which she used to finger, a clean apron, a scarf around her head, and scuffed black shoes. She was quite frail and seemed very forlorn. Florio, the ice man, tried to speak to her but he said that he couldn't understand her. Of course, he couldn't understand her because she did not speak Italian.

She had recently moved to Feiglin's basement and didn't have a soul in the world that knew her. She just sat on the bench all by herself with her thoughts.

Did she have any children? Did she have any relatives? No one knew the answers to these questions. At first, she was called the "Mystery Lady" because no one knew a thing about her.

Then one day, everyone saw the "Mystery Lady" sitting on her bench and speaking very animatedly with Mrs. Heller, from 610. How could they be speaking when no one was able to communicate with her until

then? One of the curious neighbors, ventured closer and tried to listen to their conversation. They heard them speaking, but couldn't understand a word they were saying. The neighbor just had to ask:

“Mrs. Heller, what language does the lady speak?”

“This lady speaks two languages.”

“Really, what are they? Florio tried to speak to her and she could not understand him.”

“That's right, because she doesn't speak Italian.”

“Well, what does she speak? She looks so happy now. I didn't know that she could smile.”

“The lady speaks Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and Arabic.”

“Ladino and Arabic? I knew that you and some of your friends from Palestine speak Arabic, but I didn't know that you can speak Ladino also.”

“Yes, I learned to speak it from some of my neighbors in the Old City of Jerusalem.” replied Mrs. Heller.

“Really, you surely know how to surprise people. Who would ever think that a Hungarian Jewish lady would be able to speak those exotic languages? How did you learn Ladino?”

“Actually I really didn't want to learn Ladino. I was forced to speak it.”

“How can a person be forced to learn a language?”

“Well, it was a hot dry day, in the Old City; I was very tired and worried. I had to leave my baby daughter, Sarah Gitel, with the neighbors while I took my little son Ephraim *z”l* to the doctor. The neighbors kept questioning me in every language imaginable.

One asked me in Yiddish, “Will you be gone long?”

The second asked me in Arabic: “Are you taking your lunch?”

The third said, “I think you will be gone long after dark.”

I tried to assure them all that I would be home as soon as possible.

One whispered to me in Hungarian, “Not to worry, I will be around.”

While still another said to me in Hebrew, “Make sure that you take some water with you. It's such a hot day.”

Another neighbor asked me something in Ladino, and when I answered “Yes”; they all started to giggle and laugh. Their giggling and laughter was beyond control. I thought she had asked me if I was coming back soon. But her question was, “Would I die there? When I replied “Yes.” they thought it was funny. I didn't think so. I immediately made up my mind to learn Ladino, and I did. I don't speak it very often,

because no one around here speaks it. I do love the language and miss not speaking it to anyone.”

The “Mystery Lady” became known as the “Spanish lady”. No one ever knew her name.

She was very frail and not able to shop and cook for herself. On the way to the store the neighbors always stopped and asked her if she needed anything. Mama had taught her a few sentences so that she would be able to tell the neighbors what she needed at the store.

Every Friday afternoon before Mama lit candles, one of us went to deliver her *Shabbos* meal. She told Mama that she didn't want any charity.

Mama said, “Fine, I will let you know how much the chicken costs.”

That made the Spanish Lady and Mama very happy. As for the *gefilte* fish, chopped liver, chicken fricassee, soup, salad, a home baked *challah*, compote, and the cake or cookies of the day – they were “just” a bonus!

Chapter 21

The Heller Twins: The Telephone Man

Miriam and Chana are identical twins, and no one is able to tell them apart.

Papa was usually a patient man, not easily annoyed or the nervous type. However, he expected and received obedience to his requests. He did get annoyed when he would call Chana, and she would totally ignore his call. He would call Miriam with the same result. This he would not tolerate, and would become angry and frustrated. He couldn't tell the twins apart. Neither could anyone else, for that matter. Their voices over the phone are also identical, and no one is or was able to know who was speaking – whether in person or on the phone – including their own husbands. No one, that is, except for their older sister Sarah.

In order to solve the problem, Papa decided that since they were the youngest in the family at that time, he would call them “Baby”. When they grew older they didn't like to be called “Baby”, so they became “Bay” for many years. They both answered to the same name, and things were peaceful.

The confusion stopped for the family and close friends. But for others, the confusion goes on to this very day, even though they have become different with the passage of time, and some people can at certain times tell them apart. Still, this is not a common occurrence.

The turmoil became a source of never ending fun for the two of them, or should I say for the one of them, because they really are like one. They think and act like one, exactly alike. Their actions caused complete and total frustration and embarrassment for everyone. They were responsible for many a laugh. It was almost like a contest, or a continuing serial of what would happen next, or who could be capable of the funniest one yet, a constant, “can you top this?” sort of thing.

They grew up in a limited sense of the word, got married and went their separate ways, living in different sections of Brooklyn and causing just occasional incidents. But that didn't last too long, because Chana and her family decided to move from Williamsburg to Boro Park. So the twins were together again and back in business, and the fun began anew, but this time in earnest!

When they moved, Chana was in an advanced state of pregnancy. She called the telephone company for the installation of phones at their new address. She

wanted one in the kitchen and one in the bedroom. A telephone technician named Jim arrived, hooked up the phone in the kitchen, and told Chana that he would return the next day to install the phone in the bedroom. Since the next day Chana wasn't able to wait for Jim, she called Miriam and asked her to wait. Miriam arrived early in the morning with Mayer, who was the perfect example of the "terrible two's". Around 4:00 p.m. Jim showed up, and when Miriam opened the door, He stared so intensely that his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"B-b-b-bee be c-c-c -ccareful! Sh- should you be walking around? T-t-t-take it easy. Don't pick up the little feller. Here, come with me. Look what Jim has in the tool box." Mayer didn't need any further encouragement. He got to work on the contents of the tool box, and drove poor Jim nuts. Jim tried to be patient, and didn't really mind Mayer playing with the tools. What he minded was his possessiveness. He kept running away with the pliers he needed. Jim kept looking at the lady of the house.

He said, "Sh- shouldn't you be resting?"

He was a wreck. He then proceeded to finish the job for the bedroom, but complications arose: He was missing a part.

“Well Missus, its quittin' time, i'll see you first thing in the morning to finish. I do think you should be taking better care of yourself.”

Bright and early the following day, the doorbell rang. Now of course, Chana went to answer the door. The telephone man was standing at the door in complete shock. He started to blubber all over the place –standing there dumb struck.

“Sir, what seems to be your problem?” Chana said to Jim.

“Problem? Big Problem? I aint got no problem, but she sure has one and I'm not gonna be any part of it.

But something sure funny is happening, and I'll be damned if one of us isn't crazy here! I'm getting out of here as fast as I can! Who would believe that I aint had a drink in ages. Let her call for some other guy and drive him nuts. I aint gonna finish that job, no way!! I'm calling in sick. And it aint gonna be a lie! Whew!!”

Chapter 22

The Heller Twins: A Visit to the Museum

A visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, followed by a written report, was the challenge presented to us. Our seventh grade teacher, Miss Robinson, felt that she should be getting us ready for high school and was trying to expand our horizons.

The day before I was to go to the museum, Papa said:

“Without the twins, you are not going! Miriam and Chana have to go along.”

“Why do they always have to *schlep* along with me?”

“What will it hurt you, if they too get a little culture visiting a museum? When will they get another chance to take such a trip?”

“Why do I always have to have two shadows trailing me? Why can't I go with my friends like everybody else? The whole class will be there. They just don't belong there!”

“They're gonna bother you? Why do you always have to make such a *'tsimmis'* (big deal) over every little thing, ha? Like I said, without the twins, you are NOT going”.

Well, this time, I could not be stubborn and sit home and mope as I did on other occasions. This was an assignment that had to be handed in, and there was no way out. I knew when I was licked and I had to take them with me.

Bright and early the next morning; we each paid our nickel fare, got on the Brighton Beach Express to Times Square, paid another nickel, and got on the IRT. On both trains, everyone looked at the twins.

One lady stared at them and said:

“Oh! I thought I was seeing double. How do you ever tell them apart?”

The lady sitting next to her remarked, “How cute they look.”

We each had our lunch in a brown paper bag. When we changed trains, Chana jumped on the train and then jumped back again. When she got back on the train, her lunch got caught between the doors. The grapes, the orange and banana splashed all over her face and dress. She started crying, thinking that she was going to be hungry and starve all day. I told her not to worry, because Mama packed enough for us to share with her, and she quieted down. We got off at 86th Street. The day began to look brighter.

The truth is that the twins behaved pretty well and didn't get in the way. Not bad at all. They just lagged

behind us and kept out of mischief; they didn't get lost, they didn't fall and get hurt, they didn't have to go to the bathroom every five minutes. They were o.k. until...

We came into a very large hall, where there were many statues. At the top of their voices they yelled:

“OOOOOHH!! Miriam! Look! Look over there at that man with his *tushie* and his *sissie* sticking out!”

“Wow! Chana look over there, there's a lady with no clothes and you can see EVERYTHING!”

“You brats shut up or else you will be real sorry!”

They shut up immediately but their eyes were popping out of their heads. They were quiet until we arrived home. Papa asked:

“Nu, so tell me how was the trip to the Museum?”

“Papa it was very nice. We took two trains.”

“We ate our lunch on the train. When we got off the train, we had ice cream”.

“I'm more interested in how you spent your day at the museum. Was it interesting? What did you see there?”

“I'm not gonna tell.” Miriam said, “You tell.”

“I'm not gonna say where she took us. Uh uh uh! Not me!”

“Me neither. She will just kill us if we tell on her.”

“Tell what? What happened? Where did she take you? Where did you go?” Papa wanted to know.

“Nope, not me, no siree! Ask her”, Chana said pointing to Miriam.

“Well... How long do I have to wait for you to tell me what you saw? “Talk! Now!”, Papa demanded as he slammed his hand on the table.

“O.K. What we saw was a bunch of naked men and ladies. None of them had any clothes on; just like they were gonna take a bath or a shower.”

Papa was in shock! His big black eyes bored into their faces. He was left speechless.

“Honest! Look! I'll even kiss my pinky and wave to G-d, so you know its true!”

“Go get your sister, tell her I want to speak to her.”

“Sarah! Sarah! Papa wants you right this minute!”

I came into the room.

“Now tell me, ‘*Vu hustu genemen die kinder*’ (Where did you take the children today)?”

“You know! We went to the Museum.”

“Now listen here! I want no funny answers. Tell me the truth! Who sent you where you went today, ha?”

“I told you Pa, my teacher sent us on an assignment; we went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I am working on the report right now.”

“You must think I was born yesterday. No teacher would send little children to a place like the twins just told me about. What kind of a story are you telling me? Now I know why you didn't want to take them. When you had to change trains at Times Square, tell me exactly where you went instead of the museum?”

“Papa! It's not like that at all”.

“Not like what? Did I hear right? The children said there were naked people sitting and standing in a great hall. Now tell me, is that true or not? Where you went today were there things little children shouldn't see? Were there naked men and women standing around there? They said they saw *tushies* and other things. Yes or No? I am not interested in anything else until you answer my question.”

“Yes, there were naked people.”

“Aa Ha! So they were telling me the truth. I couldn't believe them.”

The next thing I knew, I got a smack in the face and saw Papa in a wild rage. He started to take off his strap to give me a beating he thought I deserved. The last time anyone of us saw him in a wild rage was when one of the little kids ran out into the gutter, and was almost hit by an oncoming car. Papa took off his strap for only serious beatings, not that he always used it.

“It wasn't what you think. Stop! Let me explain.” I screamed as loud as I could. I was in such a state of hysteria, that Mama came into the room, although the door was shut, which meant KEEP OUT!”

Mama interceded. She said, “Stop and let her explain what happened.”

“What's to explain? By her own admission there were naked people all over the place. I want to know exactly where she went and why?”

“Avraham! Stop for a minute and think! Don't be so cruel and in such a temper. You always said that one shouldn't hit a child in anger. Do you want to be like your father? Hit first and ask questions later? I insist you let the child talk first.”

“When I want your opinion...” Papa started to say and was stopped by a barrage of their secret language, Arabic. They had a heated argument but I guess Mama won, because Papa started to put his strap back.

I was so grateful to Mama for her insight and understanding and I never expressed my thanks. I came out from behind Mama's skirt. I started to speak quickly while I had the opportunity.

“Nu! Talk!”

“Listen, we went to the museum. I am supposed to make a report about a painting by Vincent Van

Gogh; on the way to the exhibit, we passed a room with statues. That's what museums are all about, Pa."

"You mean that they were not real people, just statues?"

"Yes Papa, just statues."

"But why do they have to be naked for little children? Huh?"

"I don't know why they weren't dressed. I told you that I didn't want to take them in the first place."

"First place, *shmirst* place, young lady, you're not going any place with them". Papa said as he walked out of the room replacing his belt in the loops of his trousers.

I tried to conceal my inner joy, but it didn't last long. I still always had to take the *shleppers* along with me every place I went!

Chapter 23

The Heller Twins: Another Case of Mistaken Identity

Chana had given birth to a baby boy, and Miriam decided to visit her at the hospital to see if she needed anything. As soon as Miriam entered the lobby, a nurse came running, gently but firmly grabbed her by the arm, and summoned a security guard to bring a wheelchair.

Miriam was unceremoniously shoved into the chair. Very soon she realized that this was another case of mistaken identity.

“No! No! Just a minute, I can explain everything.”

“That's quite all right, dear, don't worry about a thing. Everything will be just fine,” the nurse said soothingly.

“But you don't understand!” Miriam protested.

“We do understand very well, leave everything to us, all will be fine.”

“But, but... you don't want me!”

“Its o.k. dear. Things like this happen once in a while. We will take care of you in a few minutes.”

Miriam's cheeks were full of tears. She couldn't control herself and was hysterical with laughter. She couldn't say a word. Nonetheless, she tried protesting, but without success.

“Let me out of this wheelchair! I don't need a wheelchair!”

“Just leave the worrying to us.”

Meanwhile in the maternity wing, Chana was lying in bed trying to rest. She heard a commotion in the hall; people were running and calling for the doctor to come at once. She was quite annoyed and said to her roommate: “Do you believe this noise? We are supposed to be getting our rest and in a hospital they have the chutzpa to make such a racket. I don't believe my ears. They must be crazy out there.”

The noise, the commotion and the racket were coming closer to the door. She moved around in her bed to see what was going on, when suddenly all the movement was in her room.

Chana saw Miriam wheeled into her room, and she and Miriam were the only ones who realized what was happening. She too burst into laughter, as well as everyone else by that time, except the head nurse, who was furious.

“What's going on here? I...I... I...Oh! I thought I was bringing Mrs. S. back to her bed. Who are you?”

“Who, me?” Miriam asked. “Oh, I’m her shadow!”



Chana, Sarah, Miriam and Rivky - The Heller girls

Chapter 24

The Heller Twins: I Just can't Believe it

As incredible as it may sound to some people, no one was able to tell the twins apart, except for their sister Sarah. Miriam and Chana were almost inseparable. They thought, talked and felt the same way in most things. Their exploits were nothing short of legendary.

They always had a good laugh when they were able to fool somebody. They laughed again in the retelling of the incident, and there were many “wows!”

“You know Miriam fell and knocked out her front tooth. Good, now I will be able to tell them apart” my friend Harriet said.

“Ha ha, that's what you think. If Miriam fell and knocked out her front tooth, you can be certain that Chana will not be far behind” I answered.

They acted alike in many ways, even when they weren't together. They could be in different stores and contemplating the purchase of a new dress, and you could bet your bottom dollar that both would select the same dress in different stores in different sections of the city.

Its quite true that they might choose different colors, and when they would come together each one would say “I really almost bought the blue, but they didn't have it in my size.”

When our sister Rivky was to be married, they had it all planned to perfection.

“Well we have to get ready for the wedding, you know, new dresses!”

“Yeah, We better go together or we will make a mistake like last time, and end up with different colors – and we don't want that to happen again.”

“I think that's a great idea. This way we will not be taking any chances.”

“Fine with me. I do not feel like gambling on this one. We must be sure this time. Remember last time, I had pink and you had blue, and that was no fun at all.”

“Okay, lets meet on Fulton Street and then we can hit a few stores. We will meet at Abraham & Strauss and if we can't find what we want there, we can go look at Frederick Loessers and then Mays.”

“Fine with me. How about tomorrow at 1:30?”

They both arrived at the store, but not at the same time. Miriam was hungry and on the way treated herself to an ice cream cone. As she was licking and enjoying her ice cream, she kept looking around for Chana to arrive. She finally spotted her in the corner,

near the ladies' skirts. She ran to greet her and started to hug and kiss her. Suddenly she broke into hysterics screaming and crying "Oh! No! No! It just can't be, not me!"

A woman approached her and tried to help and comfort her. She asked if she could be of any assistance. "No! No!" Miriam wailed, "Just leave me alone, please."

The supervisor arrived on the scene and requested one of the sales ladies to quickly call for the nurse or a doctor and a wheel chair. "There is an emergency on the floor!"

"Mam, is there anything I can do to help you?" she asked Miriam.

"No. No." she said, tears streaming down her cheeks.

The supervisor took charge "Everything will be fine. Just take a sip of this water and someone will be here to help us."

"No. No. Just leave me alone." Miriam said again.

Chana finally arrived. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"Lets get out of here quickly." Miriam implored.

"Youll never believe what happened." continued Chana. "I was walking through the department and saw a nice hat that I wanted to try on. I turned to ask your opinion. Everyone was looking at me as if I was crazy. I thought I had been speaking to you, they

thought I was talking to myself. I put the hat down near the mirror and walked away as fast as I could.”

“Is that so?” Miriam replied. “Just look over there at the big wall mirror, with that big arch of ice cream. I thought I was hugging you; I never finished my ice cream. I never even got halfway down the cone. What a waste!”

“Come on lets get out of here fast. I don't know what was more embarassing: messing up that mirror or my screaming and crying like an idiot. Let's get out of here.”

“I just can't believe it!” “I just can't believe it could happen to us too!”

Chapter 25

My Mother's Brother HaRav Moshe Frankel

The year was 1933. Hitler had just been elected Chancellor of Germany. Jews in Germany and throughout Europe were having their first taste of Nazism. But in the early stages, most German Jews preferred not to see what was going on, even though it was right under their noses. The writing was on the wall, but they refused to read the message, though it was crystal clear from the very beginning. Jews were being beaten just because they were Jews, but most German Jews felt that Germany was such a cultured and civilized nation, with so many Jews in prominent positions, that they could not believe anything bad would happen to them. But who could foresee that the anti-Semitism that was smoldering just beneath the surface was about to flare up into the all-consuming flames of the “*Shoah*” (The Holocaust)? Who could imagine the enormity of the genocide which the Nazis were about to introduce into the world?

Soon after Hitler became Germany's Chancellor, with all the powers of a dictator, he began implementing

the policies he had outlined in his book, "*Mein Kampf*". Although poorly written and full of venomous racism and anti-Semitism, the book had been well received. Among the milder measures Hitler advocated were beating and torturing Jews, and the confiscation of Jewish possessions, property and businesses.

* * *

My mother's brother, HaRav Moshe Yaacov Frankel dealt in artifacts for museums and collectors. At this critical time, just after the Nazi Party had come to power, he was in Germany on a business trip. He was traveling with The Leliver Rebbis son, because he too had business in Germany. Both of them were dressed in *Yerushalmi* garb: a long kaftan with yellow stripes under their long black coats. Such figures would have been conspicuous even before 1933 no matter where they might be.

The two visitors were guests of HaRav Aharon Marcus, a descendent of the "Hamburger Chassid" who lived in Nuremburg. During their stay they were invited to visit an Avraham Yitzchak Klein, who lived nearby. But because they were strangers in Nuremburg, they did not know their way around the neighborhood.

They seemed to be walking in circles, and could not find their destination.

“*Entschuldigen*” (Pardon me), said HaRav Moshe Frankel to a passerby who was walking along the road, “Perhaps you can show me the way to the Rabbi Klein's home?”

“*Ja, bitte* (Yes, please)” came the answer in German. He gestured, “Just around the corner there you will find the home of ‘*Herr Rabbiner*’ (The Rabbi).”

They could feel that they were almost there, but until someone else pointed out the house to them, they remained lost. When they finally did arrive they were warmly welcomed by HaRav Klein, who had indeed started to get worried about their arrival.

But on their leisurely walk back from HaRav Klein's house to their host, Harav Marcus, they were viciously attacked by some Hitler Youth coming out of a bar. The three ruffians proceeded to assault the two men, and Moshe Yankel fell on top of the Leliver Rebbe's son in order to protect him from the vicious blows. Speaking in breathless bursts, Moshe Yankel told his friend, “As soon as I start to rise, run back to Rav Klein's as fast as your legs can carry you.”

Then, all of a sudden, Moshe Yankel shocked the thugs with his strength and ferocity. He rose up and lashed out at his attackers, while at the same moment,

the Leliver Rebbe's son escaped unharmed. What the Nazis did not know was that Moshe Yankel had learned how to defend himself from battles with the Arabs, especially in the riots that took place in Palestine during 1929.

The commotion in the street brought the Gestapo to the scene, but instead of arresting the three drunken bullies, they detained the Jewish victim. The Germans were stunned that one Jew could manage to inflict so much damage to three Hitler Youths. The Gestapo officers were not interested in the facts. Therefore, Moshe Yankel was arrested and charged with:

- Disturbing the peace
- Attacking innocent Germans
- Attempted murder

Moshe Yankel then disappeared into the secret dungeons of the evil Gestapo, and all inquiries as to his whereabouts went unanswered. All the authorities would say was that he had inflicted severe bodily harm and had broken bones and noses of innocent young men, plus attempting to murder them.

A week passed, but not a word of his fate were the Jews able to discover.

Shabbos arrived and Rav Moshe Frankel's companion, the Lelivers' son, insisted that they set a place for his friend – and rescuer – in spite of his

absence. The congregation sang *Shalom Aleichem* and *Eishes Chayil*. His friend then filled his *becher* with wine. He held the cup up and then put it down, announcing to everyone that they would wait for Moshe Frankel's appearance before making *kiddush*.

Suddenly, to everyones shock and amazement, in walked Rav Moshe Frankel. The joy was uncontainable. “*Shalom Aleichem, Reb Moshe!*” the Leliver burst out joyfully, and hugged Reb Moshe to his heart, “We have been waiting and worrying for you all week long. *Baruch HaShem*, now we can make *kiddush* and celebrate *Shabbos* and your safe return!”

Chapter 26

Mama's Tears

Mount Hebron Cemetery, Friday morning, January 8, 1943. The bitter cold, howling wind and snow on the icy road made it difficult to walk the mile to Papa's grave. Mama and I went to execute a hallowed custom: To invite Papa to my wedding. When we finally arrived at block 55, I was breathless and could hardly breathe or cry. Mama cried loudly and emotionally. It was difficult for me to try and say the letters of Papa's name in the *Tehilim*. It was impossible to concentrate. I thought to myself: Mama had a difficult life; and tears came very easily. I didn't blame her. But did she really have to scream?

The last time I heard her like that was after the Hebron massacre when so many of her neighbors and friends were victims. Almost all those that were murdered or injured were as close to her as if they were her own relatives.

Mama urged me to cry, she said "G-d responds to real tears."

Sunday evening, we were all assembled in the *shul*; many of the guests had already arrived. I was sitting in the bridal room waiting for Shaya to arrive. It was

getting late. The wedding was called for 5:00 p.m. and here it was after 7:00 o'clock and Shaya hadn't yet arrived. Mama came in trying unsuccessfully to control her tears. Her friend, Mrs. Tuchinsky then said:

“Nu, I told you he wouldn't marry her. He won't come. A boy like that; people with money want him.”

I told Mama I wasn't worried. “I promise you he will be here *IY”H*.”

Shaya finally did arrive. He sent a message to me that he regrets the delay. This was during the war, and his parents were unable to come to America for the wedding. He had to write a letter to his parents and he and Sender Gross, the driver, had to wait for Reb Shloima Heiman, the “*Mesader Kedushin*” (the Rabbi performing the ceremony); he was sorry for the delay.

But the “*chuppa*” (wedding ceremony) still couldn't start, because Mama was suddenly nowhere to be found. Somebody finally found her at our neighbor, Esther Rosenberg's house. She walked the block to her house because she didn't want everyone to see how hysterical she was. Mama walked in, red-eyed and very serious, and not at all pleased that I was laughing and happy. She said, “Be serious, be solemn and shed a tear.”

I said, “I have had enough misery, sadness and tears. I will never cry again! I am going to be happy and will NEVER cry again!”

Thank G-d for all the happiness He sent my way.
I was happy, but of course, I did cry again.

Chapter 27

Wedding Day

When I woke up on my wedding day and saw the sun shining, I could not believe it. Everyone always told me that it was going to rain on my wedding day, because I was such a compulsive “*nosher*” (nibbler). But the sun was shining and so was I!

While I was dressing to go to *shul*, my friends were there helping me to get ready for the big moment. We, and especially I, were all giggling and acting very silly. My mother told me that it was not proper to appear so happy and silly on such a solemn day.

“It's like Yom Kippur,” she said “and you would better spend your time praying and crying to G-d to grant you a good life and good ‘*mazal*’ (fortune, luck).”

I thought she was trying to make me feel sad, and I told her that I was never going to be sad again. I also added that I had cried enough, and now it was my time to laugh and be happy.

The only time I felt sad on that day was when I thought of my father, and how he would have loved the partner I had chosen. He was everything my father would have wanted for me, had he only lived to see that day. As if to reinforce that thought, all of my friends told

me that they felt that it was my father's intervention in heaven that brought me such a wonderful husband, who would give me such happiness, and put an end to an unhappy period in the lives of our family.

As I looked around the synagogue where my father had prayed, I felt his heavenly presence there with me. And I felt happy and protected.



Sarah Heller - The Bride

Chapter 28

Sacred Promise

Everyone has a favorite relative. Our “*Mimah*” (aunt) was everyones favorite. She was my Zaidy Avraham Frankel's sister. Her name was Sarah Kessler, also known as the Mimah Zally. We did not really appreciate her greatness until we grew up. Whatever she did was blessed by *Hashem*. Everything she did was *lshem-mitzvah*.

The Mimah loved everyone, and everyone loved her in return. She was good, sweet and kind. She lived with her only child, a married daughter, Annie, who had four children: three sons and one daughter. As long as she was living with them, the house was blessed. After her death, however, everything fell apart: Sickness, divorce, death and severe financial problems.

The children had potential for only as long as she was alive. She would come to visit us usually twice a month. As soon as she would arrive, after a two-hour subway ride from the upper Bronx, she would don her homemade starched ruffled apron and was ready for work. She would have a snack, and when she was finished with her “*bentshing*” (saying the Grace after meals), she worked swiftly and cheerfully, making the

most delicious goodies with expensive ingredients that we could not afford, so she would bring her own. Her doughnuts smelled and tasted luscious; her *ruggalach*, *kipalach* and *delkalach* all Hungarian pastry specialties. Her cheerfulness and sense of humor permeated through the whole house, and everyone in it.

We all thought that the only thing she had on her mind was cooking, baking and sewing, all of which she did easily and perfectly. She knew that we didn't have money for luxuries like bathing suits, so one day she showed up with a black bathing suit. Who was going to get it? Three of us went in to the bathroom to try on the top, *TAAP* as she called it, because it didn't have a bottom part. If she bought it in a store they probably thought it was for her, because two of us together fit into it, and we easily could have fit in a third if we had another armhole. We laughed until we thought we would never get rid of the bellyaches we all had.

On one of Mimah Zally's visits, she opened her little suitcase and when we saw what was inside we asked her why she had brought along bread, salt and a glass?

Her answer was that one must always be prepared for any emergency.

“Why? We are always home and we never lock the door.”

Well, one day, she arrived at 610, no one was home, the door was locked, and she could not get into any of the usual unlocked doors. She felt she could not sit idly by with nothing to do, so she went to the side of the house under the kitchen extension.

“Aha,” she said, “now I can get into the kitchen in the basement, and take care of all my needs.”

Poor thing, she didn't realize that if the bathing suit was big enough for the three of us, how in heavens name was she going to get through the narrow window. She was not one to give up easily, so she carefully dropped her suitcase into the sink below the window and then she tried to get herself in also. Well, here she encountered a bigger problem because once she got partly down, that was as far as she was able to go and couldn't go back. Well, we wanted to know how she finally did get down. She said, “I had a chat with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. He came to my rescue and here I am. I washed my hands, made *hamotzi*, ate my bread and salt, had some nice cold Brighton Beach water, I *bentched* and then you all came back. And Thank G-d, here I am.”

“But Mima, how did *Hashem* help you get down through the tiny window in the kitchen, huh?”

“Well, *Hashem* knows how I fear cats, so he sent a cat there to stare and scare me, to move me. His green

eyes and his *MEE-OOW* and his sniffing for food made me so frightened, that I just had to push myself down into the kitchen as fast as I could. It wasn't easy, and I scraped my fat "*pulke*" (legs) on both sides on the way down. The main thing is that I did get away from that screaming cat with those big green eyes and his humped back."

* * *

One fine day Mimah took my brother Moshe, about 11 or 12 at the time, to our *shul*, where she had arranged a meeting with the "*shammos*" (caretaker), Reb Yankel Tuchinsky. They opened the *Aron Kodesh* and performed a procedure where Reb Yankel – a life long friend of our family – took Moshe's hand and made a gentleman's agreement, "*a tikyās kaf*" (a solemn promise or covenant) whereby Moshe promised never to forget to say *Kaddish* for her after her death.

"Now remember you promised never to forget."

"Okay, I promise, but how will I be able to remember?"

"Don't worry my child, if you make the promise and mean it with all your heart, *Hashem* will help you to remember. The HOLY ONE BLESSED BE HE will not let you forget."

As long as Mama was alive, she helped Moshe to remember. And even after Mama left this world, Moshe never had to be reminded to say *Kaddish* for Mimah, because it was arranged by a Higher Power that both Mama and Mimah had their *Kaddish* said on the same day, the 7th day of Adar, the same Yahrtzeit as Moshe Rabeinu.

Chapter 29

Saving One Life is Like Saving the Whole World

Esther Lebor and Rebitzen Schneider were first cousins. Yisrael Chaim (Isadore) Lebor, son of Esther and Avraham Yehudah Lebor, and Reb Moshe Schneider, husband of Rebbitzen Schneider were born around 1885. They learned together as youngsters in the Talmud Torah, and later in a Yeshiva in or near Vilna.

At the beginning of the 19th century my father-in-law, Yisrael (Isadore), son of Esther and Avraham Yehudah Lebor, immigrated to London, England at the age of 17. Yisrael (Isadore) married Rae (Rachel) Tannenbaum, from the Londons East End, and they had four children: Naomi, Sydney (Shaya – who became my husband), Miriam and Philip.

Reb Moshe Schneider, on the other hand, settled in Frankfurt am Meine and established a famous Yeshiva there.

As close as Yisrael (Isadore) Lebor and Moshe Schneider were; once separated, they lost touch with one another, each going his own way.

But as it happened, Reb Moshe Schneiders brother-in-law, Reb Yehudah Yudelevitch, lived across the road from Avraham Yehuda's son Yisrael (Isadore) Lebor and his family in London, and was a frequent and welcome visitor in the Lebor home. The Lebor's hired Yudelevitch to teach their two sons Sidney (Shaya) and Philip, Hebrew and *Sifrei Kodesh*.

In 1937, Reb Moshe Schneider's son Gedalia, who lived in London, became engaged to be married, and Gedalia's parents came in from Frankfurt for the happy occasion.

So after 40 years, my father-in-law Yisrael (Isadore) Lebor and his cousin and classmate Reb Moshe Schneider, were happily reunited. When Reb Moshe Schneider and his wife were ready to go home to Frankfurt, though, his cousin Yisrael pleaded with them not to go back to Germany.

Reb Schneider replied that there was no way that he could stay in London and abandon his children and the *talmidim* of his yeshiva. So they returned to Frankfurt.

On the night between Wednesday and Thursday, November 9th-10th, 1938, "*Kristallnacht*" (The Night of Broken Glass) erupted all over Germany and Austria. Using the assassination of a German diplomat named Ernst vom Rath by Herschel Grynszpan, a German-born

Polish Jew in Paris, as their excuse, the Nazis unleashed ferocious pogroms and riots against Jews throughout Germany and Austria on that terrible night, and they continued for several days. Jewish homes, stores, and synagogues were destroyed, ransacked and burned to the ground. The endless piles of shattered glass on every street gave this unprecedented and infamous event its name. Even more ominous was the fact that some 30,000 Jewish men were rounded up, arrested and taken to the first concentration camps, only to be released months later, with at least 1,000 dying in captivity under torture.

Because it was winter, *Shabbos* in London at that time began as early as 3:15 PM. Soon after that hour, however, the telephone in the Lebor household would not stop ringing, but since Philip and his father Yisrael (Isadore), had already left for shul, no one was there to hear it. Nonetheless, when they did arrive home, the phone continued to ring. Though trying to ignore it at first, assuming it was a wrong number, the persistent and incessant ringing just wouldn't stop. It rang and rang until Yisrael Lebor could no longer tolerate it.

Assuming at this point that something had to be terribly wrong for the telephone to ring so long on *Shabbos*, Yisrael finally allowed Terry, one of the family's servant girls, to pick up the phone. After

several tense seconds, he heard her say, “I don't care who's dying, Mr. Lebor does not answer the phone on *Shabbos!*” Apparently, however, the other party was very insistent, and she returned to Yisrael saying, “Excuse me, there is a rabbi on the phone who insists on talking to you.”

When Yisrael heard the word dying, he finally picked up the phone himself, but was shocked to hear Dayan (Rabbinical Judge) Abramski on the other end of the line. Terry had misunderstood – nobody was dying, but rather Dayan Abramski said it was urgent that he speak with the him.

Daddy said to Dayan Abramski, “Its *Shabbos.*”

Dayan Abramski replied, “I know its *Shabbos.* But this is an *inyan* of ‘*pikuach nefesh*’ (matter of life and death). Listen, ten minutes after the *Shabbos* candles were lit, we received a telegram from Frankfurt saying simply, ‘HELP! SCHNEIDER.’”

Reb Schneider had apparently sent his telegram to Dayan Abramski, because he knew that the dayan and Yisrael Lebor had a close relationship.

Dayan Abramski gave a regular Torah *shiur* four nights a week which Yisrael attended. At the end of each *shiur*, Yisrael instructed his chauffeur to first take Dayan Abramski home to James Street in the East End, and then go on to the Lebor residence.

Dayan Abramski insisted that Yisrael go to the Home Office to arrange Reb Schneider's papers, so that the family could travel to London.

Mr. Lebor pleaded, "Can't it wait until Monday?"

Dayan Abramski said again, "*Shabbos* or no *Shabbos*, you have to go now." Dayan Abramski even told Yisrael to take a taxi or car if necessary, since the matter was so urgent. Though he did obey Dayan Abramski's urgent order, Yisrael decided that since it was *Shabbos*, he could still walk to the Foreign Ministry, and make it in time to accomplish his assignment. And thanks to this immediate action, the family and several Frankfurt yeshiva boys were saved, with everyone arriving safely in London by Tuesday.

But the scope of the miracle and *Hashem's hessed* only really sunk in when Reb Schneider told a sort of epilogue to this amazing story about the campaign to rescue him, his family and some of his students. Apparently, no one had known till then how really close a call it was that they even got out their building alive, let alone Germany. As Reb Schneider related, upon hearing the news that some of the yeshiva boys were leaving Germany, everyone became noisy and hysterical out of both happiness and fear, wailing and crying as they hugged and kissed one another as they said their final goodbyes. Apparently, one of the

Nazi patrols rounding up Jews building by building and house by house had heard the commotion, but assumed the ruckus they heard was caused by the fact that a different unit was already inside rounding up the yeshiva boys and other Jews, so they didn't bother to check out the noise and commotion! It was only after they fact, of course, that everyone realized just how narrow and miraculous was their escape from the horrors of Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Chapter 30

Only an Act of G-d

I was about ready to leave the house, when I casually asked my husband: "Where did you park the car?" He looked at me sheepishly and said: "It's not back yet."

"Back? Back from where?"

"Oh! I thought I told you that I lent the car to Reb Motel. He is visiting New Haven and had to see some people for help with his yeshiva."

"No! You didn't tell me. You know very well that tonight we have to go to Colchester for Women's Branch. I can't believe that you didn't tell him to bring the car back in time."

"Darling, I'm really sorry, I never dreamed that he would keep the car so long. You're going with Ida and Rona, so just call them and ask them to drive, or ask if you can take one of their cars. That shouldn't present any difficulties. They have three cars between them. With G-d's help you will be successful with the *mitzvah* of another member for Women's Branch, and come home safely.

"Rona, this is Sarah calling, I would like to ask you if we could possibly take your car. My husband lent his car to a friend and he hasn't come back yet."

“Oh Sarah, too bad you didn't call me earlier, I just lent my car to my grandson; but you can call Ida, they have two cars and that should be no problem.”

I called Ida and she said:

“You called a little too late, Alan is using my car tonight, but we can take Gerald's car. It's true it's old, but it's in perfect condition. You know he wouldn't have it any other way. The only problem is that I won't drive it that distance. But if you are willing to drive, Gerald will gladly agree that we can take it.”

So we took Gerald up on his generous offer.

It was freezing that Chanukah night at the end of December, 1957. We were three women returning from a Chanukah party sponsored by the sisterhood. It was late, and we were all quite anxious to be home. However, I wasn't too happy about driving an unfamiliar car on a road that was even less so. We had gone to the sisterhood in order to recruit members for the Women's Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, otherwise known as the OU. I was membership chairman (yes, you read right – we were called chairmen in 1957 and no one seemed to be bothered about it). I was also chairman of the Speakers' Bureau and couldn't get anyone else to go on such a long trip at Chanukah time and so soon after a big snow storm, so I myself had to go and try to sell

a Women's Branch membership to this sisterhood. Thank G-d, our enrollment campaign was successful, and we were pleased to add another member sisterhood to the new Connecticut Chapter. We could use all the new blood that we could enlist.

The trip going there had been very pleasant. The last houses in the populated part of the town looked like a fantasy; as if a child had painted the scene without too many colors. Everything was snow white or silver. The scenery was so beautiful. The houses, the shutters, the different shapes and sizes of all the evergreen trees and bushes. It was a scene like this that made me yearn for the talent to be able to paint or photograph pictures instead of just having them stay in my memory all these years. The sky was such a lovely shade of navy blue velvet, with beautiful diamonds twinkling high up in the heavens. We had never seen so many stars, and it almost made up for the moonless night. They illuminated the whole area. I never stopped marveling at the beauty of the state of Connecticut. I really loved the rural scenes, having only recently moved from New York City.

But now we were on our way back. Suddenly, I heard a train-like noise, and said to my companions, "Listen to the train! We probably could have come by train; it does not sound too far from here."

“Whatever are you talking about? There are no trains around here.”

“I still hear that train-like noise,” I replied as I opened the window, “listen don't you two hear it?”

Suddenly, the car started to bump. There was a hissing noise.

“Something is wrong here.” I said as I pulled the car to the side. We got out of the car and sure enough, all the air hissed out of one of the tires.

We were very frightened. Here we were stuck on a strange dark road, with an unfamiliar car. The two older women who accompanied me were wealthy and wore some very exquisite and expensive jewellery. The first thing they did was to take off their big diamond rings, their expensive watches, and put them into a change purse with their large bills that they hid under the back seat of the car.

We stood at the roadside on that cold and starry night waiting for a car to stop and help us. At least half an hour passed before we saw or heard anything. It was the longest, coldest half hour that I can remember. Finally, we saw an oncoming car. We had taken big white styrofoam snowmen from the children's projects at school that had been left in the car, and started to wave them furiously. The car stopped, and the couple in the car promised to send the AAA to fix the flat.

Being young and impatient, I suggested that we try and change the tire by ourselves. But we had a problem. We could not open the trunk. Another half hour passed, no help; no one to fix the flat. By this time, we were frozen stiff; and really sorry that we had not stayed longer and had some coffee and cake at the Chanukah party.

A few cars passed, and each one promised to send someone from the neighboring town to help the three stranded ladies. Results? Zilch! We were just about to give up hope when all of a sudden a very large custom-built white station-wagon pulled up in front of our car. The next thing that happened seemed to be a scene from a movie. All four doors opened at once and four of the tallest blackest men I had ever seen stepped out; one from each door, and after another second, four more men stepped out. The last one to get out of the car was a short white man. As soon as they all got out of the car, another big white station wagon pulled up in front of theirs, and the whole previous scene repeated itself: four doors opening, eight extremely tall black men and one short white man stepping out of the car. One man wanted a light for his cigarette, and got it very easily: He simply held the cigarette in his mouth, leaned over the roof of the car and the guy on the other side just lit it for him. We were scared

out of our wits. We just did not know what to think. I had never seen such a collection of black giants in my life. My teeth started to chatter, and not just from the freezing cold!

“What seems to be the trouble, ladies?”

“As you can see, we have a blown out tire. We would have tried to change it ourselves, but something is wrong with the lock and we can't open the trunk.”

“Well let's take a look, what do we have here? Ah, a frozen lock, well, the first thing we do is flick our Bic.”

They lit a cigarette lighter, warmed the lock, and like magic the trunk opened.

“Ladies, do you have a searchlight?”

“Of course! Here it is.”

“Wow! Man, this search light is something else.”

It took the men less than ten minutes to get the tire changed.

“We are most grateful for your help, and would like to show our appreciation. Please take this \$10 as a token of our thanks.”

There was a burst of hysterical laughter from all the men. The short white man asked: “Ladies, do you know who changed your tire?”

“No.” we answered in unison.

“Well,” the short white man said, “If you women were home on a cold wintry night like this, watching television

instead of traipsing around the countryside, you would have seen these very famous men playing... These men are the world renowned Harlem Globetrotters. They do not get paid for changing tires anymore.”

Of course, as soon as the tire was changed, the AAA arrived, along with the police, and the captain wanted to know: “What's the problem ladies? We got a report that there were three ladies stranded in the cold.”

“Wow! Captain,” the other officer exclaimed, “take a gander at this search light! It lights up the whole area. I've never seen anything like it. Boy! Where did you get this searchlight? Our police department could surely use one like this.”

“Well, we can thank my husband's occupation for this search light with which everyone is so fascinated,” Ida proudly proclaimed.

“What business is that? I have never seen anything like this in my life.”

“My husband is in the automotive supply business and this is one of the newest and brightest models; it lights up for the longest distance on record. It's not even on the market yet.”

“And you can thank my husband's profession for these men.” I replied.

“What is your husband's profession, that you can get two such talented teams to help you on a night like this in the middle of nowhere?”

“My husband is a rabbi.”

The police captain shook his head in agreement and said:

“Indeed, only an act of G-d could get such a talented group of men to stop so late at night in this kind of weather, and at the end of nowhere to change a tire.”

The two teams of men accompanied us all the way home to New Haven. They felt that since we did not have a spare tire; it was not wise for us to travel alone. One white station wagon in front of us and another right behind us. I have been a Harlem Globetrotter fan since then. They were great! Otherwise, I think we would still be standing there.

When I came home and told my kids of our experience, they had only one question:

“What? No autographs?”

“Oh! Ma! How could you?”